

KING'S GAMBIT



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THE OPENING

ONE

‘Check.’

For a moment the young boy didn’t think his burly opponent had heard him. Then Gligoric’s cold grey eyes blinked and focused on his. ‘Check, mister,’ the boy repeated.

Gligoric’s eyes dropped to the chessboard between them. He thought for a few seconds, then quickly interposed a knight between his king and the boy’s bishop. Almost as an afterthought he reached out and pushed the plunger on his side of the chess clock. His clock stopped and the boy’s began. Gligoric’s movements were smooth and expert, belying his position on the board. The boy felt a surge of excitement. Certain that his opponent’s move was a mistake, he leaned forward and began to study the board intently, looking for the correct sequence of moves that would lead to the checkmate he felt sure would be his.

Gligoric ignored him. The Russian leaned back in his chair and looked out over the hall where upwards of four hundred people were jammed together, huddled over their chess sets, waging a war of the mind in almost total silence. The world of the chess player was a classless society, Gligoric thought, with young and old, rich and poor, men and women, many of whom were neurotics, some psychotics, bearded street people and businessmen, all monumentally unconcerned with any characteristic of an opponent save his ability to orchestrate the movements of sixteen carved wooden pieces over a playing board with sixty-four squares. He hated the closeness of these *patzers*, the sweaty smell of bodies made unnaturally rigid by sustained nervous tension.

His gaze wandered to the front of the hall where a knot of fifty or sixty people stood three deep around a table set up on a special raised platform. Classless societies were for politicians, he thought; he had nothing but

contempt for a would-be world champion who would subject himself to the common indignities of an American Swiss-style week-end tournament.

The object of Gligoric's contempt appeared to be oblivious to the crowd of people ringing the table where he played. John Butler's pale blue eyes were bright, focused like lasers on the board in front of him. His tall, rangy body was tense, coiled like a sprinter's; his feet were flat on the floor, his shoulders hunched forwards.

Only now was he beginning to emerge from the vacuum cocoon of concentration in which he had wrapped himself for the past four hours. An hour before, John had had only ten minutes left on his clock, to Victor Ratchek's seventy minutes. Then he had launched his combination, a brilliant sacrifice of a rook. Ratchek had had no choice but to capture, and the trap had snapped shut. Now it was the older grand master's clock that was ticking away the final minutes. John knew the game was over, and he allowed himself to relax slightly while he waited for the same realisation to come to Ratchek. These were the times John longed for, the moment of triumph when all things fell into place and a raw, troubled spot deep inside his mind became serene. It was the moment when, using only the power of his mind, he became another man's master.

Ratchek glanced nervously at the clock, then advanced his knight, threatening a check. He quickly punched his clock. John had anticipated the move. He retreated his king one square. He punched the clock, noted both moves on his score sheet, then leaned back and looked around him.

Tom Manning had returned from an arbitration dispute and was sitting in the chair reserved for him, making copious notes on the game being played before him. He brushed a shock of silver hair away from his forehead and glanced up. His face was expressionless, but his sharp eyes shone with approval. John wondered how Manning's analysis would compare with his own.

Henry Palmer was standing in the front row of spectators. He caught John's eye and gestured, indicating victory in his own match. The gesture was not needed; as usual, Henry's freckled, boyish face was an open window on his emotions. John gave a perfunctory nod and turned back to his opponent. Ratchek looked pale.

Somewhere in the rear of the hall a door slammed. Two sets of footsteps echoed with an ominous cadence, growing louder as they approached. John frowned. The sounds were out of place in the still hall.

Gligoric made his next move and looked up as the two men in tan raincoats and matching short haircuts marched down the centre aisle, ignoring the players around the hall who angrily shushed them. Gligoric recognised authority when he saw it. The men were too formal to be New York City policemen, too stereotyped to be the men he had expected. That left the FBI. Something that might have been surprise flashed for a brief instant in Gligoric's eyes. He scratched the back of his neck. In the corner of the hall a tall, dark-complexioned man who had been standing watching the games, walked over to a window and signalled down into the street.

The young boy was unable to suppress his excitement. His voice broke and ended in a squeal. 'You just left your queen hanging, mister.'

'I resign,' Gligoric said, reaching out and absently tipping over his king.

Special agents Burns and Draper reached the outer perimeter of the crowd ringing the table at the front of the hall. With Burns in the lead they began to push their way through.

'Excuse me,' Burns said brusquely. 'Let me through, please.' His voice was a harsh croak, as though someone had stepped on his larynx.

A young man with long, stringy blond hair and a greasy leather jacket turned and blocked Burns' path. 'Hey, man! What—?' The man nervously glanced around him. His voice dropped to a venomous whisper. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Let us through, please!' Draper said, shouldering the man aside. There was a chorus of muted curses, but the crowd parted. Burns and Draper moved forward until they flanked the table. John was waiting to move, his clock running. Neither he nor Ratchek had given any indication that they were aware of the disturbance, or of the two men standing over them.

Draper pulled a thin leather wallet from his coat pocket and opened it, exposing a shield and identification card. 'Are you John Butler?'

John and Ratchek ignored Draper and continued to study the position on the board between them. Henry Palmer had moved closer to Burns, the taller and heavier of the two men, and was openly glaring at him. Tom Manning rose to his feet.

Burns was flushed, his eyes bright. He had unconsciously balled his hands into fists. 'Look, Butler—!'

'Shut up!' a woman's voice called from the rear of the hall.

Draper shoved the wallet in front of John's face, blocking his field of vision. 'Mr Butler,' he said evenly. 'I'm Special Agent Draper, and this is

Special Agent Burns. We would—’

Without looking up John absently pushed Draper’s hand away from his face. He studied the position for a few more seconds, then made a move. He pushed the button on his clock and noted his move on his score pad. Burns and Draper exchanged surprised glances.

Burns had risen up on the balls of his feet, balanced like a prizefighter. ‘Butler, this is official business. We want to talk to you.’

‘Can’t this wait?’ Henry said angrily. ‘You people are disturbing the next world champion!’

‘Hey!’ a man’s voice bellowed. ‘*Can’t you guys in the front shut up?*’

Tom touched Draper’s arm. The tensed muscles beneath the coat felt like bands of coiled steel. Draper jerked his arm away. Tom stepped around in front of him. ‘My name is Thomas Manning,’ he said evenly, meeting the other man’s gaze. ‘I’m the President of the United States Chess Federation, and director of this tournament. You’re interrupting an important match between two grand masters. What is it that you want? Perhaps I can help you.’

‘Sir, we’re here on official business,’ Draper said stiffly.

‘*Go do your business someplace else!*’ Someone shouted and was immediately followed by a chorus of cheers.

‘They’ll be finished soon,’ Tom said softly. ‘Surely you can wait a few more minutes.’

Draper looked at Burns and the big man shrugged. Both agents stepped back a pace from the table and stood with feet apart and hands folded in front of them, like soldiers at parade rest. The muscles in Burns’ jaw were knotted, but the eyes of both men were veiled and cold.

The tempo of play increased as both John and Ratchek came under intense time pressure. The hours of tense, unflagging concentration had taken their toll, and fatigue was etched on the faces of both men. Each player now saw the position on the board through the emotional filter of his own elation or crushed hopes: John saw a physical arrangement of almost poetic beauty, while to Ratchek the pieces were suddenly grotesque and menacing, like strangely misshapen warriors on a checkered battlefield.

John moved his rook to the seventh rank and punched the clock. ‘Check.’

Ratchek suddenly reached out and stopped the clock. ‘I resign,’ he said quietly, extending his hand toward John. John nodded and shook Ratchek’s hand. There was a short burst of applause from the spectators, quickly

stilled by the angry shushing of the other players. Burns and Draper stepped forward and stood over John.

‘Beautifully played, John,’ Ratchek said. ‘I missed the combination. Very deep. Very deep.’

‘Mr Butler,’ Draper said impatiently, ‘we’d like to speak with you.’

‘It was set up as far back as the eighteenth move,’ John said to Ratchek. He began to set the pieces up in their original positions. ‘We’ll analyse and take a look at it.’

Ratchek glanced up at Burns. It was the first time either of the players had recognised the presence of the agents. ‘John,’ Ratchek said, a nervous edge to his voice, ‘I think maybe—’

‘No!’ It was almost a shout. The quiet place inside John was already roiled again, boiling, sending out fiery streams of anger that coursed through his body, stiffening his muscles and blurring his vision. ‘I intend to analyse! If we ignore these creeps, maybe they’ll go away.’

Tom and Henry exchanged quick, nervous glances. Burns sucked in his breath sharply, then reached out and grabbed John’s arm. ‘Now you just hold it right there, wise guy!’ Burns said, his voice trembling with rage.

John pulled free from Burns’ grasp. He unhurriedly swept the pieces to one side of the table, rose and brought the wooden playing board crashing down on Burns’ head. The board split and the pieces fell to the floor. Burns, stunned, mumbled something unintelligible, staggered and fell backwards off the raised platform.

The crowd of spectators, which had tripled, cheered. All of the players in the hall were on their feet. John spun around and struck Draper a glancing blow on the jaw. Draper, unperturbed, moved with the skill and speed of a professional fighter. He rolled with the force of John’s blow, shifted his weight and caught John in the solar plexus with a short left hook. John’s breath exploded from his lungs and he doubled over in pain.

The cheers abruptly shifted in pitch to a uglier sound. A few of the spectators advanced on Draper. Draper glanced in the direction of his partner. Burns was sitting up, slowly shaking his head back and forth. Draper made a quick decision; he stepped back and drew his gun. ‘Hold it!’ he barked. ‘FBI!’

TWO

Peter Arnett wore a pained expression on his face. He was sitting behind a modern desk, leaning forward on his elbows and cupping his chin in his hands. Behind him, a huge bank of windows looked out over Manhattan, thirty storeys below. It was one of those rare, clear days when the city—viewed from a great height—looked clean, beautiful, and awesome.

Arnett's sandy hair had two parts, one natural, the other a straight, pencil-thin line of white scar tissue left behind by a bullet. He was forty-six, and looked younger. His suit was ill-fitting and sagged on his trim, muscular body. At one time he might have been handsome; now his nose was crooked, as though it had been broken and never properly reset. His face was that of a man who has seen too much to care about appearances. His green eyes carried a hint of humour, and a glint of cruelty.

Across the carpeted office, John, his hands handcuffed behind his back, stood between Burns and Draper. Burns had a large gash on his forehead which he occasionally nursed with a large handkerchief. Draper stood stiffly, his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat. John pointedly ignored the three men, but his sensitivity to subtle shifts of mood in other men made him aware that Burns and Draper were angry and uncomfortable in the presence of the man behind the desk. John sensed that a new and different kind of game was being played. He now felt sure that he had identified the principal player, and he would wait to see what the rules and object were before deciding whether to do more than stand and stare straight ahead.

'Let him go,' Arnett said. His voice was soft, but with the hard edge of authority.

Draper's hands came out of his pockets fast. They tensed, then went back into the pockets like nervous animals ducking for cover. 'Not a chance,' Draper said tightly. 'I don't know what you want with Butler, and I don't know where you get the juice to be able to use FBI agents as errand boys. It doesn't matter, we do what we're ordered to do. What I do know is that this guy has problems. He assaulted a federal agent. Now, you go ahead and take care of your business. But when you're done with him, he's ours.'

Arnett tapped his index finger once on the desk. 'You'll do nothing except take the handcuffs off that man and get out of here,' he said evenly. 'You've done what you were supposed to do. Now get lost.'

Both Burns and Draper smelled of frustration and rage. Out of the corner of his eye John could see a dark blotch spreading under Draper's armpit.

'You have no jurisdiction!' Burns croaked.

Arnett didn't blink. 'I don't need jurisdiction. I could have you out on your asses, and you know it,' he said quietly. 'You do what I told you or I'll have you out in South Dakota shuffling file cards before dinner time.'

The FBI agents glanced at each other, but didn't move. For the first time John looked directly at Arnett. If there was any doubt in Arnett's mind that the two men would obey him, his face didn't show it. A moment later his confidence was rewarded Draper removed a set of keys from his pocket and, with trembling hands, unlocked the handcuffs, John resisted the impulse to rub his numbed wrists. He slowly let his arms drop to his sides. He could feel Arnett's eyes searching his face. He met the gaze and held it, struggling to keep his face impassive. He was certain the man behind the desk was humiliating the FBI agents for his benefit. John felt his stomach tighten; it was the same sensation he always experienced before an important match.

Burns and Draper turned to go.

'One more thing, gentlemen,' Arnett said.

The two men stopped, but did not turn around. John could hear Draper's heavy breathing.

'Mr Butler is big news,' Arnett continued. 'By now, half the people at the tournament are spilling their guts to some very eager reporters. I don't want a *word* about what happened to appear in the newspapers. Not one word.' Arnett smiled thinly. 'Otherwise, you can say hallo to South Dakota.'

The force of the words spun Burns around. 'How the hell do you expect us to—?'

'I don't *care* how you do it! Use some imagination. Go wave a flag in front of the *Daily News* building. Promise *The Times* and the *Post* access to some secret documents. *Threaten* them, for God's sake. Just keep that story out of the papers.'

Burns swallowed hard and nodded. He turned to John and seemed about to say something, but didn't. Draper was already out of the office. Burns followed him, slamming the door shut behind him.

Arnett rose from the desk and walked across the office to a hidden bar. He produced a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. He poured two drinks and offered one to John. John ignored him. Arnett set the drinks down on a

table, then went back to the desk and sat down on the edge, crossing his arms across his chest. 'I'm sorry about that,' he said at last.

'Who are you?'

Arnett smiled engagingly. 'My name is Peter Arnett. I'm a spy.'

'Is that supposed to impress me?'

'No. I was trying to be funny.'

'Does that mean that you're not really a spy, or that you're trying to be a funny spy?'

The smile faded. For a brief moment Arnett's face paled and his eyes glinted with anger. It quickly passed. 'It means that I'm a CIA operative,' he continued after a pause, 'and the CIA isn't supposed to work in the United States. That's why I had to send those two educated goons after you. This is still in the way of an apology.'

'Am I under arrest?'

Arnett casually lit a cigarette. He seemed to be thinking about the question, but John knew he wasn't. The silence was there to make him anxious, a part of the same power game the other man had employed so successfully against the FBI agents. John waited. The pain in his stomach where Draper had hit him and the memory of the cold steel of the handcuffs were melting into a hot, shapeless fury that John found all too familiar. He struggled against it.

'No,' Arnett said at last. 'All I want is a few minutes of your time. I want to talk to you.'

'Why didn't you come to see me yourself?'

Arnett smiled wryly. 'A Cold Warrior's natural disinclination to be seen in public, announcing that he's a CIA agent. Besides, you'd have ignored me, as you ignore most people.'

John had suddenly run out of words. He walked to the table, picked up his drink and calmly poured it over the carpet. Knowing that such a show of emotion was a mistake only increased his rage; he hurled the glass at the window behind Arnett. There was a sharp, popping sound, and hundreds of spider web lines exploded from a neat, round hole that had appeared high on the plate glass surface.

Arnett walked to the window, raised himself on his toes and looked down. 'I think you got a taxi,' he said evenly.

'I don't have *time* to talk to CIA agents! Can you understand? I have time for nothing but my work!'

John was at the door in three quick strides.

‘The subject I wanted to talk you you about was Yevgeny Petroff.’ Arnett turned to find John frozen, his hand still gripping the knob. ‘Is the match still on?’

John turned stiffly. Conflicting emotions flashed on and off in his eyes like traffic lights. ‘Why do you ask a stupid question like that?’

Arnett shrugged casually. The hook firmly in place, he began to tug gently on the line. ‘Because you have a reputation for torpedoing ventures that are in your best interests. Most people assume you’ll beat the Russian, if and when you do finally sit down and play him.’

John looked as if he wanted to throw something again. Instead, he asked: ‘Do you play chess?’

The question caught Arnett off balance. ‘Some,’ he said wearily.

‘A *patzer*,’ John said contemptuously. ‘Keep your opinions on my play to yourself until you get to be a grand master.’ Once again the lights changed. ‘What about Petroff?’

Arnett indicated a chair. ‘Why don’t you sit down?’

‘You said you wanted to talk to me about Petroff.’

‘All right,’ Arnett said after a pause. ‘We’ve received a report that Petroff wants to defect.’

John looked away. After a few moments he went to the chair and sat down. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said quietly.

‘What don’t you understand? It seems pretty simple to me. The man is tired of living in Russia. He wants to come over to our side.’

John shook his head. ‘Russia is a chess player’s paradise,’ he said distantly. ‘That’s why the Russians, man for man, are the best in the world. They’re given everything; time, the best computer analyses. Here ...’ John shrugged and left the sentence unfinished.

Arnett finished it for him. His tone was mildly mocking. ‘Here you’re not appreciated?’

John glanced up quickly. ‘That’s right,’ he said seriously. ‘Here I’m not appreciated.’

‘There are other things in life besides chess, Butler.’

John laughed. It was a short, quick sound, without humour. ‘Not to a grand master. And certainly not to Petroff.’

Now it was Arnett who seemed puzzled. His face bore the expression of a man who is afraid he’s missed the punch line of a joke. ‘What do you know

about Yevgeny Petroff?’ he said after a long pause.

‘He’s world champion.’

Again there was a long silence. When Arnett finally broke it his tone was incredulous. ‘My God. That really is all you know about him, isn’t it?’

‘That’s why you’ll always be a *patzer*, Arnett,’ John said with a sneer. ‘Being the best in the world at what you’ve chosen to do *is* everything.’

‘Don’t you ever read a newspaper?’

‘I told you: I don’t have time.’

Arnett shook his head almost imperceptibly. He slowly walked around behind the desk and sat down. He leaned back and fixed his eyes on John’s. ‘Petroff just happens to be a poet who came close to winning the Nobel Prize a few years ago,’ Arnett said evenly. ‘His work isn’t the kind that exactly endears him to the Politburo. Six years ago he founded a literary journal that was closed down by the government the week after it published its first issue. So Petroff simply took it underground. That literary journal is the hottest property in Russia today. Petroff publishes his own work in it, along with that of every other dissident in the country. Most of the contributors use pseudonyms. Not Petroff.’ Now it was Arnett’s voice that was edged with contempt. ‘Those are a few of the things Petroff finds time to do besides play chess.’

Arnett waited, but John said nothing. Once again John’s face was impassive, his eyes blank.

‘In other words,’ Arnett continued, ‘Petroff has been giving the Russians fits for almost a decade. So far he’s gotten away with it because he brings home the bacon on the world chess scene, and we both know how important that is to the Russians. But the pressures must be enormous. Now it looks like he’s had enough. He wants to come over.’

‘Why tell me all this?’

‘Because the story goes that Petroff is going to need your help to defect.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense. I’ve never even met Petroff.’

‘I suppose it’s also occurred to the Russians that their star chess player might not be too happy in his own country. That’s why he’s rarely seen at any of the big international tournaments. They don’t let him out of the country. When they do, he’s given an escort of six KGB agents. They never let him out of their sight, and he’s not allowed to speak to anyone. Without help, there’s just no way for him to get to us, or for us to get to him.’

Something didn't seem right. John stared hard at Arnett, but the other man's face was impassive. 'Then how did you find out about this rumour in the first place?' John asked. He made no effort to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

'Petroff's friends inside Russia,' Arnett replied evenly. 'It's communicating with him when he's *out* of the country that presents a problem. That's where you come in. Say, hand me that other drink, will you? I wouldn't want it to go out the window.'

John didn't move. Arnett rose and got the drink himself. He sniffed at it, then threw it back with one swallow. He shuddered, 'You used good judgement, John,' he said. 'It's lousy Scotch.'

'You can call me Butler. And you were just about to tell me where I came in.'

'You'll be the only foreigner allowed within fifty feet of Petroff when you play him in Venice at the end of the month. He reads a little English, and you read a little Russian; that's what comes from having to follow the world's chess literature. In any case, you're the only one he'll be able to contact when the time comes.'

'What time?'

'The time when he feels he'll be able to make his break; the time when we'll be able to move in at best advantage. You could be in Venice for up to two months, depending on who scores twelve and a half points first. Sometime during that stay Petroff should be able to shake loose from his watch dogs. It could be during a training session, or a recreation period. It could even be an end run off the stage during the match itself, if we wanted to be melodramatic. But Petroff is the only man who'll be able to say when. And when he's sure of the time and place, he'll tell you. You'll tell us, then we'll take over from that point. That's all there is to it. Will you do it?'

John might have been concentrating on a chess problem; he sat for long moments without moving, his eyes slightly out of focus. Finally he leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. 'No,' he said quietly.

Arnett felt as if he had been punched in the chest. He realised now that he had seriously underestimated his adversary. He hadn't been reeling the other man in at all; John had merely been circling.

'No?' Arnett's voice was strained by disbelief. 'You won't simply look for a brief note? Listen for a whisper?'

‘You said you knew something about chess,’ John said, his eyes flashing. ‘Then you should understand that a top player must have *nothing* else on his mind if he hopes to win against the best competition. This isn’t some warm-up tournament I’m playing in; it isn’t a contest for first board at some local chess club. Petroff and I will be playing a twenty-four game match for the chess championship of the world.’

Arnett seemed about to say something. He didn’t. Instead he went back to the spider-webbed glass and stared out at the city below. It seemed to be an act of indifference; in fact, he had turned his back on John to hide his fear. He was afraid he was going to fail His work—and this operation in particular—depended on his ability to control other people, and he did not see how he was going to be able to control a megalomaniac who virtually everyone agreed was crazy.

John squirmed in his seat. Arnett’s back infuriated him, and the rage transformed itself into, a desperate need to talk, to explain, to justify, to somehow build a ladder of words that would allow him to scale the wall that always seemed to separate him from other people.

‘I happen to be the best chess player in the world,’ John said tightly. ‘I always knew that I would be some day; and I have been for the past four or five years. I could be the greatest player who ever lived.’

‘Your modesty overwhelms me,’ Arnett said distantly.

‘I’m not bragging, I’m just stating a fact. I’ve said it many times, and now the time has come to prove it.’

‘Nobody’s asking you not to play.’

‘But nobody’s ever given me a thing,’ John continued, ignoring the sarcasm in the other man’s voice. ‘Everything I know, everything I’ve done, has been despite of, not because of, the situations in which I’ve found myself. Chess is the most demanding occupation there is, bar none, and everyone in the world knows it except the people of the United States. I’m known everywhere; except in my own country where the people are more interested in a bunch of morons knocking each other silly or in watching other morons bat a little ball around a field. It’s insane.’

John paused, probing to see if the rage had gone. It hadn’t. ‘The Russians,’ John whispered for no apparent reason. ‘How I hate the Russians.’

Arnett turned and looked at John with new interest. ‘Why do you hate the Russians?’

‘They cheat.’ John’s eyes were like clear panes of glass looking inward on his soul. ‘They don’t break the rules, they just cheat; playing for draws against each other, then playing like tigers against everyone else. That’s how they control the top international tournaments. The only thing that can be said for them is that they appreciate chess. The Russian players have the complete support of their government; their grand masters don’t have to earn a living hustling chess games or kissing some sponsor’s ass.’

‘You’re crazy, Butler,’ Arnett said without feeling.

‘Me, I’m hated in my own country; I’m hated because I refuse to admit that I have any other responsibility but to play the best chess I’m capable of. I’m the best because I have talent, but talent isn’t enough. I learned very early to put every other distraction out of my mind, to concentrate only on the game. That’s the only way it can be. Now you’re asking me to play the most important match of my life with half my mind on something else; looking for some kind of signal that might never come. You’re asking me to risk losing because Petroff isn’t happy with the country he’s living in—the country, by the way, that made it possible for him to be champion in the first place. *You* must be mad.’

Arnett went to the table and poured himself another drink. He started to lift the glass to his mouth, then set it back down. ‘Chess is a *game*, Butler. It’s not a religious rite. It’s two men pushing pieces of wood around sixty-four squares. You’re feeling sorry for yourself while I’m talking about a man’s life.’

John made a gesture of contempt. ‘Your opinions on the metaphysics of chess don’t interest me,’ he said. ‘Do you think I’m a fool? You don’t want to help Petroff defect because it’s a nice thing to do; you want to do it to embarrass the Russians. That’s part of the game that *you* play, and the value of a human life has no more meaning in your game than it does in mine. Chess players don’t assassinate people.’

Arnett decided to angle for a new position. ‘You said you hated the Russians.’

‘Not enough to risk losing the championship match just to embarrass them. I’ll do that anyway when I beat their man.’ John paused. Something moved behind his eyes. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘it could be a gambit.’

‘A gambit?’

‘A *gambit*, yes; a phony sacrifice to gain material or to checkmate an opponent.’ John laced his long fingers together and met Arnett’s puzzled

gaze. 'The Russians are devious,' he continued. 'That title means a great deal to them. I wouldn't put it past them to float a rumour like this just to take my mind off the match. I sit there waiting for some signal while Petroff proceeds to blow me off the board. He wins, I lose. He goes back to Russia a hero while I go back to the United States a fool; with the Americans cheering because the obnoxious John Butler got beat.'

'Jesus, Butler!' The disgust in Arnett's voice was real.

'I'd like to go now.' When Arnett said nothing John rose to leave. Suddenly he felt very tired.

'Butler!'

John paused with his hand on the knob. He stared through the frosted glass of the door at the reversed letters which read, UNITED TEXTILES, INC. Arnett's voice came at him, even but stripped of all guile. John knew it was Arnett the man speaking, not Arnett the CIA agent.

'I just wanted to tell you that you're a bastard. A real bastard.'

John pulled the door open and stepped out of the office. Tom Manning and Henry Palmer were waiting for him in the corridor.

'John!' Henry's voice squeaked boyishly.

John hurried down the corridor without looking up. The two men fell into step beside him. 'How did you two get here?' John asked absently.

'The same men who took you away came back and told us where to find you,' Tom said, his voice strained from the physical effort required to keep pace with John. 'They seemed pretty upset, said there'd been a mix-up.'

Henry stopped at the elevator but John hurried past and disappeared down a stairway. Henry started to go after him but Tom reached out and grabbed Henry's arm. 'Let him go,' Tom said quietly. 'He'll talk when he feels like it.'

Tom was vaguely surprised to find John waiting for them outside the building. He was standing on the edge of a mall, staring at the taxi-stained traffic on Fifth Avenue. The spray from a nearby fountain rainbowed in the late summer air, then fell out of the sky, spotting John's jacket.

'There was no mix-up,' John said as Tom and Henry moved up beside him. 'And it wasn't the FBI that wanted me. It was the CIA. A man the name of Peter Arnett.'

'What did he want?' Tom asked anxiously.

John continued to stare at the traffic. 'He told me Petroff wants to defect,' he said after a long pause. 'He wanted me to help.'

Henry whistled softly. Tom stepped forward and half-turned so that he could see John's face. It was expressionless. Only his eyes seemed alive, bright and constantly in motion. 'What did you tell him?'

John's eyes stopped moving. 'I told him no.'

'What did he expect you to do?' Henry asked.

'Wait for a signal from Petroff. I was supposed to tell the CIA how and when he wanted to make his break.'

Henry shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at the tops of his shoes. 'You think it's some kind of trick?'

John, sensing the tone of reproach in Henry's voice, glanced sharply at the other man. 'I don't care if it's a trick or not,' he said tightly. 'I don't want any part of it.'

'It could be real,' Tom said thoughtfully. 'The only thing that's kept Petroff out of Siberia for the past five years is the fact that he's world champion. It could be that he's had enough.' He looked into John's eyes. 'I think you were wise to stay out of it.'

'Why do you say that?' Henry said quickly, betraying his own feelings.

'It's possible that the Russians know something is up.' Tom paused and glanced warily at John. 'The Russians contacted the International Federation two weeks ago. They wanted to postpone. Naturally, we refused.'

John's eyes darted in Tom's direction and his voice was sharp, 'Why wasn't I informed of this?'

'We thought you had enough on your mind preparing for the match,' Tom said evenly.

'You should have told me!'

Spots of colour appeared high on Tom's cheekbones. He turned away for a moment. When he turned back the colour was gone. 'Do you want the match postponed, John?'

'Of course not. I've worked too hard and waited too long to let Petroff get away from me now.'

'Precisely,' Tom said curtly. 'It's our option to insist that the match be played as scheduled, and FIDE will back us up. If the Russians don't want their boy to leave the country, they forfeit the title.' He touched John's arm lightly. 'The important thing is to keep this thing out of your mind. You take care of the chess, and the US Chess Federation will take care of the organising details.'

‘He might never be heard of again,’ Henry said distantly.

‘You said something, Henry?’ John’s voice was sharp, a warning signal.

‘I was just thinking of what Petroff must be going through,’ Henry said quickly. ‘If he loses that title the Russians will nail him for good. It’s a hell of a prospect.’

‘Would you like me to give him the match, Henry?’

‘You know I didn’t mean that, John. I was just thinking—’

‘You were just thinking what you would do in my place, which is *lose*, Henry. You’d lose because you’d have your head filled with romantic notions while Petroff was wiping his feet all over you. That’s what’s wrong with your game, Henry; too many busted sacrifices.’

A hot flash of hate welled up in Henry’s throat like bile. He swallowed it. The suddenness and force of the emotion had surprised Henry, and made him afraid. ‘There aren’t that many people in the world who can beat me, John,’ Henry said softly.

‘I can beat you, and so can Petroff.’

‘You, yes; you did it in the candidates’ matches. Petroff, maybe, maybe not.’

John granted derisively and Henry felt his face burn.

‘I’ve never had a chance to play the man! He’s like a ghost! He comes out of the woodwork every two years or so, beats everyone in sight, then goes back to raising hell.’

‘Then he must not be that unhappy, rights’ John snapped. ‘But you still want me to help him out of his misery.’

‘I didn’t say I’d help him if I were in your place! God damn it, John! You don’t have to insult me every time you want to make a point!’

Tom stepped between the two men and made a conciliatory gesture. ‘Nobody’s criticising your decision,’ he said to John. ‘If Petroff wants out that bad, and the CIA wants him, then it’s up to the professionals to work up a plan and carry it out. But it’s not going to do anyone any good for the two of you to argue. There are too many other things that have to be done. John, you’ve already lost a day. Now, why don’t you forget about this Petroff thing? Take Henry home with you and do some analysis. I’ll have dinner sent up to your apartment.’

John hesitated a moment, then abruptly walked away. Henry glanced at Tom.

‘What now?’

‘Go after him. He’ll snap out of it.’

Henry nodded, then walked quickly after John. Tom stood alone, watching them go. After a few moments he turned and walked away.

Across the street, Gligoric waited until the three men were out of sight, then stepped out of the doorway in which he had been standing. He got into a waiting car and instructed the driver to take him home. He was satisfied that everything was going according to plan. He decided to reward himself that night with a woman.

THREE

John had always believed that his life had begun when he discovered the existence of the game of chess. His early childhood was a blur of vaguely defined memories of his mother and a hulking, faceless man that he associated with physical pain and that he assumed was his father, although he couldn't be sure; there had been a lengthy procession of men in and out of his mother's bedroom for as long as he could remember. He remembered himself as constantly feeling out of focus, drifting through school, bullied, afraid, alone, and—most of all—powerless. He was not small in stature, but he *felt* small—which was worse.

Then he had been born again on a bright day in the early spring when he was eleven years old. He had been walking home through a park near his school in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. As usual, old and young men, unemployed, drifters of all ages were hunched over the stone tables near the sidewalk, playing chess. John had seen the men and women playing many times before, but had never stopped. This day, for some reason, he did.

There was a great deal of noise and argument as one or more of the spectators, unable to control a mounting frustration, would suddenly reach over the shoulder of one of the players and move a piece, loudly arguing that only an idiot could have missed that particular move. The player, backed by his own supporters, would argue back vehemently. Tempers would flare, but, as far as John could see, there were never any fist fights. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely, and the arguments seemed as much a part of the fun as the game itself.

John moved closer so that he could see one of the games in progress. A young man in a business suit was playing an old woman with pale eyes and a moustache. There was much discussion going on among the onlookers, and the young man's face was flushed, his jaw muscles tense, and it seemed obvious to John that he was losing. But it was the game pieces themselves that caught and held John's attention. They were different from any game pieces he had ever seen before, and somehow beautiful; rearing horses, spear carriers, religious figures, castles, kings and queens. Players had different sets, some ornately carved, others very simple. John found all of them fascinating. He quickly learned, by watching, that each piece had its

own special way of moving, and that a particular player's prowess depended on how well he could co-ordinate the moves of his various pieces.

'You wanna' play, kid?'

John turned and looked up into the rheumy, colourless eyes of the old man who had touched his shoulder. The old man wore a ragged jacket over a shirt that had once been white. He smelled.

'What's the matter, kid? You don't talk? You a dummy?'

John felt afraid; at the same time he experienced an entirely different emotion that he could not identify. Many years later he would realise that the emotion was gratitude. That day in the park was the first time in John's life that an adult—any adult—had approached him as an individual, and not as a child. The old man simply wanted to play chess: John's age was absolutely irrelevant. It was an exhilarating experience for the eleven-year-old John Butler, and it erased his fear.

'I ... I don't know how to play, mister.'

The old man hawked and spat on the sidewalk, then turned and started to walk away. John ran after him and grabbed his sleeve.

'Teach me, mister.'

'I ain't no teacher, kid.'

The old man kept walking. John hung on to his sleeve. 'Please, mister.'

The old man stopped and stared down at John for a few moments. Finally he motioned towards an empty table where a board and pieces had been set up. 'Ten minutes, kid,' the old man said gruffly.

Ten minutes was all it took John to learn the moves of the pieces—eight pawns, two rooks, two knights, two bishops, a king and a queen.

'And the object of the game is to capture the other man's king?' John asked, desperately trying to stretch out the precious, passing minutes.

But the old man no longer seemed anxious to leave. The hard light in his eyes had diffused and grown softer. He shook his head. 'The king's never captured, kid. The game's over when you're *about* to capture the king on the next move and there's not a damn thing the other guy can do about it. That's called "checkmate".' The old man hawked and spat again. Something rattled deep in his chest. 'There's an interesting thing about chess,' the old man continued when he had caught his breath, 'you can't sneak up on another guy's king. When you're threatening to take the king, you gotta' say "check", and he's gotta' move the king out of the way or protect it some other way. When he can't, that's 'mate. There are some special rules, but I

ain't gonna' teach you them now. I don't come down here to play wet nurse to beginners Tell your old man to teach you.'

'I don't have a father. I mean, he doesn't live with us.'

'Sorry, kid. Didn't mean to get personal.'

'That's all right.' John fingered the chess pieces, practising the moves he had just learned 'Is that all there is to it?'

The old man threw back his head and laughed. The laugh ended, shifting down into a strangled, hiccupping cough that had a foul odour. The old man quickly set up the pieces, then leaned forward, his elbows resting on the sides of the table. 'You're white, smart-ass,' the old man growled. 'You move first.'

John moved his king's bishop pawn out two squares. The old man smiled and advanced his queen's knight. John hesitated, then moved another pawn. He found that he remembered the moves of the pieces clearly, but he was no longer so confident that he knew what to *do* with the pieces. Now that the game had begun, their number appeared to have grown. The old man's king, eight squares from his own, might as well have been a million miles away; John could think of no way of attacking it successfully. *What* to move, where to move it and when; those were the problems and the essence of the game, John thought. He moved a bishop to the opposite end of the board and watched it captured by a piece he hadn't even noticed. His face began to burn. In a few more moves his king was surrounded by black men, none of which he could safely capture with his own white pieces.

'Checkmate in three, smart-ass.'

John glanced up. 'How do you know that?' he asked stiffly.

The old man gestured towards the board. 'It's right there in front of you.'

Three moves later John's king was hopelessly trapped, and the old man's prediction suddenly became painfully clear. 'I told you, smart-ass,' the old man said evenly. 'That's checkmate.'

John felt humiliated. He wanted to get up and run but knew that would only make him feel worse. The old man's eyes were filled with scorn, merciless.

'Let ol' Edgar tell you something, sonny,' the old man said. 'This here game was made up by an Indian general—or maybe a Persian. Doesn't make any difference. The game was used to practise making war, and that's what the game is all about; it's a war. The armies are the same. Everything's the same except the person runnin' the army. When you get to be a better

general than the other guy, that's when you win the battles and the war. The game's thousands of years old. It's a game that will never die because it's the greatest game there is.'

Edgar swept the pieces to one side of the table and pressed his index finger directly in the centre of the board. 'First lesson, sonny; you may learn the moves of the pieces in a few minutes, but it will take you the rest of your life to learn to move 'em *right*. And that won't be enough time. Nobody knows everything there is to know about this game.' Edgar tapped his finger on the board. 'This may look like a playing board with sixty-four squares to you, but you're wrong. I'll tell you what it is; it's a bottomless pit. Every time you move the pieces out there, you're going into unknown territory. People have been working out new wrinkles ever since the game was invented. So don't be a smart-ass, smart-ass! There ain't no luck in this game. No luck at all. You always get exactly what you deserve. Remember that you're a general; move your army right and you win; move it wrong and you lose. It's just as simple as that Or as complicated. Learn the capabilities of your forces. Hell, it's also like being an orchestra leader. You're the conductor, and it's only going to sound good when you get everybody playing together.' Edgar paused and cleared his throat. He seemed slightly embarrassed. 'I talk too much, kid. Forget all that general and orchestra conductor crap. The only way you're going to learn to play is to play. And that's all I got time for. I wanna' play some chess before it gets too dark to see the pieces.'

John felt light-headed. 'Thank you Mr Edgar,' he said as the old man rose.

Edgar hesitated, then reached into a pocket of his jacket and withdrew a thick, tattered paperback book. He tossed it across the table at John who caught it and looked at the title. The book was *Modern Chess Openings*. 'Here, smart-ass. Check this out. Learn what's been done and save yourself a lot of trouble. You can give it back the next time you see me.'

John nodded and clutched the book firmly to his chest. He felt as if he had been given something very precious, a book that would teach him the secret of the old man's skill at the chessboard. Edgar turned without another word and shuffled off into the crowd.

Later, in his room, John was to discover that *Modern Chess Openings* might as well have been written in a foreign language; most of it was printed in what appeared to be a specialised notation. But, by using the few

diagrams provided in the book and by remembering what Edgar had told him, John learned to read the book and decode the positions. And he stopped by the park every day to watch. Edgar ignored him, but other men would occasionally answer his questions or demonstrate a move on an unused board. He used one week's allowance to buy a small pocket chess set, then spent every moment he could steal at home and school to practise the various opening sequences of moves he had read about in the old man's book. He felt as if a new world had been opened to him, a world ideally suited to him; it was a world of figures and analysis, a world of tense confrontation which was nonetheless free of the kind of pain John had known most of his life. This was a world where everyone knew the rules and played within them, and this was all John had ever wanted.

Watching the men in the park, John soon learned to recognise the same opening moves he had been practising. And he learned that there were three theoretically separate phases in a chess game· the opening, middle game and end game. Each phase had its own special characteristics, and different tactics were occasionally used in each phase. Some players were noted for their strengths and weaknesses in the different phases. Thousands of opening lines had been thoroughly analysed; it was the middle game, that stage of the contest where all the pieces had been deployed, where imagination combined with a strong sense of logic had to be used. It was the end game, when most of the pieces had been removed, that appeared, ironically, to be the most complicated phase of all, requiring the maximum of concentration and thought.

Within a few weeks John discovered something else; he often saw more in any given position than other people who had been playing for years. At last he felt ready to play again. His mother rarely arrived home before eight or nine in the evening, and so John had no difficulty remaining in the park after school to play. Within ten days he had beaten Edgar for the first time.

Edgar sat back and stared at John. Something moved in the pale eyes; surprise, anger, then pride. 'That's good, kid,' Edgar said. 'That's real good. Let me ask you something: how'd you know enough to sacrifice your knight on the fifteenth move? I mean, you didn't really *know* how it was going to bust up my king's side, did you? Wasn't it a mistake?'

John glanced at his score sheet, then set the pieces back in their original positions and played through the game until he reached the move Edgar had questioned. He demonstrated quickly. 'You couldn't afford to take the

knight,' John said. 'This happens ... then this.' John's fingers flew across the board, moving the pieces while Edgar absently nodded his head. 'I think you could have defended with pawn to bishop four.'

Edgar didn't say anything and John grew nervous. 'Did I do something wrong?' John asked quietly.

'No, kid.' There was pride evident once again in Edgar's eyes and voice. 'You did just fine' The old man cleared his throat. 'Look, kid, you doin' anything this weekend? I mean, will your folks let you spend some time with me Saturday and Sunday?'

John dropped his eyes He wished he could say that someone would mind. In fact, ever since his father had left, his mother rarely knew whether John was home or not. And she gave no indication that she cared When she was home there was always a man—some man, different men—with her, and John found that he was often afraid of them When the men were not in his home, his mother was in theirs 'I can get out,' John said in a voice barely above a whisper. 'Where do you want to take me?'

'How old are you, kid?'

'Eleven I'll be twelve next month.'

'Can you get some money? Maybe ten bucks?'

John shook his head 'I don't think so.'

'Never mind. You meet me here eight o'clock Saturday morning. Okay?'

John gazed out over the huge hall with its hundreds of chess sets. They were early for the tournament, but there were already a few players there, sitting by themselves, poring over chess books and analysing past efforts. They all looked so terribly serious, and John felt a tightening in his stomach.

Edgar walked back over to him and handed him a receipt. 'All right, smart-ass,' Edgar said with a broad smile, 'you're now a member of the United States Chess Federation. You're also entered in this tournament. You sure your parents—your mother—doesn't mind you coming out with me like this?'

'I'm sure. You paid for me?'

Edgar made a gesture with his hand. John realised with some surprise that the old man was embarrassed and he felt a flood of affection.

'I know you know how to keep score, smart-ass, but you're also going to use a clock here. You know how?'

‘No, sir.’

‘Then I’ll show you.’

Edgar borrowed a chess clock from the tournament director and took John over to a table at the end of the hall. John watched carefully as the old man demonstrated the use of the two-faced clock. It had suddenly become important to John that he do well.

‘Do you play in these tournaments, Mr Edgar?’

Edgar shook his head ‘No, smart-ass. Haven’t got the nerves for it. I’m a park player, a *patzer*, a wood pusher. I like to talk when I’m playin’, have fun. You’re not going to find that here. You talk too loud here and somebody will hand you your head. These guys are out for blood. But this is where you belong, kid. You got talent, and you need the competition.’

John looked around him The hall was now filling rapidly. Players were standing around nervously waiting for the pairings for the first round to be posted.

‘After you play five rounds you’ll get what’s called a provisional rating,’ Edgar continued. ‘Your rating depends on the ratings of the guys you’re playing. The more you win and the higher their ratings, the higher your own rating goes The same goes for everyone all over the US. The average rating is about 1,500 When you get to 2,000, the USCF gives you a title. Then you’re an expert You get that far and you’re good, smart-ass. And I wouldn’t have brought you here if I didn’t think you could do it. If you hit 2,200 you’re a master, 2,400 is what’s called a senior master. That’s as far as you can go with national titles.’

‘What happens after that?’

‘Tournament chess is internationally controlled. The US Chess Federation is the American part of an outfit that calls itself *Federacion International des Echechs*; FIDE. They’re the ones who decide who gets the international titles, and they control all international tournaments, including the candidates’ matches and the world championship matches.’

‘How do they work?’

‘Whoa, smart-ass. Let’s see if you can win a, few games at this level before you start worrying about the big boys.’

‘Please, Mr Edgar. I want to know.’

Edgar shrugged with good-natured resignation. ‘If you get good enough, that is, if your rating gets high enough, you’ll be invited to certain international tournaments. You’ll earn the title of international master or

grand master—the highest you can go—by beating a certain percentage of other grand masters For these championships, they’ve divided the world up into zones and play what are known as interzonals. Then they take the two best guys to represent each zone and these players go on to the candidates’ matches. The process takes three years. Finally you end up with one challenger, and he plays the current champion for the world title.’ Edgar paused. ‘You listening, kid?’

John did not win any games in the first tournament He cried after the last loss, and was ready to quit Edgar insisted that they sit down immediately and analyse the games Upon doing so John’s mistakes became painfully obvious to him, and he could not believe that he had missed so many obvious good moves.

‘There’s another lesson, kid,’ Edgar announced quietly. ‘Eliminate the simple mistakes. And that ain’t as simple as it sounds.’

John continued to play every day in the park after school. He hustled other players under the watchful eye of Edgar. He spent all of the money he earned on chess books. Within a month he had entered his second tournament, won two games and drew one. When the next list of ratings was published he found that his was 1,703.

John quickly discovered that top-level chess required serious study, a thorough knowledge of what had been tried before, and constant attention to new lines being tried in the latest important tournaments. Finding nothing that interested him more than chess, John devoted all of his time to chess, buying, borrowing—and, on one occasion, stealing—every book and magazine he could find on the subject. In four months he had won his first tournament. A week later Edgar was killed, run over by a beer truck as he was crossing a street on his way to the park.

John dropped out of school on his sixteenth birthday to devote his full time to chess. It was six months before his mother became aware of the fact, and then her only concern was that he provide his own support. He moved into a small walk-up apartment, supporting himself through a series of odd jobs and the income from small-stakes games in local New York City chess clubs.

When he was seventeen he won the US Open and was automatically granted his international grand master title. Seeds of bitterness planted years

before flowered under the pressure of having to earn an adequate living. A recognised master of his chosen profession, it was difficult for John to find the rent money each month.

Within a few months he had had his first taste of international competition. The USCF, under the directorship of Tom Manning, had recognised John's talent and undertaken a programme of sponsorship to introduce him to world chess at the highest levels. John found it a profoundly distressing experience. The Russians, John discovered, played as a team, something he could neither understand nor accept. To John, chess was the purest form of individual endeavour. While a scorekeeper might tally the points scored by a number of individuals from a certain group, they were still, as far as John was concerned, individuals when they sat down to play. The idea that one player might conspire to help another was anathema to John, yet this was precisely what the Russians did, and John could not forgive them for it.

Since more than half of all the grand masters in the world were Russians, there were always many Russians in the top tournaments. They used their numbers to control the outcome of the matches, accepting easy draws against one another, saving their physical and mental energies for all-out struggles against opponents from other countries. It was a practice that John could not tolerate. His appearances at the international tournaments became more and more infrequent.

At the same time John was beginning to pay a price for the years of pressure, isolation and single-minded dedication to his goal; frustrated, a terrible rage had become his constant companion. He found he could not tolerate distractions of any kind, and he refused to play under any conditions that did not exactly suit him. Soon he was not playing at all.

The USCF, which had been pinning its hopes for the world championship on John, shifted its attention to another young, promising player—Henry Palmer.

John, embittered and alone, retired from competition. For three years he isolated himself in his apartment, venturing out only to earn money at whatever jobs he could find, struggling with the private demons that threatened to destroy him. He suffered when Henry Palmer won the United States Championship, exulted when Palmer lost the North American Interzonals. And he sensed, deep within himself, that both feelings were equally unhealthy.

John made his final important discovery in these lonely years; without chess, he was nothing. Nothing. He defined himself through the game. And he had to be champion of the world.

At the age of twenty-four he went back into active competition. In the same year Yevgeny Petroff emerged as the new world champion. It would take John almost a decade of constant struggle with stiff competition, cautious tournament directors and—most of all—himself to emerge as the challenger.

FOUR

John lived out of his apartment like some men live out of a suitcase. There were no pictures or photographs on the walls of the small, sparsely furnished apartment; nothing of a personal nature except, perhaps, for the hundreds of trophies and plaques stacked haphazardly in the corners of the rooms. Chess sets and books filled the bookshelves, spilling out on the floor. There was a large, magnetic demonstration board set up against the wall next to an unmade, convertible sofa-bed. Food wrappers and empty coffee containers littered the floor by the table where John and Henry sat, next to the one window in the apartment. They had been analysing games for close to five hours. Henry's eyes were marbled with red, and the muscles in his face were tense with fatigue. John seemed inexhaustible.

Both men stared intently at the board in front of them. Suddenly Henry reached out and advanced a knight. 'Then this on the seventh move,' he said.

John shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'He did it at La Parma in '68.'

'And drew. By now Petroff has something better.'

Henry, unconvinced, continued to study the possibilities of the position. Finally he moved a bishop up in support of the knight. John quickly brought his queen into play on the rook file. They made a few more moves, then Henry tipped over his king.

'You're right,' Henry said after a pause. 'It doesn't work.'

Both men made notes, then John began to set up a new situation. 'Incidentally,' he said without looking up from the board, 'I'm sorry about some of the things I said this afternoon.'

Henry glanced up, surprised. An apology from John Butler was rare. 'That business about Petroff really doesn't bother you?'

'I don't intend to let it bother me. I don't want to be a hero.' John suddenly laughed. 'Henry, you still don't understand that I'd rather be world champion than be liked.'

It seemed to be an understatement to Henry, but he didn't say so. Instead, he rose from the table and stretched. 'I've had it, John. I can't see.'

John, still absorbed in the position on the board, nodded absently.

'You want me to come around tomorrow?'

'Sure.'

Henry turned and walked from the apartment. John sat at the table for another half hour, then rose and took a small pocket chess set from a shelf. He sat down in an over-stuffed armchair, reached up behind him and turned on a standard lamp.

The persistent ringing of the bell reached down and tugged at John's consciousness. He awoke slowly, already thinking of moves, positions, games of chess he had played and read about stretching back through the years. The ringing continued. John slowly sat up in the chair. The pocket chess set fell off his lap and onto the floor. He picked up the phone and, when he heard a dial tone, hung up and went to the door.

The girl standing in the hall was a few inches over five feet, olive-skinned, dark and beautiful. Her black hair was parted in the middle and drawn back tightly in a style that was either very old or very new. Her eyes were large and, on the surface, very calm; somewhere in their depths, pride burned with a steady flame. Her suit was a chic basic black, highlighted by a ruffled beige blouse. She carried a small purse in one hand and a slim, soft leather case under her arm.

'Mr Butter?'

She spoke with a pronounced Russian accent that, spoken as it was outside the confines of a chess tournament hall, John found vaguely disorienting. He nodded sleepily.

'My name is Anna Petroff,' the girl said evenly.

John ran his fingers through his tousled hair and shook his head in an attempt to clear it. He felt as though he had been woken in the middle of the night, but the colour of the light in the hall told him that it was almost noon. 'Petroff?'

'Yes,' the girl said curtly. 'But I've disturbed you. I'm sorry, I'll come back later.' She bowed slightly and turned to leave.

'Just a minute. You said your name was Petroff?'

The girl stopped and gazed at him levelly. The pride in her eyes touched her voice. 'Yes, Mr Butler,' she said slowly, 'Yevgeny is my brother.'

Still fighting off the lingering cobwebs of sleep, John searched for connections that seemed just beyond his grasp. 'What do you want?' he asked hesitantly.

'I'd like to talk to you, Mr Butler, but not in the hall. I'll come back when it's more convenient.'

‘No, it’s all right.’ John stepped aside. ‘Please come in.’

The girl walked past him and John caught a whiff of the scent she was wearing; it was light, expensive and somehow perfectly matched the girl’s cool, poised manner.

John motioned towards the armchair, ‘Uh, sit down. Just give me a minute to wake up.’

Anna Petroff sat down in the chair, crossed her legs and rested the leather case in her lap. John went into the bathroom, splashed some water on his face and combed his hair. Next he went into the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil. By the time he returned to the living-room he was fully awake and was becoming very suspicious.

‘What’s this all about?’ John asked coldly.

Anna opened the leather case and withdrew a sheaf of papers that had been stapled together. ‘I have something to give you,’ she said, rising and handing the papers to John.

John glanced at the letterhead on the front page. It was written in Russian. He felt the muscles in his stomach flutter. ‘It’s “Moscow” something. I can’t read the rest of the printing, or the handwriting.’

‘It’s the Moscow Institute. The handwriting is my brother’s. It’s just his name.’

John flipped over to the next page which was covered with typed symbols. The margins were filled with lengthy notations in the same handwriting seen on the first page. John glanced up,

‘I can read this,’ John said warily. ‘These are chess games,’

‘Yes, Mr Butler, those are chess games.’

John, still studying the symbols, absently turned and walked over to the table by the window. He set up the chess pieces, then quickly played through the first few moves noted on the first sheet. He hesitated, then played them through again. Finally he casually tossed the manuscript on a chair and turned back to Anna. He felt a sense of release, of triumph, almost as though he had ventured into a dark cave and emerged safely once again.

‘Whoever played this game is an amateur,’ John said, his voice laced with a trace of contempt. ‘I’ve played white against this system hundreds of times. Black’s eighth move will lose. It’s all wrong.’

‘Is it?’ Anna asked coolly. ‘I understood you could read enough Russian to follow the analysis.’

‘I can make it out. But I don’t have to read the analysis to know that the eighth move is bad.’

‘Why don’t you read it anyway?’

There was a challenge in the girl’s voice that could not be denied. John shrugged, then went back to the table. He sat down and smoothed the first page of the manuscript open before him. The notes were printed, and John had little trouble reading them. Over the years he had taught himself to read chess-related material in Russian, Spanish, French and Italian. He received—and pored over—fifty chess publications a month.

He skimmed through the first page of analysis notes quickly. He stopped and frowned when he came to a sentence at the bottom of the page. It didn’t appear to make any sense; it went against the body of knowledge that had built up around the Ruy Lopez opening over the past twenty years. The eighth move had to be a mistake, and yet ...

John set up the pieces and slowly played up to the eighth move. He looked at the position and shook his head. Still, he continued on with the analysis, playing up to the twentieth move. Suddenly he felt uncomfortable; there was something wrong. What had seemed like a disastrous eighth move for black had led to a position where black enjoyed a small but palpable advantage in space and mobility. Black had given up two pawns, but already John could see where the material would be recaptured, with an even greater advantage. Incredible as it seemed, the analysis indicated an entirely new line in the opening, and it led to a clear win for black.

John knew that, had he been playing white in this game, his ninth move would have been almost automatic. He would have fallen into the trap, and he would have lost.

John quickly skimmed through the rest of the manuscript, his hands flying over the board, making the noted moves. Then he went back to the beginning and replayed each game, reading the accompanying analysis with great care. In each game, one set of moves—sometimes the black set, other times white—virtually leaped out at him from the page; they were his games, his favourite lines. But the answering lines were totally new—deadly effective. John felt a sudden surge of conflicting emotions; consternation, excitement, and the beginnings of self-doubt. His mouth was suddenly dry.

He did not hear the kettle whistling, and his concentration was only broken when Anna appeared at his side. She was carrying two cups of

steaming coffee.

‘I don’t know how you like your coffee,’ Anna announced. ‘I found milk, but no sugar.’ She made no attempt to hide the satisfaction in her voice, and the sound rasped against John’s nervous tension. He swivelled round in his chair.

‘Where did you get these?’

Anna raised her eyebrows in mock earnestness. ‘The cups? They were in your dusty cupboard.’

John felt anger flush through him, burning like acid in his blood. He turned away quickly, wrestled his emotions down to an acceptable level, then turned round again. He took the cups from Anna and set them down on the table.

‘I meant where did you get *these*.’ He pointed to the manuscript.

‘How and where I got them is unimportant.’

‘Your brother did these analyses?’

Anna walked around the table and sat down across from John. She picked up one of the cups of coffee and sipped at it, her gaze levelled at John over the rim. Once again her eyes hid more than they revealed.

‘He had help, naturally,’ Anna said evenly, after a long pause, ‘Yevgeny and six of our top grand masters sat for five months with a computer. Those opening lines are the result. As you can see, every one of those innovations is aimed at you, based on the records of your games.’ She lowered the cup and smiled, displaying a row of even, white teeth. ‘Yevgeny is ready for you, Mr Butler.’

The smile and the girl’s position at the table across from him made John uncomfortable. Like Arnett, she appeared to be presenting herself as an opponent, challenging John to a game he did not understand. John rose and leaned forward on the table.

‘Why did you give these to me?’

‘I’m not prepared to tell you that.’ Anna took another sip of coffee, then set the cup down. ‘Perhaps one day I will ask something of you.’

‘Not a chance. You’ll tell me what you want now or forget about it.’

‘No, Mr Butler, I will tell you nothing,’ Anna said with an equanimity that John found infuriating. ‘But, whether or not I ever ask you for a favour in return, and whether or not you refuse, the papers are still yours. And you know now exactly how valuable they are. Because of the conditions under which my brother is forced to play, very few of his games are ever

published, even inside Russia. On the other hand, Yevgeny and every other player in the world has hundreds of your games and analyses by everybody under the sun. In addition, Yevgeny has the full support and resources of our government, at least for his chess efforts. No, Mr Butler, those papers are what you Americans might refer to as a gold mine. You'll keep them, and you'll study them, because those papers will tell you exactly how Yevgeny is preparing for your match.'

John got up and paced around the room nervously. Anna watched him and knew he was shaken. After a few moments he stopped and turned back to her.

'Any innovative move in the opening from a grand master requires thought,' John said tightly. 'I'd have found the answer over the board.'

'Maybe. But not without using up a lot of time on your clock, time that you could scarcely afford. But then it doesn't really make much difference in my opinion.'

'What do you mean?'

'Those analyses are just standard preparation. Yevgeny doesn't need the new moves, Mr Butler. He'll beat you anyway.'

John's eyes flashed angrily. 'The world's first female grand master! What do you know?'

'I know my brother,' Anna said quietly.

'And *that* kind of reasoning, lady, is why there aren't any women grand masters!' John took a deep breath and tried to back off from his anger. His first thought had been that the girl's visit was some kind of psychological ploy. But the analysed games and the new moves were real, too high a price to pay for an ephemeral psychological edge.

His failure to solve the problem posed by Anna's presence prodded John's anger once again. 'What the hell is this all about? How did you get here? Someone smuggle you out of Russia?'

Lights from some inner source danced in the girl's eyes. 'My, my, Mr Butler, you do get excited when someone suggests you're not as good as you think you are.' The colour in Anna's eyes shifted to a darker hue. 'Don't believe everything you read in *The Daily News*, Mr Butler. Most Russian citizens are as free to travel as the people in this country; freer, in some cases. Also, my government doesn't hold what my brother does against me.'

'Where does that leave you?'

‘On the East River. I’m a member of my country’s mission to the United Nations.’

John made no effort to hide his surprise. ‘Then you’re a party member?’

‘Of course.’

‘The papers must have been smuggled out.’

‘Yes.’

Something in the girl’s voice tripped a warning signal in John’s brain, and he welcomed it. The girl’s response had been a millisecond too quick; she was too self-assured, too confident. Her manner was a mask, and for the first time John thought he had caught a glimpse of the face behind it.

‘No,’ John said after a long pause. Something moved deep in the girl’s eyes. John moved in after it. ‘No, they weren’t smuggled out,’ he continued with greater assurance. ‘And I’ll tell you why you’re here: world champions command a lot of headlines, while ex-champions mean nothing. If your brother wins it means the Russians will have to put up with him for three more years. If he loses, they just put him away. So they’ve decided they don’t want him to win after all. And they sent his sister to do the dirty work. Christ, you Russians are really something!’

Anna had quickly regained Her composure. A thin white line around her lips was the only sign of any strain. ‘You may believe anything you want, Mr Butler,’ she said, her lips pressed tightly against her teeth. ‘At the moment it doesn’t make any difference.’ She rose, took a card from her purse and laid it on the arm of the chair. ‘I must leave now.’

John watched Anna move towards the door. Somehow it was not right that she leave now: it was too anticlimatic. He would be left with only the papers, and no answers.

‘It could also be a bribe,’ John said quickly.

That touched a nerve. Anna hesitated, then wheeled like a puppet on the string of John’s words. There was confusion on her face, fear in her voice. ‘What did you say?’

The intensity of Anna’s reaction caught John off balance, and he was sorry he had spoken. If Petroff did indeed want to defect, and if he was right about the girl being part of a plot to push the world champion into oblivion, then a few indiscreet words on his part could help destroy a man he had never met. The only place John wanted to destroy Yevgeny Petroff was over a chessboard.

Anna's eyes bored into his, and John turned away. 'Nothing,' he said lamely. 'I was just mumbling to myself.'

Anna walked quickly back across the room, circled John until she was staring into his face. 'No,' she said firmly, her voice coloured by a faint note of desperation. 'I heard you. You said something about a bribe, and you were referring to the papers. Why should I try to bribe you? For what purpose?'

Anna swallowed hard. Once again she seemed icy calm, but now it was obviously feigned. 'Has someone else contacted you about my brother?'

The girl's reserve was rapidly disappearing. Her dark eyes were large and moist. John felt trapped.

'Look, lady, I don't know why you're here, or who you're doing this for.'

Anna stepped forward, very close to him, and put her hand on his arm. It was a light touch, but it sent shivers through John like an electric shock.

The girl's voice was very soft. 'You must believe me when I tell you that I would do nothing to hurt Yevgeny.'

John walked to the table and slapped his hand down hard on the papers. 'No? What about these?'

Anna flushed. She shook her head like someone fighting pain. 'I can't explain. Not now. Please tell me what you meant.'

John picked up his coffee and sipped at it. The liquid was cold and bitter. 'I was told your brother wants to defect while he's in Venice.'

The colour drained from Anna's face, leaving her eyes like two holes charred in a piece of paper. 'Who told you that?' she asked in a choked voice.

'The CIA.'

'You must take me to the men who told you this!'

'It was just one man.'

'Take me to him!'

'Why?'

She shook her head again. 'Please. Consider it a down payment on the papers I brought you.'

It did not take John long to reach a decision. A distraction of unknown proportions had been thrust upon him, and he knew that he would have great difficulty concentrating until the problem posed by Petroff, Anna and the papers was resolved. He took a sports coat out of a closet and led Anna out of the apartment, locking the door behind him.

Neither spoke as they took the apartment elevator to the street. The girl appeared pale and shaken. John hesitated, then took her arm. Anna didn't pull away.

If Gligoric was surprised to see John and Anna emerge from the apartment house, there was nothing in his expression to indicate it. He watched impassively as John flagged down a taxi, waited until the taxi pulled away from the kerb, then ordered his nervous passenger from the car. Finally he leaned forward and tapped his driver on the shoulder. The sleek, grey car moved out into the noon city traffic, keeping close to the taxi ahead.

FIVE

John toyed nervously with his leather chess wallet, quickly sliding the flat metal pieces in and out of the slash pockets in the wallet, replaying from memory one of the games on the sheets Anna had brought him. But his mind was not on the game; he was very conscious of the nervous tension in the girl sitting next to him. He glanced sideways. Anna had pushed herself far back into the patched seat of the taxi. Her head rested against the dirty glass of the window as she stared pensively out at the passing street scenes of lower Manhattan.

John snapped the wallet shut and shoved it into the breast pocket of his coat. 'Do you really believe your brother can beat me?'

For a moment John was not sure the girl had heard him, and he was glad. He had thought he was merely making conversation, but the words hung in the air, revealing far more than he had intended. He crossed his legs and glanced out the window.

Anna's voice was thin and tight. 'Yes, Mr Butler, I think Yevgeny can beat you. I think he will beat you.' She sighed, as though already tired of the conversation. 'I don't see what difference my opinion makes. You're not going to win or lose on the basis of a poll.'

'You think he's going to win because he's your brother?' He had meant to sound amused; it came out sarcastic.

'He'll win because he's a better player,' Anna said absently. Stung by her own words, she turned towards him and touched his arm. 'I'm sorry,' she said quickly. 'My mind ... That was a stupid thing to say, I didn't mean it. Please forgive me.'

'Don't flatter yourself by thinking I would take your insults seriously,' John said tightly. 'Usually I'm the one who does the insulting.'

'John, really, I'm not thinking too clearly right now. I didn't mean it the way it sounded.'

'I'd like you to explain what you did mean.'

'But—'

John shook his head. 'I'd like you to explain what you meant. Really.'

'Why?' Anna suddenly flushed angrily. 'You're mocking me.'

'No,' John said easily, his anger gone, replaced by curiosity. 'Your brother is a mystery to me, as he is to most people outside Russia.'

Anna laughed. It was a short sound, quickly stifled by tension, but while it lasted it was bright and attractive. 'Oh, I can assure you that Yevgeny is also a mystery to most people inside Russia.'

'Including you?'

'Including me,' Anna said seriously. 'Obviously, we're poles apart politically.'

'Then we come back to the matter of betrayal, don't we?'

John thought Anna was going to hit him, but she glanced forward and saw the bright eyes of the taxi driver watching her through the rear view mirror. She clasped her hands tightly together. There were dark red spots of colour high on her cheekbones.

'Everything is a game to you, isn't it?' She hissed savagely. 'If it makes you happy, you just scored a debating point.'

John was taken aback by the intensity of the girl's reaction. 'I'm sorry,' he said simply. He could not remember the last time he had apologised to anyone for anything. He found that he trusted the girl who called herself Anna Petroff, and had every reason not to; liked her, and was afraid to.

The conversation had come to an abrupt halt. John did not like the silence. 'I'd like to know something about your brother's thinking,' he continued. 'You're the closest I'm going to get to him before the match. That's why I asked you what you meant.'

Anna turned back to the window. 'You're a strange man, Mr Butler,' she said softly.

'"John" was good enough when you were apologising,' John said lightly. 'Why not keep it that way?'

'If you like.' Her voice was flat.

'He's not afraid of me?'

'No, Yevgeny isn't afraid of you. In fact, he's greatly looking forward to playing you. He's very confident of winning.'

Once again there was a strange quality to Anna's voice, John listened carefully, trying to hear the secret the tone concealed. Finally he gave up. 'I'd still like to know why people like yourself confuse personalities with the ability to play chess. I'm not a performer, and nobody's ever asked me to run for public office. I've never asked anyone to like me or approve of the way I live. I challenge them to beat me. Usually they can't.'

'Why do you make chess your whole life? Why do you shut everything, everyone, out?'

John felt his lips automatically curl into a sneer. It was the way he had always protected himself from pain. But the sneer would not stay; he wanted to laugh, but the laughter died in his throat.

‘The only time I know who I am is when I’m playing chess,’ John said simply, amazed at how easy the words came. ‘Chess is what I am.’

Anna stared at him a long time before speaking. ‘And you think that’s *all* you are?’

John shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Being the best chess player in the world is all I ever wanted to be.’

‘Then I feel sorry for you, because you’re not a whole person.’

‘And that’s nonsense,’ John said with feeling. ‘There are more than two billion people on the face of the earth; “nice” people, “whole” people. Boring people. How many are the best—the absolute best—at what they’ve chosen to do?’

Anna smiled wryly. ‘That sounds like a rehearsed line.’

‘That’s because I’ve had this same discussion at least a thousand times before.’

‘First of all, we don’t know that you’re the best. You’ve been close before, and you’ve always walked away from the chance to find out. It seems to me that you’re the one who’s afraid.’

John felt as if he had been hit in the stomach. He turned away quickly so that the girl would not see what he knew must be in his eyes. ‘I see no reason to explain my actions to you. And you haven’t answered my question: why are you so sure that your brother will beat me?’

Anna thought for a few moments, then said: ‘My brother will beat you because, in the end, he has the courage to demand more from life than you do, John. He risks more, but doesn’t have as much to lose.’

‘Lyman Building, mister,’ the taxi driver said, pulling over to the kerb.

John’s mind shifted gears as he got out and paid the driver. He helped Anna out of the taxi, and they walked together at a rapid pace past the familiar fountain and into the building. He was anxious to see what Anna Petroff and Arnett would have to say to each other.

They took the elevator to the eleventh floor. John steered Anna to the left, down the long corridor to the offices of United Textiles, Incorporated. John knocked once perfunctorily on the door and went in.

The office was as he remembered, except that a middle-aged, moon-faced secretary with strawberry coloured hair now sat behind the desk. A glazier

was busy repairing the pane of glass behind the desk.

The secretary glanced up. 'May I help you?'

John nodded towards the closed door to his right. 'I'd like to speak to Mr Arnett.'

The puzzled expression on the secretary's face was the first indication that something was wrong. John did not have to wait long to find out what it was. 'There is no Mr Arnett working for our company that I know of,' the moon-faced woman said. 'I'm Mr Jensen's secretary. Perhaps he can help you.'

John could feel Anna's eyes on him. He didn't look at her. 'Yes,' he said. He swallowed and found that his mouth had suddenly gone dry. 'Let me talk to Mr Jensen.'

The secretary picked up an intercom phone and exchanged a few words with a thin, reedy voice that sounded as if it was suffering from mechanical failure. She looked up at John. 'May I have your name, sir?'

'John Butler.'

'And the nature of your business?'

'It's personal.'

The secretary spoke again into the intercom and then looked up.

'You may go in, sir.'

John opened the door to the inner office, and waited until Anna had stepped in behind him, and closed the door.

The inner office was over-decorated, with paintings from a dozen different schools, all of which clashed with the rug and curtains. The man sitting behind the mahogany desk was thick and florid. He bore a striking resemblance to the secretary, and John wondered if that was an occupational hazard of the textile industry. Still, the man seemed pleasant enough. He quickly smoothed down the half dozen strands of hair on the top of his head, then half rose and extended his hand towards John.

'I'm Jensen,' the man said. 'What can I do for you, young man?'

John didn't like being called 'young man'. Most of all, he didn't like the situation he found himself in. He ignored the hand. 'I want to talk to Arnett.'

Jensen put his hand in his pocket and sat down. His eyes were suddenly cold. 'I don't know anybody named Arnett.'

'Yeah? Well, where were all you people yesterday afternoon around four?'

‘Why do you wish to know?’

John glanced quickly at Anna. She wasn’t staring at him any more; her eyes were wide, as though she was looking at something far beyond the walls of the office. John swung back towards Jensen.

‘Somebody’s been jerking me around!’ John snapped. ‘I want to know who, and why!’

‘Are you implying that this company cheated you in some way?’

‘I’m not sure. You still haven’t answered my question.’

‘My secretary and I were at a sales meeting yesterday afternoon.’ Jensen’s hand had moved towards a drawer to his right. He half opened the drawer and left his hand resting on the edge. ‘Now that I’ve told you my business, perhaps you’d be kind enough to tell me yours. What do you want?’

Suddenly Anna uttered a choked cry, turned and jerked the door open. She ran out of the office. John hesitated, then ran after her. But he was too late. He reached the elevator just as the doors were closing. He considered the stairs, then rejected the idea of going after her. If she wanted to get away, there was no way he could stop her; she would be into a taxi and away before he could reach the ground level.

Anger and frustration welled inside him, then exploded. He kicked savagely at the elevator door, then turned to find himself staring into the startled face of the secretary who had followed him down the hall. Any suspicions John had had about the innocence of the woman were erased. Her face mirrored total bewilderment, and more than a little fear. She stumbled backwards, almost fell, then spun around and hurried back towards her office. John cursed and punched the elevator button.

Gligoric was used to making quick decisions. Also, he had been thoroughly briefed on Yevgeny Petroff so he had recognised the woman with John as being the world champion’s sister. He had masked his surprise earlier because of the man who had been with him, but he knew that his superiors would want to know precisely just what Anna Petroff was doing with John Butler. He knew he would have to pick the girl up eventually and, now that the opportunity had presented itself, he saw no reason to wait.

Gligoric had spotted Anna when she was still half a block away, running blindly, head back, tears streaming down her face. Gligoric quickly glanced out the side and rear windows of the car. The sidewalk was crowded with

people, typical harried-looking New Yorkers. Gligoric instantly matched his skills against the situation and did not find them wanting.

He barked something in Russian to his driver who immediately started the car's engine. As Anna approached Gligoric opened the car door and stepped out into her path. Anna collided with him, like a feather smashing against a wall of rock. Gligoric feigned a grunt of surprise and reached out with his left hand as though to steady her. At the same time he moved in front of her and drove his right fist into her solar plexus. Anna's mouth opened in a tortured, silent scream as the breath exploded from her lungs. She jack-knifed forward, but Gligoric gripped her tightly and used the momentum from her fall to ease her into the back seat of the car. He slammed the door shut at the exact same moment when the driver stepped on the accelerator and the car shot off down the street, neatly cutting off two taxis and cornering sharply down a side street.

The speed of the abduction was expert, clean, and totally wasted on the New Yorkers. No one seemed to have noticed; if they had, they had pretended not to. The flow of pedestrians continued on, uninterrupted, as though Anna Petroff had been no more than a drop of water sucked up by a merciless sun.

SIX

John's nerves were stretched taut by the time he got back to his apartment. A gambit: that was the suggestion he had made to Arnett, an attempt to take his mind off his preparations, destroy his concentration, crush his will before he even got to Venice. If that was what Petroff was up to, John thought, it was working perfectly, and this realisation had the perverse effect of making John even more distracted. Was the girl in on it? Then, how could he explain her reaction to the report that her brother wanted to defect? And why the papers? Arnett? Was Arnett out to get him too? Why else go to the trouble of using someone else's office, thus effectively erasing any trace of himself? But then there was the undisguised rage of the FBI agents, Burns and Draper. Or were they simply acting? Was it all a charade with expert actors?

John's hand trembled as he took out his key and slid it into the lock on the door of his apartment. He twisted the lock open, pushed on the door and stepped into the apartment. He immediately froze.

The apartment had been ransacked and virtually demolished. The armchair and sofa-bed had been slashed and most of the other furniture broken. His trophies and plaques were broken and scattered about the rooms of the apartment. John felt a strange sadness when he saw the broken metal, pieces of his life torn from him and trodden on. He had never realised how much the trophies had meant to him the trophies were his home movies; his bronzed baby shoes, his photo album, landmarks of his life stretching back into the past.

Something dark and wet was closing over him, and he fought against it. He felt numb over his entire body; he was staring out at the world from the only safe place left to him, a small area deep inside his brain. And that place was too far away, too cramped. He knew he had to do something to fight the awful pressure. He had to do something; he had to play chess.

He began to pick up, slowly and methodically, the only things left of importance; a chessboard, pieces, and the scattered pages of the Petroff manuscript. He cleared a space on the floor and sat down, arranging the board and pieces before him, laying the papers down at his side. It felt like he was sitting on the ocean floor with a billion tons of water pressing down on him; it was incredibly hard to breathe or move.

He glanced at the record of one of Petroff's games, then reached out and tentatively moved a piece. A droplet of sweat welled from his wrist and dropped onto the board. He blinked his eyes and found that they stung. It was only then that he realised that his body was soaked with sweat, his clothes pasted to his skin.

He played faster, ignoring the sheets, playing from memory, trying to block out everything else. It didn't work. The events of the past few days tore through his mind like an old newsreel on an endless loop of film: Burns and Draper coming for him at the tournament, Arnett, the girl. *Why the FBI? Why Arnett? Why the girl? Why, if it was all something cooked up by Petroff, had the Russians asked for a postponement?*

And then the film plot broadened to include his mother and her men, his games in the park, Edgar ...

John exploded, smashing his fist into the floor, picking up the board and hurling it across the room. Everything he had worked for was crumbling to dust before his eyes, because *he* was crumbling. He had conquered his own private demons to the point where he could play for the world championship, but now that wasn't enough. Suddenly there were too many other players in the game.

He looked around the room for the card the girl had left. If it was there, it was hopelessly lost in the confusion. He did find the telephone directory, satisfied himself that there was no Anna Petroff listed, then looked up the number of the Soviet Embassy. He picked up the telephone receiver and listened; the phone was still working. He took a deep breath and dialled the number.

The phone was answered on the second ring. A heavily accented female voice said 'Soviet Embassy. May I help you?'

John was grateful when his voice did not tremble. 'You have a woman working for you at the United Nations. Her name is Anna Petroff. She isn't listed in the telephone directory, and it's very important that I get in touch with her.'

'May I ask the nature of your business?'

'No,' John snapped. 'It's personal.'

'One moment, please.'

The seconds dragged on. John drummed his fingers impatiently. Finally the voice came back on.

‘I’m sorry, sir, but we’re not allowed to give out the information you request. May I suggest you—’

John slammed the receiver down with such force that pain shot up through his forearm. But he welcomed the pain; it was better than no feeling at all.

There was a ringing in his ears like telephone wires on a hot summer day. He sat for long moments, struggling with his growing sense of panic and desperation. Finally he stripped off his clothes and took an ice cold shower. After that he felt better. He put on clean clothes, went down to the street and hailed a taxi.

The ride to the United Nations building took fifteen minutes. By the time he got there he was wet again. He was squandering the most precious thing he had, the one thing he could not afford: time. The fact that he could see no way of avoiding the expenditure only increased his frustration. He could not concentrate, and if he could not find some way of solving the riddles that had been posed, the match would be lost before he even sat down to play. Yet he knew he couldn’t back out of the match; at this stage of his life that was only another way of losing.

It did not take long for John to discover that his trip to the United Nations was wasted; no one could—or would—give him any information, except for a porter who verified that there was a Russian girl working there who answered Anna’s description, and a page who remembered seeing the name Anna Petroff on a bulletin of some sort that he had distributed. Since his instinct had led him to believe the girl in the first place, John felt he was back where he had started. Despite the fact that the General Assembly was in session, no one had seen the girl that day.

John felt himself growing numb again. He changed a dollar at a souvenir stand and placed a call to Newburgh. Tom Manning answered the phone himself.

‘Manning.’

‘This is John. I’ve got to talk.’

‘Where are you?’ Tom said quickly, reacting to the tension in John’s voice. ‘I’ll be right over.’

‘No,’ John said after a long pause. ‘I’ll drive out. I need a change of scenery.’

‘Everything’s coming apart.’

John had hoped that the ride in the rented car up the Palisades Parkway would relax him, clear his mind. It hadn't. There had been too many ghosts riding with him. He stood now on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Hudson River. A gull swooped out of the sky, calling for its mate. The call reminded John of Anna's stifled cry inside the United Textiles office. What had frightened her?

Tom stepped close to him and gripped his arm. John felt his muscles tense, stiff and unyielding. '*Relax*, John,' Tom said soothingly. 'Take it easy.'

John resisted the impulse to pull his arm away. He needed help badly, and he needed a friend. 'Relax? That's the last thing in the world I need to do right now. I need to *work*, and I can't! I'm being crowded. First there was the CIA thing, and now Petroff's sister shows up at my door.'

'*What?*' Tom screamed, reacting as he would to a physical blow. It was the first John had spoken of the reason for his wanting to talk. John had remained silent throughout lunch and the ride to this secluded area. The two Martinis Tom had insisted John drink had no visible effect. Tom thought he was beginning to understand why.

'You heard me right,' John said. 'Her name is Anna, and she is Petroff's sister. I'm satisfied of that. She works at the UN. She was with me earlier this afternoon, but now nobody seems to know where she is.' He considered telling Tom about Jensen's office and Anna's reaction to the fact that the mysterious Arnett was not there. The story seemed too long and complicated, and he was too tired. He would speak of it when the words came.

'For God's sake, John, what did she want?'

'Oh, nothing much,' John said wryly. 'She just wanted to give me a few of her brother's games, his latest collaboration with half a dozen grand masters and a computer.'

Tom's eyes widened. 'Petroff's latest games?'

'Complete with analysis.'

'Why? What reason did she give?'

'She didn't. She just said she was giving them to me in exchange for something she might ask of me in the future.' John kicked dirt over the edge of the cliff, watched it fall down towards the water. 'She was very cool about the whole thing until I told her I'd heard her brother wanted to defect. That upset her.'

Tom thought about that for a few minutes. 'I suppose that would be a natural reaction,' he said at last, his brow furrowed. 'To her, we must be the enemy.'

John shook his head. 'I think it was more than a question of national loyalties. If Petroff is planning to defect, you can be sure he hasn't said anything to his sister about it. I think that's what upset her, although I'm not sure why. She even made me take her to the place where I'd met Arnett. Nobody there had ever heard of him. It seems Arnett borrowed somebody else's office to talk to me.'

Tom shoved his hands deep into his pockets and stared into space. The gull had returned, swooping low over the water in search of its dinner.

'Is the analysis any good?'

'Good?' John laughed shortly, without humour. 'You should see it! They've turned every system I play inside out. They've got four new moves prepared for the main line of the Ruy Lopez, and a whole new approach to the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian.'

Tom shook his head in bewilderment. 'Why do you suppose she would want to betray her brother? That is, assuming she has a choice.'

'I'm not sure she is betraying him. At least she doesn't think so.' John was vaguely surprised at the degree of conviction in his voice. 'As a matter of fact, she's convinced Petroff is going to beat me And nothing could make her happier.'

Something in John's voice made Tom glance at him sharply. 'This girl impressed you, didn't she?'

'Yes. I suppose you could say that.'

'You don't believe the Russians put her up to it?'

'No.'

'You sound awfully sure. How else do you explain it?'

'I can't.' John turned and started walking. Tom fell into step beside him. A chilly wind had sprung up and John shivered. 'I do think the Russians are up to something though.'

'Like what?'

'It's just a feeling. I think they're trying to rattle me so that I'll pull out.' John smiled bitterly. 'I suppose they've been looking at my track record.'

Tom's voice was incredulous. 'It just doesn't follow, John. They want you to pull out, so they manage to slip you a manuscript of Petroff's latest games!'

‘I told you, I don’t think the girl is a part of it,’ John said insistently.

‘What you mean is that you don’t *want* to believe she’s a part of it.’

‘I think she’s playing a game of her own. I don’t know what it is, but I don’t believe the Russians know about it. I think they are trying to get at me in a different way. That’s probably what this business with Arnett was all about.’ He took a deep breath, trying to dissipate the tension in his arms, legs and chest. ‘The only thing I know for sure is that the first game of the match is scheduled for a week from tomorrow. And we’re supposed to be in Venice the day after tomorrow.’ He glanced at the older man. ‘I’m not ready, Tom. I can’t prepare because I can’t concentrate.’

‘All right.’ Tom said decisively, ‘I’ll get Henry and a few other grand masters to move in with you for the next couple of days. Sanders will be willing, I think, and so will Johnson. Henry will screen all calls and visitors, and I’ll make arrangements to have all meals sent in. You’ll do nothing but rest, play chess and analyse.’

‘No,’ John said after a long pause. ‘Just Henry is enough. There won’t be room for anyone else. Someone broke into my apartment earlier this afternoon.’

Tom stopped walking. He touched John’s arm. John turned to face him. There was concern on the other man’s face, anxiety in his voice. ‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

John shrugged. ‘Because I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m not sure where it fits into all this. There’s something funny about the break-in that I can’t put my finger on. Nothing was taken. Of course, I don’t have much to take. But a junkie would have taken something. But nothing is gone, as far as I can tell. Whoever did it seemed content to just bust up everything. Maybe I’m beginning to sound paranoid, but I think it’s part of the same pattern. I think the Russians are stepping up the pressure.’

‘My God!’ Tom said with feeling. ‘The Russians did ask for a postponement.’

John turned away. He found he was embarrassed by Tom Manning’s obvious concern and sincerity. He had not realised until that moment just how much this match—and his own hoped-for success—meant to the other man. Of course John knew how much Tom loved the game, and it was only natural that the director of the United States Chess Federation should want the next world champion to be an American. But John sensed that it was more than that with Tom; Tom wanted *him* to win, to finally prove himself.

And he had waited many years for it to happen. For this John was grateful, and gratitude was not an emotion John was sure he knew how to handle.

‘There’s another thing I don’t understand,’ John said when Tom caught him up. ‘If you saw those papers you’d think the Russians would want to hold the match now. *Yesterday*.’

‘Precisely!’ Tom interjected. ‘*Yesterday*, but not today. The papers must be the key to the Russians’ attitude. You said you thought the girl was playing a game of her own. All right, let’s look at that line. Here’s how it goes: the papers were stolen and the Russians found out about it. They know you’ll be ready for anything Petroff throws at you, so they want more time to prepare something else.’

John grunted. ‘There’s only one thing wrong with that line. Why, if the girl wants her brother to win so much, should she steal Petroff’s analysis and hand it to me?’

‘Maybe the defection report is true. The papers are a kind of payment for helping him escape.’

‘Uh-uh. We’ve been over that, remember? You should have seen her face when I told her about the report.’

Tom made a disgusted noise deep in his throat. ‘I think we should postpone. The Russians asked for it first, so FIDE is bound to honour our request.’

‘Are you kidding? You’re telling *me* we should postpone? You’ve been on my back for the past six years—’

‘A different set of circumstances,’ Tom said quietly but firmly. ‘Then you were stumbling over your own ego. You’re a genius, John. Like most geniuses you have your own way of looking at things. I’m sure you felt you had good reason for walking away from the championship the last two times you had a shot at it.’

John flushed, but he bit back the angry words that gorged his throat.

‘I’m not criticising you, John,’ Tom continued evenly. ‘My only point is that it’s a different situation this time. Rigging grand master draws in the interzonals to assure a lot of Russian qualifiers is one thing; smashing up a man’s apartment—if the Russians did do it—is quite another.’

‘There’s no proof the Russians did it,’ John said.

‘In any case,’ Tom continued, ‘you were the one who said you were losing your concentration. You can use the time. Just this one time we’ll give the Russians what they want, because it’s also to our advantage. This is

your shot, John. It won't happen again for three more years. Let's make sure the playing conditions—*all* the playing conditions—are right. You mustn't go into this thing unprepared.'

John considered Tom's words. He could see the logic in them, but he could feel his own hunger. It was time for him to show what he could do, and he didn't want to wait one day longer than necessary. 'No,' he said at last. 'I want to play the match as scheduled.'

'John, don't be bull-headed about this thing. You'll be under enough pressure at it is. I don't have to tell you that.'

'No, you don't have to tell me that. But I know I'm the best there is. Those other times ... they're past. Now I'm tired; I'm tired of not being what I know I can be. I'm tired of not being world champion.'

'All right, John,' Tom said quietly. 'I've already booked our flight to Venice.' He glanced quickly at John. 'I know it's none of my business, John, but have you visited your mother lately?'

There was a time, John reflected, when he would have been enraged at the mere mention of his mother. Now the thought of her was no more than a dead weight, a dull pain, in his heart. Suddenly, without warning, tears welled up in his eyes. He quickly blinked them back.

'No,' John said, his voice hard. 'I hadn't intended to. Not before the match. I've got enough on my mind.'

'I think you should go, John,' Tom said gently. 'It's not far from here. You may have more on your mind if you don't go.'

John's voice was almost inaudible. 'I'll give it some thought.'

SEVEN

It was dusk by the time John reached the hospital. A few patients were still strolling the grounds, waiting for the stony-faced attendants to once again seize hold of their lives and tell them it was time to come in. John's mother was not among them. He had been told that she rarely left her room, and that this was a cause of concern among the hospital staff. But John understood: if he were locked up here, he would never come out of his room. Not ever.

His hatred of the place was personal; often, in his mind's eye, he had seen the padded cells, the barred windows, the male nurses with frozen smiles and needles in their hands. He had known the torment of mental anguish, winced inwardly when people had called him 'crazy'—in jest or otherwise. He probably was crazy, he had often reflected in his more reflective moments. Perhaps that was the price he had to pay. Was his madness—his bizarre behaviour, needs, drives and hungers—the result of his brilliance in chess? Or was his brilliance the result of his madness? And he knew it didn't matter; chess was his lifeline to sanity.

His mother had simply had no lifeline: ability to perform prodigious sexual feats was not considered to have any socially redeemable value, and it had not qualified her as a mere 'eccentric'. When they had found her one night, naked, wandering the streets, crying out for a man—any man—to take her, they had locked her away. And the courts, with the psychiatrists, had kept her locked away. It was as simple as that. And as complicated.

Whatever he had, John thought, whatever gift he possessed, was undoubtedly from his mother. His father had been simply a drunk, and that was learned. And so he played chess and his mother made love. She was locked up; he was free, at least for a while. She could not play chess; he could not make love.

John often suffered from a recurring nightmare. One time he went to visit his mother and the attendants would not let him out again. And they would not allow him to play chess. He would cry and there would be no one to listen, to care.

His mind, the unique way in which he could look at a chess problem, was a mystery to him. Like all mysteries, John thought, there was a dark side to it. One day, perhaps, his mind would turn on him, cast him adrift on the sea of night music that was the scream of the mad.

He kept his eyes straight ahead as he walked up the narrow sidewalk to the main entrance, but he was aware of a dozen or more pallid faces watching his progress from behind the barred windows on the top two floors of the main building. He entered the lobby of the administrative section and approached the reception desk. A burly male nurse was sitting behind the desk, reading a comic book.

‘I’ve come to see Mrs Butler.’

The nurse didn’t look up. ‘You kin?’

‘I’m her son.’

‘Visiting hours are almost over.’

John wanted to shout, to demand to know how anyone making a living supposedly dealing with human misery could be so concerned with time. He didn’t. Instead, he swallowed his anger and said: ‘I know. Please. I’d appreciate it if you’d let me see her.’

The nurse casually wrote out a pass and held it out towards John. ‘You know the way?’

John took the pass, turned and walked off down a corridor without speaking. He knew the way.

He made a conscious effort to relax as he approached his mother’s room. He stopped at the door, then froze. Someone had scratched the words, *Emma’s a fucker*, into the wood with a pen knife or nail: it was obvious that none of the custodial staff had bothered to try to remove them. In fact, John wondered if it might not have been one of the staff who had put them there.

Again, John found that his eyes had filled with tears. He glanced around to make sure that he was not observed, then wiped them away with the back of his hand. Twice that day he had wept—for the first time in many, many years. Both times he had suppressed his anger immediately before. More prices to be paid, John thought. He raised his hand, hesitated a few moments, then knocked on the door.

‘Come in.’ His mother’s voice was airy, cheerful, as though she were a famous hostess who had been greeting guests all day.

John pushed the door open and stepped into the room. The room was as he remembered it from the last visit, and the visit before; the room, like the hospital and patients, never changed. It was small, and attempts had been made to make it attractive. The attempts failed because, John knew, without looking, that all of the rooms—at least in this wing—were exactly the same.

His mother had hung some of her own paintings on the walls. All of the paintings were hung upside down.

Emma Butler was sitting in an easy chair by the single, large, draped window in the room. At forty-eight, she was not so much attractive as a caricature of the attractive woman she had once been. She was garishly dressed in a fringed maxi-dress with a plunging neckline that revealed a good deal of her breasts. She wore black stockings and red, patent leather shoes. Her face was caked with make-up, and her lips were covered with a lipstick shade that matched her shoes. She was smoking a cigarette held in a long, imitation mother-of-pearl holder. John forced himself not to look away.

‘Hello, Mother.’ The smile on his face hurt.

Emma Butler studied her son for a few moments, as though her brain was taking more than the usual length of time to make the connection between the man standing in the door and someone she knew. Then she leapt up and rushed towards him.

‘Johnny!’ she squealed with delight.

John braced himself as his mother’s arms wrapped around him and her mouth rose to his. He closed his eyes and tried to think of something else as he felt his mother’s tongue darting over his lips, her hands caressing the back of his neck. He tried not to think of the nipples beneath the gown pressing into his chest, her thrusting pelvis. His stomach churned.

After what seemed an eternity his mother pulled away. Her eyes, once fiery with passion, were now vacant, like unused storerooms. All of her passion had been spent, John thought, or drugged out of her. Now she was just going through the motions, like a corpse continuing to twitch.

Emma Butler puffed on her cigarette, then smiled warmly. ‘So, how are you? How are you feeling, Johnny?’

‘I’m fine, Mother,’ John said quietly. ‘How are you?’

‘Ha!’ Her eyebrows lifted in mock wonder. ‘How would you be if you were locked up in this funny house?’

John tried to think of something to say and couldn’t. His throat hurt, as though something very large and sharp was trying to force its way out. He watched as his mother walked back across the room and looked out the window.

‘I have a new lover, Johnny,’ Emma said casually. ‘You want to see?’

‘I came to see you, Mother. I have something to tell you.’

Emma Butler waved her arm impatiently. 'Oh, do what you're told and come here! I'm the one they've got locked up. Humour me a little!'

John slowly walked across the room until he was standing next to his mother. He forced himself to look in the direction she was pointing. Outside the window, fifty yards away, a skinny gardener with a pock-marked face stood beneath a floodlight winding a hose on a mechanical wheel. Apparently sensing that he was being watched, the gardener glanced towards the window, then left the hose and walked quickly away.

It was true, John thought, dropping his eyes; God, it was true.

Emma sat down on the edge of the bed and motioned John towards the easy chair. 'Why don't you sit down, Johnny? You in a hurry? I know you are; I can feel it. You just got here, you know.'

John sat down woodenly in the chair. His mother's cigarette had gone out. She stared at the blackened tip for a few seconds, then extracted it from the holder. She put a new cigarette in and lighted it.

'They put me here because I killed your father, you know,' she said casually, through a smoke ring. 'Can't say that I blame them. In a way I suppose it's pretty decent of them. This place is a drag sometimes, but it's better than prison.'

John shook his head slowly back and forth. 'You didn't kill anyone, Mother. My father is still alive.'

'Ha! That shows how much you know! Have you seen him lately?'

'No, Mother. He's just a memory to me. But I know that you didn't kill him. You know it, too. That's just something in your mind.'

Emma Butler suddenly leaped to her feet. 'Who are you to tell me I shouldn't have a lover?' she screamed, jabbing the cigarette holder in the air, wielding it like a sword. 'You're a *man*, Johnny! You should understand!' The rage passed as quickly as it had come. She sank back on the bed, crossed her legs and stared at him. 'I'll grow old in here, Johnny,' she continued softly. 'My body's going to dry up.'

'I didn't say anything, Mother,' John said in a choked voice.

'I saw it in your eyes when you were standing by the window.' She crushed out the second cigarette, lighted another. She smoked in silence for a few minutes. A vein throbbed in her left temple. John stared at it in helpless fascination. 'Anyway,' she said at last, 'you're right about one thing. I did kill him in my mind.'

'Who, Mother?' John said absently.

‘Your father. I did it because he left us, because he didn’t understand. The doctors know I killed him and that’s why they’ve got me locked up here. I killed him in my mind, so they’re punishing my mind. God, I hate it here, Johnny. I hate it here.’

‘Mother,’ John said quietly, ‘I’ll be leaving for Italy soon. I’m playing for the world chess championship.’ John waited, but Emma said nothing. She was staring off into space, apparently lost in her own mad thoughts. ‘Mother, I came to tell you.’

‘Are you still playing that same silly game, Johnny? When are you going to go out and get a job?’

John stepped back, as if from a physical blow. He quickly passed his hand over his eyes. The muscles in his stomach had knotted into a hard hot ball.

‘Oh, Johnny,’ his mother said. ‘I’m sorry. I’ve hurt your feelings.’

‘You haven’t hurt my feelings, Mother. I just ... it. Hurts me to see you like this. I don’t know how to say anything to you.’

‘Come to Mother.’

She moved close to him again, put her arms around him and kissed him on the mouth. John screwed his eyes shut and clenched his fists at his side. Tears welled from his eyes and flowed freely down his cheeks. This time he made no effort to wipe them away.

His mother moved away and stared at him thoughtfully for a few moments, then reached out and patted him on the cheek. John cringed; it had been a gesture of contempt.

‘Okay, Johnny,’ his mother said with quiet savagery. ‘The visit’s over, Johnny boy. You’ve done your duty by coming to see your crazy old mother. You can go now.’

‘God, Mother,’ John said, his voice cracking. ‘If we could just learn to talk to each other—’

John stopped when he saw his mother was not listening. She had returned to the window and was staring vacantly out at the night.

‘Get out, Johnny,’ she said tightly. ‘Just get out. I’m tired of talking.’

John started to speak, then thought better of it. He walked across the room and kissed his mother lightly on the cheek. Then he turned and walked from the room. He closed the door quietly behind him.

John's confrontation with his mother had had a cathartic effect. He found during his ride back to the city that he was very tired but relaxed. He knew he would be able to sleep soundly, and he was grateful for that. He would get a good night's sleep, then rise early in the morning with his mind fresh, ready to attack the problems imbedded in the papers Anna had brought him. He found he was no longer concerned about why Anna had brought him the papers. That was her business. He would use the papers because he would be a fool not to, but he would simply refuse to play the rest of her game, whatever it might be ... unless he chose to.

And he would apply the same reasoning to the problem posed by Petroff's supposed desire to defect. If the world champion wanted to defect, fine. John might or might not help him, and in any case he would not commit himself beforehand to any plan. Tom Manning would see now that he was protected, and in less than forty-eight hours he would be on a flight to Venice. He would be there to play chess, to wrestle the championship away from the Russians—and that would be his only reason for being there. He would simply refuse to allow himself to be distracted by anything or anybody. He would not take any calls, not see anybody but Henry and Tom Manning.

Guilt, sudden and unsuspected, pricked his consciousness. He thought of the girl, and the collapse of her cool façade when he had told her about the reports. There seemed to be one truth that had risen out of the cacophony of unanswered questions: someone, somewhere, was in trouble.

But that was not his responsibility, John thought. It was not his fault. He had not invented politics, and he had not asked Petroff to fight his government. He had not asked Anna Petroff to bring him her brother's games, and he could not see where Arnett—even if he was really a CIA agent—had the right to ask anything of him. Perhaps the person or persons in trouble would suffer. But he had suffered, and he had endured. Now there was just one more rung on the ladder he had been climbing for more than two-thirds of his life ... He would win!

Riding through the dark, sucking in the cool night air through an open window, John felt confident of beating the Russian. Then, perhaps, he might even try to change, to loosen up, learn to accept other people on their own terms. He would see a doctor about his sexual problem. Perhaps he would even take a few months off from chess and travel, for once, without the suffocating, blinding pressure of an important chess tournament pushing in

on him. If he felt like it he might even enroll for a few courses in a university. He could relax, do what he wanted. Then he could afford to; he would be champion.

And he would like to see the girl again, John thought. Perhaps everything would work out. If it was in his power, he would try to make sure that it did.

John celebrated his positive mood by stopping at a roadside bar and ordering a drink. He drank it slowly, letting the alcohol warm his stomach and slowly seep into his bloodstream to be carried to his brain. He made a point of joking with the bartender and the half a dozen other people at the bar. Then he bought a drink for the house and went back to his car. By the time he pulled his car to a stop outside the apartment building he was mildly euphoric.

When he went up to his apartment the euphoria contracted into a tight ball in his stomach, soured and melted away. Burns and Draper were waiting for him.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ John asked. He suddenly felt cold.

The two FBI agents had been standing side by side in the middle of the living-room. Now Draper stepped forward, produced a set of handcuffs and snapped them on John’s wrists.

Burns drew two official-looking pieces of paper from his overcoat pocket. ‘This is a search warrant, Butler,’ Burns croaked in his injured voice, ‘and this other paper is a warrant for your arrest. You don’t have to say anything, and you should know that anything you do say may be used against you. You have the right to make one phone call, and I suggest it be to your lawyer.’

‘I don’t want to call anybody. What’s this all about? Who are you creeps running errands for this time?’

Draper lunged forward, his face suddenly twisted with hate. Burns tried to block his rush, but Draper got past him. He stood very close to John, trembling with rage, his fists clenched. John smiled contemptuously.

‘There aren’t any spooks around to help you this time, wise guy!’ Draper yelled.

Burns sounded more contemplative and thoughtful. He stared at John. ‘Everyone knows you’re an obnoxious son-of-a-bitch, Butler,’ Burns said evenly. ‘But who would have thought you were a traitor?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ John stammered, far more disturbed by Burns’ quiet manner than by Draper’s rage.

‘This,’ Burns continued in the same tone.

John watched in amazement as Burns reached into his pocket and withdrew two plastic chess pieces that John recognised as part of one of his sets. Each piece had been placed in a small plastic bag and was marked. Burns held them up to the light. There was a dark blotch inside the translucent material.

‘What the hell is it?’ John asked, bewildered. His stomach felt as though someone had kicked it.

‘You know Goddamn well what it is, wise guy!’ Draper spat.

Burns turned the plastic piece and pointed to the felt bottom. ‘Not a very sophisticated hiding place,’ he said, ‘but then nobody would suspect you. Sometimes the simplest hiding places are the best.’

John worked his tongue back and forth inside his mouth until he was sure there was enough moisture to allow him to speak. ‘Hiding place for what?’

‘Show him,’ Draper said. ‘I want to see the bastard’s face when we show it to him. We’ve still got the other piece, and that’ll have his fingerprints all over it.’

Burns shrugged, then ripped open the plastic bag. He peeled back the felt base on the bottom and pointed to the small area of blackened, rippled plastic in the middle. ‘Clever,’ he said. ‘You took off the felt, burned a hole in the base, slid the merchandise in, then sealed it back in.’

‘*What* merchandise, damn it?’

Burns hit the chess piece sharply against the side of an end table. The bottom split off and a tiny piece of microfilm slid out and floated to the floor. John stared at the film, speechless.

‘Tell him again,’ Burns said.

Draper repeated the litany. ‘You’ve got one phone call. You don’t have to say anything; if you do, it may be used against you.’ He paused and smiled thinly. ‘That’s from the book. *My* book says: if you’re smart, you’ll co-operate.’

After a brief period of almost total numbness, John’s brain was beginning to function again. But he could not think of anything to do; he was preoccupied with the vision of everything he had ever wanted slipping from his grasp. ‘The pieces are mine,’ John said simply, ‘but I don’t know how the film got there. The film isn’t mine, and I didn’t put it inside the chess pieces; I have never seen it before and don’t know what it is.’

Burns and Draper stared at him as if they expected him to say more. John remained silent; there was nothing more to say.

Draper cleared his throat like an embarrassed host who has watched a conversation go flat. 'But you do admit that this is your chess set?'

'I just said—' Anger flared up and this time John made no effort to check it. 'Look, pal, I don't mind answering your questions, as long as they aren't so incredibly stupid! Why don't you give your partner a chance? He looks a little smarter.'

Draper's eyes flashed warning signals that John ignored. He was near the point where he almost wanted to be hit, to feel physical pain, anything to take his mind off the growing sensations of despair and loneliness he was experiencing.

'Butler, you're going away for a long time,' the big man hissed in a smothered tone that was almost inaudible.

'Talk or don't talk, Butler,' Burns said in a cold, even tone. 'But don't be a smart-ass. We're not as interested in you as we are in the man or men who hired you to take this with you.'

'You idiots! What would I want with a piece of microfilm?'

Burns and Draper glanced at each other. John had seen that type of look on peoples' faces many times before; he had seen it on the faces of countless teachers and guidance counsellors in school. It was meant to convey the message: how could such a supposedly bright boy act so stupidly?

Draper shook his head. It was an almost paternal gesture, and John hated Draper for it, 'You mean you never even asked what was on the film?'

'I told you I've never even seen that bloody film. I didn't know it was there. It was planted. Can't you see that?'

'Sure, Butler. Now who would go around planting pieces of microfilm in your chess set?'

John ignored Draper's condescending tone. "The Russians."

'Why would the Russians do that, Butler?'

John's face felt very hot. 'Because they don't want their man to lose the world title. He will if he plays me.'

'Such modesty!' Draper sneered as he held the strip of film up to the light and studied it for a few moments. When he again looked at John his eyes were hard. His tone was that of a man who had been personally insulted. 'These happen to be photographs of the inside of one of our highest

security missile bases. You think the Russians are going to let photos like this loose just to stop you from playing a few chess games?’

‘Chess is very important to the Russians. It’s part of their ideology; a Russian is—and always will be—champion because he’s a communist. That title is worth millions to them in propaganda value.’

‘That sounds like a lot of bullshit,’ Draper said tautly.

‘As far as letting the film “loose”, as you put it, it wouldn’t make any difference. If they’ve got the information, they’ve got it. Period.’

‘Bullshit is bullshit!’ Draper’s face was very red. ‘There’s a spy in that plant, and we’ll find him. But in the meantime we’ve got *you*, and that gives agent Burns and I a great deal of satisfaction. Your job was to act as a courier. You planned to drop it in the Russians’ lap while you were in Venice. Who knows? Maybe Petroff himself was supposed to be your contact. Neat—if it had worked.’

John fought against the panic rising in him, against the impulse to fight back through rage and insult. ‘Why would I want to get myself involved in something like that? For *money*?’

‘Oh, no,’ Burns said sarcastically. ‘Not money for you, Butler, you’re too smart for that. But we’re not stupid. Money doesn’t mean that much to you. Besides, you’d have all the money you’d need if you could win the world title.’

‘Right,’ John said. He thought he had scored a point. ‘So I’m still waiting to hear what my motive would be.’

The answer came to John a split second before Burns told him. He had been completely outmanoeuvred, and Anna Petroff, it seemed, was about to cash in on her temporary sacrifice of time and material. It was the final blow, and it had the effect of stopping the breath in John’s throat. He watched in horror as Burns reached into a small briefcase on the floor and drew out the sheaf of games the girl had given him.

‘There you are,’ Burns said. ‘Motive. An edge against Petroff. You were going to sell out your country for a few sheets of paper.’

EIGHT

While John was being booked and locked up, he felt like a man in a dream. He used his phone call to call Tom Manning, then lapsed back into a protective, dazed state of numbness.

Now that Burns and Draper had him, their hostility had disappeared. Once again they were cool professionals, wrapped in cloaks of moral righteousness. Their manner indicated that they felt they had definitely done John a favour and that, one day, John would realise this and thank them for it. John ignored them. Their only setback came when Tom Manning and Henry Palmer showed up at the police station and were allowed, over the vociferous protests of the FBI men, to talk to him. They were escorted to a small interrogation room by a tough-looking sergeant who remained there while they spoke. Occasionally John caught a glimpse of Burns or Draper pacing nervously past the small, mesh-covered window in the door.

Both Tom and Henry seemed stunned. Henry had developed a small tic in his right cheek. The nerve throbbed with clock-like regularity.

‘How did you get in to see me?’ John asked quietly.

Tom smiled crookedly. ‘It took some doing, but you find chess buffs in some of the strangest places.’ He had tried to sound cheerful, but the words came out tired and nervous.

‘I don’t suppose you know any chess buffs who can get me out of here?’

Tom shook his head slowly. ‘I’m afraid not, at least not before a formal arraignment. They’ve got you on a federal espionage charge, John. Even if we could get you out, they’d never let you leave the country.’

John glanced at Henry. Henry smiled weakly and dropped his eyes. John shifted his gaze to Tom. ‘Then the match is off, isn’t it?’

‘It looks that way,’ the older man said. ‘I don’t see any way you can be in Venice when you’re supposed to be. It looks like the Russians got their postponement after all.’

‘Postponement? You’re a bit hopeful, aren’t you? You don’t really think they’re going to agree to a postponement when they find out I’m in jail?’

‘Maybe I can get to them before they find out.’

‘C’mon, Tom. They know. They *put* me here.’

‘Maybe I can stall through FIDE’s rules committee.’ Tom’s voice lacked conviction.

Henry cleared his throat and spoke for the first time.

‘How did it happen, John? How did the microfilm get in those chess pieces?’

John stared hard into the boyish face. ‘Do you think I put it there, Henry?’

‘Of course not!’

Something bothered John, and he couldn’t put his finger on it. He let it go after a few seconds and turned to Tom. ‘Whoever broke into my apartment put the film there,’ he said flatly. ‘They busted up everything so that I wouldn’t be suspicious and look around. They were hoping that I’d blow under the pressure they’d already applied, but the microfilm was their insurance policy. When it looked like I was ready to show up in Venice, they tipped off the FBI. So the point of breaking in wasn’t to take anything; it was to leave the microfilm.’

‘That would also explain why the girl brought up the papers,’ Tom said carefully. ‘She was setting you up.’

‘Right,’ John said distantly. There was a bitter taste in his mouth, in his mind. ‘They would look like my “payment”. But there’s still something odd about the whole thing.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ll let you know when I can pin it down myself.’

The sergeant glanced at his watch, then stepped forward and stood close behind John. Henry stood up quickly.

Tom gripped John’s arm tightly. ‘Is there anything we can get you?’

‘Yes. My chess wallet.’

‘Sorry. I thought of that. I tried to bring it in to you but they took it away from me. They said the pieces are too sharp.’

‘Shit,’ John said without emotion. Then his eyes flared. ‘You can bet I wouldn’t commit suicide without taking those two FBI baboons with me.’

‘You’ve got to take it easy, John.’

‘Yes, John,’ Henry said nervously. ‘You’ve got to relax until we can straighten this thing out.’

The guard grabbed John’s arm. ‘Time’s up,’ he said, gesturing to the clock on the wall.

John shook hands with Tom and Henry, then allowed himself to be led away through a barred door at the rear of the interrogation room.

Beyond the interrogation room was a smaller room, and beyond that an iron door closing off the cell block. The guard opened the iron door with a

key from a ring on his belt.

It seemed colder beyond the iron door, or perhaps it was only in John's mind. The long corridor he was led down was lined on both sides by cells, and was faintly illuminated by a succession of naked, low-wattage bulbs. John could barely make out the dark figures of men sleeping in the cells. One man was standing at the bars of his cell door. His face was blank, and he did not look at John or the guard as they passed. The man's eyes were red, as though he had been crying.

John was unceremoniously escorted to an empty cell near the end of the corridor. The door slammed shut behind him with the terrible finality of metal locking into metal. He stood very still in the darkness, trying to calm himself. The moment the door had slammed shut the cell had seemed to grow smaller, like in his nightmares. It was a nightmare, John thought, but he was living it. No one had said when he would be released. He was sure that Tom would attend to the technicalities of getting him a good lawyer, but the subject had not been discussed. Now he was locked up, isolated.

They might never let him out. They would claim he was mad like his mother, transfer him to a hospital.

John tasted blood and realised he had bitten into his lip. He dabbed at the wound with his handkerchief and glanced around the cell. There was a bed, a wash basin, and a commode, discoloured by what looked like dried vomit. That was all.

He listened to the sounds of a jail at night. Men snored and occasionally broke wind. Somewhere at the opposite end of the cell block a toilet flushed. Someone—probably the man who had been standing—was crying.

John sat down on the edge of the bunk. He did not want to sleep, dared not sleep; his living nightmare was bad enough, and he did not care to be tormented by his other demons. He tried to clear his mind in the only way he knew how. He imagined a chessboard, then closed his eyes, filling the board with pieces, locking the image into his mind. He chose a game he had played in an invitational tournament in Palma de Mallorca. He had been nineteen at the time, and it had been a brilliant victory against a Cuban grand master.

'Pawn to queen four,' he whispered softly, making the white move in his mind, then responding with black's: 'Pawn to queen bishop four. Knight to king bishop three.'

'I don't see any way you can be in Venice when you're supposed to be.'

‘Pawn to king four. Pawn takes pawn. Knight to queen bishop three. Bishop to king two.’

‘You’re going away for a long time, Butler.’

John shook his head, trying to dispel the voices. The image of the board was blurring in his mind and he struggled to retain it, reaching out for it like a drowning man to a life preserver.

‘Pawn to queen’s rook three,’ he said quickly, pushing the piece forward in his mind. ‘Bishop to king three.’

‘Are you still playing that silly game, Johnny? When are you going to go out and get a job?’

‘Queen to rook four. Bishop to bishop four.’

‘No, Yevgeny isn’t afraid of you. In fact, he’s looking forward to playing you. He’s very confident of winning.’

‘Castle! Castle! Pawn to king rook three! Knight to knight four! Pawn to knight four!’

‘Hey!’ a voice yelled from a cell close to his. ‘Shut up, shit head! What the hell’s the matter with you?’

‘Yes, Mr Butler, I think Yevgeny will beat you. But I don’t see what difference my opinion makes. You’re not going to win or lose on the basis of a poll ... You think he’s going to win because he’s your brother? ... He’ll win because he’s a better man.’

John leapt up and gripped the bars of his cell. ‘Hey! Guard! guard! I want a chess set!’

‘Hey, man!’ another voice shouted. ‘Shut up! You crazy or something?’

‘Goddamn it!’ John screamed. ‘Can’t you just give me a chess set?’

‘Shove it up your ass, pal!’

Shaking with helpless rage and fear, John went back to his cot. Finally he slept.

John was awakened early by a key turning the lock of his cell door. Immediately afterwards a set of footsteps went away. A second set came towards him. John rolled over and found himself looking up at Peter Arnett.

The first thing that caught John’s attention was the tan car coat Arnett had draped over his right arm. The coat was spotted with raindrops. That meant it was raining outside, and John was surprised to find how much such a trivial piece of information meant to him. Arnett’s face was impassive, but there was a slight hint of amusement in the cold eyes.

‘The spook,’ John said quietly.

Arnett smiled thinly. 'I see you're picking up the argot.'

John's initial irritation passed quickly, and he found that he was glad to see Arnett. He wondered if jail always had that effect, turning things upside down. He tried to imagine how he would survive the years in prison ... he couldn't. He knew he wouldn't survive. He had been locked up less than eight hours, and already he was prepared to do almost anything to get out; anything but sell himself.

'I suppose you've come to gloat.'

'Gloat over what?'

'I don't know,' John said, suddenly feeling foolish. 'You caught me at a bad moment.'

'They're all bad in jail.'

Arnett removed the coat from his arm and John could see that Arnett was carrying a paper bag. He opened the paper bag and produced two containers of coffee and rolls.

'I hope you like your coffee regular,' Arnett said, offering one of the containers.

John took the coffee and sipped at it. The hot liquid hit his empty stomach and sent a warm glow through him. The strong, acrid fumes in his nose had a bracing effect. He swallowed some more, then set the container to one side. He shook his head when Arnett offered him a roll.

'You know why I'm here?' John asked.

Arnett sat down on the opposite end of the cot. He crossed his legs and stared casually at John. 'Sure,' he said easily.

'You know, it crossed my mind that you might be a Soviet agent.'

John was vaguely surprised when Arnett didn't laugh. Instead the man nodded absently. 'Interesting thought,' he said without any show of emotion. 'I'm not, but it's shrewd of you to consider the possibility. Usually, nothing in this business is ever what it appears to be at first sight.'

'Including people?'

'Especially people.'

'What about you? You think I hid that microfilm.'

Now Arnett laughed. It was a cold sound, without real humour. 'Of course not. The film was obviously planted by those sportsmen from Moscow.' He snapped his fingers. The sound reverberated like a pistol shot in the small, closed space, 'Checkmate.'

John flushed. 'If you believe that, why am I still in here?'

Arnett shrugged. 'This is a domestic matter. As long as it remains that way. I don't see that there's much I can do about your situation.'

'Then you can get out,' John said evenly.

Arnett ignored the demand. 'What we have here is a kind of jurisdictional dispute. The FBI wants you put away because they think you're a threat to Truth, Justice and The American Way. I want you out because I'd like the answers to some questions.'

'What questions?'

'I want to know what the Russians are up to.'

'I thought we'd already answered that one. The Russians don't want Petroff to lose.'

'Or defect. There's still the possibility that the report was accurate.' Arnett ran his fingers absently over the scar on his face. 'The Russians are playing a pretty heavy game here, and I want to know why. That's why I want you to go to Venice and hear what sweet nothings Petroff has to whisper in your ear, if any.'

John felt his stomach contract painfully, 'I thought you said you couldn't get me out of here.'

Arnett blinked rapidly, as though John had interrupted a train of thought. 'Oh, that,' he said casually. 'I said it was a problem of jurisdiction. If you agree to co-operate with me, that problem disappears.'

'And what does "co-operating" mean?'

'In this case it means doing no more than what I asked you to do in the first place.'

John reached inside himself, searching for the controls to the emotional roller coaster he was trapped on. 'It's too late. The match has been called off.'

'That's not what I hear,' Arnett said evenly. 'I've already talked to your friend Manning. He and Palmer are waiting for you outside.' He paused and drank some of his coffee, watching John over the rim of his cup. John struggled to keep his face expressionless, but he was sure that his eyes betrayed him. He said nothing. Arnett rose and spilled the rest of the coffee into the toilet. 'Cold,' he said.

'Stop playing with me, Arnett.'

'I believe you planned to leave for Venice tomorrow morning. You agree to co-operate and you can walk out now. You'll even have time for a little practice.'

‘I’ll do what you ask. You knew that before you came in here.’

Arnett nodded approvingly. John rose and walked quickly to the door of the cell. He stood there, trembling with anger and bitterness. Regardless of the circumstances, he now found himself in a position where he felt indebted to the other man; it was a situation he could barely tolerate.

‘Just a minute.’

John whirled. ‘Aha!’ he said, making no attempt to conceal his feelings. ‘Now it comes, right? Something you forgot to mention! Just a few more little strings?’

Arnett looked at him oddly. ‘You’d better slow down a little, Butler. You’re not going to do me any good if you have a heart attack. There are no more strings. I just want you to look at a photograph.’

John, swallowed his anger and took the photograph that Arnett pulled from his pocket. The surface was grainy, and was obviously a cropped blow-up. It showed a large, husky man with dark features and cold, expressionless eyes, like Arnett’s.

‘Ever see him?’

John shook his head. ‘Who is he?’

‘His name is Alexander Gligoric, and he’s a KGB agent. Gligoric is a nasty customer. He’s been seen in New York, and I suspect he’s the one who was given the assignment of putting you out of commission. If you’ll pardon the analogy, that’s like using a bulldozer to weed a garden.’

‘That’s not very flattering.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be. But it is accurate. That’s what I meant by the Russians playing a heavy game. I want to know why. On the other hand, I wouldn’t want to see you put out of commission permanently.’

‘You’re telling me that I could be in some kind of danger?’

‘Something like that. I’m telling you to watch your ass.’

John tried to identify what he felt as fear, and couldn’t. *That* made him afraid. He had never thought of himself as being suicidal, but death seemed very remote to him, no more terrible than any number of things that he could imagine happening to him in life.

‘There’s a girl,’ he said after a long pause. ‘Petroff’s sister. I was wondering—’

‘Sorry,’ Arnett said curtly, I don’t know anything about that.’

Arnett signalled for the guard. The cell door was opened and John followed Arnett down the corridor. He felt the curious stares of the other

prisoners, but John did not look at them. They passed out through the iron door, through the interrogation room to the station exit. The sergeant at the booking desk did not even look up.

Gligoric, who was always kept apprised of Arnett's comings and goings, arrived at the station house in time to see Arnett, John, Tom Manning and Henry get into a government car and be driven away. The big man cursed slowly and methodically in Russian, then wheeled the car he was driving in a sharp U-turn and sped back the way he had come. His fingers were white where they gripped the steering wheel.

NINE

Henry, at John's request, accompanied John back to his apartment. Henry seemed uneasy and unnaturally quiet. Neither man spoke as John pushed his broken trophies into the corners of the living-room and set up a chessboard in the centre. He sat down on the floor, crossed his legs, and began playing through a game.

Henry moved around to the opposite side of the board and stared down, watching the moves John was making. 'It's too bad we don't have those games of Petroff's,' he said at last.

'I remember most of them,' John said without taking his eyes off the board. 'In any case, I don't need them. I'll beat Petroff anyway.'

'Not if you don't get some rest. You couldn't have slept much in that jail.'

'There's no time to rest.'

'You sound very confident, John.'

'I am very confident. I think I've got the answers to some of Petroff's opening innovations.'

Henry watched John demonstrate one of the opening lines. John varied on the sixth move. Henry frowned. 'I'm not sure that's going to work. Why can't he do this?' He reached down and moved a piece. 'Pawn to queen four. It forks your knight and bishop.'

'Sure,' John said easily. 'And it loses. It sets up the combination beginning with knight takes pawn. Watch.'

John rapidly moved the pieces, demonstrating the combination. He took the bishop's pawn with his knight. The next four moves were forced. When he had finished the position of the enemy king was destroyed. Checkmate was imminent.

Henry lifted his eyebrows and whistled softly. 'I see,' he said respectfully. 'Very neat.'

'I thought that up in jail.'

Henry leaned forward on his elbows, cupped his chin in his hands and stared at John. 'You do look tired.'

John did not reply. His eyes were still on the position in front of him. Henry tentatively moved a piece, then studied the board. After a few moments he sacrificed a bishop, using it to capture the rook's pawn on the

king side. 'That's what I had in mind; sacking the bishop for a king side attack.'

'Yeah,' John said flatly. 'It looks good. I'll have to give it some thought.'

Henry picked up a freshly sharpened pencil and began to write some notes on his analysis pad. The scratching of the pencil on the rough paper of the pad was the only sound in the room.

'I had a lot of time to think while they had me locked up, Henry,' John continued without looking up. His voice was soft, but there was a new quality to the tone that made Henry stiffen. 'For one thing, I came up with that combination I showed you. What I wasn't able to come up with was your reason for putting that microfilm in my set.'

The point on Henry's pencil broke. The tiny piece of lead skipped off the table, hit the floor and skittered to the opposite wall. John slowly looked up and was sickened by what he saw; Henry's face was bloodless, his expression a mixture of shock and fear.

Henry's quivering lips opened and a single word dribbled out. 'John ...'

John slammed his fist down on the table in disgust. 'Please don't try to deny it, Henry. Just please don't try. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. It's written all over your face.'

Henry's shaking hands were like animals that had suddenly slipped the leash of their master. Henry dropped the pencil on the floor and crossed his arms on his chest, squeezing his hands in his armpits. The flesh of his face had gone from a fish white to an ashen grey.

'How did you know?' Henry asked in a choked voice.

'It took me a while to figure out what was wrong with that break-in. It was the door. The door was locked when I came home. That was your mistake, Henry. You're the only person besides myself who has a key to this apartment. You must have been nervous. A burglar or a junkie might break in, or even pick the lock if he has time. But he's not going to lock up after himself when he's through busting up a man's apartment.'

Henry leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

'Why did you do that to me, Henry?' John asked quietly. 'Was it for lie money?'

'I ... this man ...'

'What man?'

'I ... I don't know his name. He was a Russian. He offered me money, yes. Lots of money. But I turned him down.' Henry shuddered, as though he

had suddenly seen something horrible on the ceiling of his eyelids. ‘Then he said he was going to hurt me, John; put me in a coma, damage my head, make sure I’d never be able to play chess again. I couldn’t stand that thought, John. Can you understand?’

John studied the face across the table from him and tried to find his anger. It wasn’t there. There was only pity. ‘It won’t wash, Henry. I can understand how you’d make promises to somebody who was threatening you. But you had a chance to come forward later, after the FBI picked me up. You’d have been protected. You didn’t do it, Henry.’

John waited for some response from the other man. It didn’t come. Tears welled from beneath Henry’s closed eyes and rolled down over the pink, boyish cheeks. ‘God, Henry, how I pity you,’ John whispered. ‘You planted that microfilm because you wanted to be world champion yourself one day. You might be able to beat the Russians on a good day, but you could never beat me. At least that’s what you were afraid of. Helping to frame me on espionage charges was a neat way of finally getting me out of the picture for good.’

‘John, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.’

John tried to hold the words back and couldn’t. ‘You were my friend, Henry. My only friend. Now I find out what a small man you are. I wonder what that makes me?’

Henry’s head suddenly jerked forward. His eyes snapped open. Rage burned in their depths, momentarily burning away the tears of shame. ‘Don’t you get sanctimonious with me, John! Your talent is *wasted* in you, you mincing prima donna! You’ve thrown all your other chances away, so why should you deserve this chance? All right! If you really don’t *want* to be champion—if you never have the guts to follow it through to the end—then somebody else should have the chance!’

‘You, Henry?’

‘Yes, me! You’re a disgrace to this country. Nobody *wants* you to win, John! Do you know that? You’ll never be champion because you’re not ... enough ... of a ...’

‘Man, Henry?’ John asked quietly. ‘Is that what you’re trying to say? That I’m not enough of a man to win the championship?’

Henry slumped forward on the table and began to weep. John watched the heaving shoulders and felt overwhelmed by emptiness. His throat felt

raspy and there was the taste of bile in his mouth, but that was all. Suddenly he wanted only to sleep.

Henry's weeping finally wound down to a series of disconnected sobs. John wanted to reach out and touch the shoulders, but couldn't. The distance between them was farther than any arm could reach.

'Well, Henry,' John said wearily into the silence, 'I guess we've both said everything there is to say.'

Finally Henry lifted his head. The tears were gone. There was a new air of resignation—and some relief—about him now that the terrible secret was out. 'What will you do now?'

'Try to beat Petroff.'

'I mean ... about me.'

John thought about it. 'Nothing,' he said at last. 'I can't do any more to you than you've done to yourself. But I don't want you with me on that flight to Venice. I suppose that goes without saying. I don't care what you tell Tom. You'll have to make up your own excuse.'

Henry tore a page off the pad in front of him and began to wad it into a small ball. 'John, you'll need a second,' he said in a small, strained voice. 'You'll need help to prepare and analyse during adjournments.' Henry paused and swallowed hard. 'Please let me try to make it up to you.'

John's only reply was a fixed, cold stare. After a few moments Henry dropped his eyes, nodded and slowly rose from the table. His walk was unsteady as he went towards the door. He paused with his hand on the knob and looked back towards John. John was hunched over the table, studying the chessboard. Henry opened the door and walked out of the apartment.

Back at the table John brushed the back of his hand across his eyes. Then he rose and went to close the door.

TEN

The jangling of the phone seemed incredibly loud as it broke the night stillness. John squirmed in the armchair where he had fallen asleep and tried to ignore the sound. He cursed softly, for he had meant to turn down the bell.

Finally the ringing stopped, but John was already awake. He turned on the standard lamp behind him and glanced at his watch: it was three in the morning. His plane would be leaving in five hours. He glanced down at the chessboard in his lap, debating whether or not to analyse more. Finally he decided against it. He would go to bed and get a few more hours of sleep.

He rose and put the chess set on a shelf that he had repaired. Then he went to the phone, turned it upside down and turned off the bell. The phone began to vibrate as he started to set it down. John hesitated a moment, then snatched up the receiver.

‘What is it?’ he asked angrily.

‘John, it’s Anna Petroff.’

Suddenly John found it difficult to breathe. The sound of the voice on the other end of the line cut through his weariness and jolted him wide awake. It was enough for him to hear that voice, and he did not notice the tension in it.

‘John, I have to see you. Now.’

Then he remembered, and the bitterness of the memory of what Anna had tried to do to him clouded his voice.

‘You want to see me after what you tried to pull?’

There was a long pause at the other end, then: ‘I don’t understand.’

John frowned as he caught himself hoping that it was true, that the girl hadn’t tried to betray him. He shook his head. ‘I have a plane to catch in the morning,’ he said abruptly.

‘Please, John. I have to see you. It’s about Yevgeny.’

He was a fool to be talking to the girl, John thought; a fool to have answered the phone in the first place. He would be gone in a few hours, on his way to becoming chess champion of the world.

‘No,’ John said forcefully, and started to hang up the phone.

Anna’s strained voice leaked from the receiver, pleading, strangely defenceless. ‘John! Please don’t hang up!’

John hesitated. The receiver was only inches from the cradle. He struggled against the image of himself cutting Anna out of his life forever, condemning her to ... he didn't know what. He was very tired, John thought, and not thinking straight. The thing to do was to hang up the phone and put Anna Petroff completely out of his thoughts. He slowly raised the receiver back to his ear.

'John? Are you still there?'

'Please leave me alone,' John said quietly.

'I have to talk to you, John. You—we—are in a great deal of danger. I ... I need your help.'

'Then you come here.'

'I can't. You have to come to me. I'm at the Hotel Carlisle. Room 417. Please, John. I have something very important to tell you.'

He couldn't leave his room now, John thought. It would be insane. 'I don't know,' he said quickly, and hung up.

John walked quickly away from the telephone as though it was a bomb about to explode. He went to his window and stared out at the city lights. The muscles in his stomach had knotted painfully. He opened the window and took deep breaths of the cool night air, trying to collect his thoughts.

What did she want? *What did she want?*

Sleep was impossible, John thought. A major distraction had come back to haunt him. The girl's request was outrageous, but it still upset him.

He took a chess set off a shelf, set it up on the table, then sat down to analyse. His hands trembled as he reached out to move the pieces.

He gave it up after twenty minutes. He rose and searched through his pockets until he found the scrap of paper he was looking for. Then he went to the phone and dialled the number written on the paper. The phone was answered on the second ring by a scratchy recording.

'This is Peter Arnett. I'm out at the moment. Please leave your name and number, I'll call you back.'

John replaced the receiver on the hook. He stood very still in the middle of the room for a full minute. Then he strode quickly to a closet, took out a jacket and walked out of the apartment.

It took fifteen minutes to get to the Hotel Carlisle, a twenty-storey building on the lower east side of Manhattan. John paid the taxi driver, then walked through a light rain the few steps to the lobby.

The lobby was just short of seedy, and its personnel reflected this fact. A television set no one was watching was on in a small alcove at the far end. The night clerk was sound asleep behind his desk. John went directly to the elevator and punched the button for the fourth floor.

He knocked once lightly on the door of room 417.

‘Come in.’ Anna’s voice was laced with a curious mixture of relief and tension.

John pushed the door open and stepped into the room. He found himself in one room of a suite. The lighting was dim, but he could make out Anna sitting on a couch shrouded in shadow at the opposite end of the room. A doorway behind her was covered with a curtain. The air was musty.

‘Thank you for coming.’ Anna’s voice was flat.

John went to turn on the overhead light.

‘Please don’t turn on the light,’ Anna said quickly.

John turned on the light. Anna’s hands flew to her face, but not fast enough to hide from John the fact that she had been beaten. The entire right side of her face was black and blue, and her right eye was swollen almost shut. She quickly turned away.

‘Who did that to you?’ John asked angrily.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Anna said from behind her hands. ‘What does matter is that you came.’

‘Are you finally going to tell me what part you play in all this?’

‘Would you turn off the overhead light, please? I don’t want you to see me like this.’

John hesitated, then turned off the light. The only illumination came from a small table lamp to his left. Anna rose and walked across the room to him. She kept the damaged side of her face turned away from him. John wanted to reach out and touch her, cradle her face in his hands. He kept his hands at his sides.

‘John, you mustn’t get on that plane. Don’t go to Venice.’

‘You must be out of your mind.’

Anna shook her head, then moaned softly with the pain. ‘You’ll be hurt, John! You may even be killed if you go. You must believe me!’

‘Who’s going to kill me?’

Tears glistened in Anna’s eyes, and there was a note of desperation in her voice. ‘I can’t tell you anything except that you must not go to Venice. Even

if you go, you won't play, John. Believe me! You'll never get a chance to play!'

'They haven't stopped me yet,' John said with a touch of pride. 'You haven't stopped me yet, and you sure as hell gave it your best shot.'

'Oh, John!'

John sat down in a chair and casually crossed his legs. 'You're one cool bitch, Anna Petroff,' he said evenly. 'First you try to set me up with those papers, then you get yourself punched around to make this pitch sound more convincing.' He wasn't sure that was true, but he had to say it because it was on his mind. It was the only explanation that made sense to him. He tried to see the girl's face, but she was still turned away from him. 'For a woman who's convinced her brother can beat me over the chessboard, you've gone to an awful lot of trouble to try to keep me from playing him.'

Anna's voice was choked. 'I didn't try to trick you with those papers. They were what I said they were: a gift.'

John frowned in the dim light. He hesitated a moment, then bored in again. 'You gave them to me so that it would look like they were a payment for my smuggling secrets out of the country.'

Anna slowly shook her head. 'John, I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You're a very convincing liar. What *did* you want in return for the papers?'

'I ... I still can't tell you. For *your* sake, I can't tell you.'

'Does your brother want to defect or doesn't he?'

Anna's answer was immediate, and her tone was stiff with pride. 'My brother is a *Russian*, and he is a patriot. He would never defect.'

John found the girl's tone, her certainty, disconcerting. 'I'm sorry,' he said weakly. 'I don't believe anything you say.'

'If you weren't prepared to believe anything I say, why did you come to see me?'

'A good question,' John said wryly. 'Maybe it's because I can't get you out of my mind. I don't know what game you're playing, but I respect the way you play it. I couldn't do it. I need a board, a certain number of pieces. Most important, I need to know the rules.'

'Oh, John, it's not a game.' Anna stepped forward and gripped his arms. 'At least agree to a six month postponement. I think you care for me, or you wouldn't have come. Then do it for me. Trust me. Please. You won't have to

wait more than six months. You've waited years; six more months can't make that much difference.'

'No,' John said quietly. He slowly removed Anna's hands from his arms, then turned and started to walk towards the door.

'John!'

Something in her voice made him stop. He turned and froze.

Anna reached up with trembling fingers and began to undo the buttons on her blouse. She made no effort to brush away the tears that slid down her cheeks.

The blouse was unbuttoned. Anna shrugged it off her shoulders and it fell to the floor. Then she reached behind her and unsnapped her bra. She took that off and dropped it next to the blouse.

John stood rooted to the spot, staring at Anna's half-naked body. She had full, firm breasts, topped with large brown nipples that went rigid under his gaze. Her whole body trembled, as if from some inner cold. Finally she reached up and cupped her breasts in a gesture that was entirely out of tune with the strain—and shame—etched on her face.

'All I'm asking you for is six months,' Anna said in a choked voice. 'If you agree, you can have me. I'll do anything you ask.'

She reached down and started to pull down the zipper on her skirt. John held up his hand and smiled thinly. He wanted to laugh and couldn't. 'You might as well stop right there,' he said in a voice that contained much more bitterness than he had intended. 'I'm impotent. I can't take what you want to give me.'

Somebody laughed for him. The sound was low and guttural, coming from somewhere in the darkness beyond the closed curtain.

'I'm sorry, John!' Anna cried, covering her face with her hands and moving to one side. 'He made me!'

A large, gnarled hand reached out and drew the curtains aside. The body that followed was huge, topped by a bullet-shaped head. The thin mouth was drawn back in a sneer of contempt.

John recognised the man from his picture: Alexander Gligoric.

Anna had begun to cry. Gligoric turned towards her and spoke sharply in Russian.

John felt his legs go numb. He stood frozen to the spot, glancing back and forth between Gligoric and Anna. Anna swept up her blouse and covered her breasts. She rushed at Gligoric, grabbing at his arm.

‘Don’t hurt him! Please don’t hurt him!’ She repeated it in Russian, but Gligoric brushed her easily to one side and moved towards John.

John slowly moved backwards, keeping his eyes fixed on Gligoric as the big man reached into his pocket and withdrew a set of brass knuckles. The metal gleamed in the soft light of the table lamp. Gligoric slipped the deadly ring of metal on to his right hand, then flexed his fingers as though testing the fit.

‘Is he another one of your gifts?’ John asked softly, looking directly at Anna.

‘He’d have come for you anyway!’ Anna cried out. Her voice quivered with fear and desperation. ‘I had to try to stop you from playing! Tell him now! It’s not too late! Tell him you won’t play!’

John bolted for the door. Gligoric, moving with the speed of a jungle cat, was there before him, leaning against the door, staring down at John with eyes that had suddenly gone the colour of iron.

Anna, her hands balled into fists, rushed at Gligoric. Gligoric’s left hand flicked out like the tongue of a snake, catching her on the side of the head. Anna spun, then fell to the floor, unconscious. A second later the big man casually brought his fist up into John’s stomach. John doubled over in pain and staggered out into the middle of the living-room, gasping to recover some of the air that had exploded from his lungs. He retched, dropping the remains of his last meal on the rug at his feet. The room was suddenly filled with the acrid smell of vomit and John’s fear.

Gligoric came after him.

Still gasping for air, John lifted his arm in a silent plea which Gligoric ignored. The Russian grabbed John by the front of his shirt and slapped him hard with an open palm. John fell backwards to the floor. His ears were ringing and he could taste blood in his mouth.

The man was toying with him, John thought. Torturing him. One blow with the mailed fist would kill him, and John suspected it would not be long before Gligoric tired of slapping him around.

He could hear footsteps coming up behind him. His vision was blurred, and he groped around for something with which to defend himself; there was nothing within reach of his fingers but the soft, furry nap of the rug. Then he suddenly became aware of pressure on the right side of his chest; something sharp was digging into him—his chess wallet.

John quickly rolled halfway over on his back and reached into his jacket pocket for the set with its sharp metal pieces. Gligoric's powerful hand was already gripping his shoulder as John found the set, drew it from his pocket and snapped it open. He withdrew a sharp-pointed bishop.

Gligoric yanked him to his feet and spun him around; the fist with the brass knuckles was drawn back, ready to smash into his head. John lashed out with the chess piece. The bishop carved a long, red welt across Gligoric's forehead, just above the eyes. The welt immediately spouted blood.

Gligoric screamed with pain and surprise as he stumbled backwards and came up hard against the opposite wall. His hands flew to his face, but blood continued to well from between the fingers, the crimson rivulets collecting and rolling down over the wrists, and into his eyes.

John braced himself and shook his head, trying to clear it. Anna had regained consciousness. Out of the corner of his eye John saw her slowly sit up and look around her. Then she froze, her face a mask of terror.

Now it was Gligoric's turn to grope. The blood running from his forehead had made him temporarily blind. He removed his hands from his face and began to search the area around him with his fingers. His features were smeared crimson and sounds of animal rage and fear issued from his throat.

Numb with shock, John backed up into a table, knocking over a lamp. Gligoric immediately reacted to the sound, lowering his head and rushing, arms outstretched like a bull's horns, towards the source.

There was no time to move out of the way, and John only just had time to pick up the lamp and bring the base crashing down on Gligoric's skull; the porcelain base splintered like delicate China. And then Gligoric had him.

The Russian wrapped his huge arms around John's body, locking his hands together behind John's back. Then he quickly moved his arms down to the base of John's spine. Gligoric began to squeeze.

Pain blossomed in the small of John's back, then exploded into a river of fire that swept to all regions of his body, threatening to engulf him. His body arched and John screamed with pain. In a small corner of his mind that was still functioning, John realised that he would black out at any moment—and that he would be dead seconds after that.

Anna had recovered and was once again pounding at Gligoric with her fists. She might as well have been punching a stone wall. Gligoric gave no indication that he was even aware of her presence. His sightless, bloodshot

eyes were wide, staring at nothing. A thin stream of frothy white spittle flowed from the corner of his mouth.

John closed his fist hard around the metal bishop and brought the point up hard against Gligoric's left temple. There was a soft sound like a melon being punctured. John cried out in revulsion and dropped the chess piece. But the pointed metal had already done its work: the remaining light in Gligoric's eyes went out. His arms flew out at right angles to his body and he went crashing to the floor like a felled redwood.

Anna screamed. John crumpled and writhed in pain. But gradually the fire was extinguished, banked to a dull, throbbing pain that pulsed from his buttocks to the base of his skull.

Someone was pounding at the door.

'Hey! What the hell's going on in there?'

John struggled to look around at Gligoric and Anna. He tried to speak but couldn't. Still, the message in his eyes was clear and Anna knew what had to be done. She bit into her clenched fist, stifling her screams. She regained some of her composure through a tremendous effort of will, then walked uncertainly to the door. She took a series of deep, shuddering breaths as she leaned against the jamb.

'It's all right,' she managed to say in a strangled whisper. 'Just a fight with my husband. It's all over now.'

The footsteps on the other side of the door moved away. Anna turned back to find John kneeling over Gligoric's body, grasping the thick wrist in a futile search for a pulse. John dropped the wrist and slowly looked up at Anna. His face was ashen.

'He's dead.'

Anna stared wide-eyed at the corpse, as though afraid it still might rise from the floor and come after her. John reached out with a trembling hand and picked up the chess piece. The tip of it was stained with blood, like his clothes. He rose and staggered into the bathroom. He turned on the tap and ran water over the metal. Then he cupped handfuls of water and furiously scrubbed at the stains on his shirt and jacket. They wouldn't come off.

He'd killed a man. He'd killed a man!

The metal chess piece fell from his hand and clattered in the sink. John fell over to one side, crashing into the glass door of the shower stall. Finally he braced himself on the sink. He managed to rinse out his mouth, then he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. The face belonged to somebody

else, a stranger, a man who had just destroyed himself. It was not the face of a man who might once have been world chess champion.

He began to tremble. The tremors started in his fingers, spread through his hands to his arms, and finally in waves over his body. He shook like a man with palsy, and he did not think he would ever be able to stop.

Then Anna was beside him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, anchored her head on his shoulder and squeezed. She had not put her blouse back on, and her nipples were hard points in the soft mounds of flesh pressing against him.

‘Stop trembling, John,’ Anna whispered. ‘You’ve got to get hold of yourself.’

John closed his eyes and shook his head. His teeth were chattering, and he suddenly felt very cold. ‘I just killed a man,’ he croaked.

The pressure of Anna’s arms increased, but John still continued to shake uncontrollably. Anna lifted her mouth to John’s face and kissed him gently on the cheek.

‘He’d have killed you, or made you a cripple. You did the only thing you could do. Now you’re going to be all right. I’m going to make you all right.’

The tip of her tongue flicked out and touched his ear lobe. Suddenly John was very conscious of Anna’s naked breasts, her smell. God, how he needed someone to hold him like this, John thought, to make him feel safe, if only for a few moments; to love him, make him forget.

Something was happening to him; there was a different fire in him now, flaming in his belly and sending its hot fingers down into his groin, making him hard. He was afraid of that feeling; in the past it had been a weapon of torture, humiliation and failure. But his need was even greater than his fear. He lifted Anna’s head in his hands and kissed her hard on the mouth. Anna’s mouth opened and her tongue searched for his. John cupped Anna’s breasts, and he felt her pelvis thrusting forward, urgent and demanding.

Suddenly Anna broke away, gripped John’s hand and led him into the adjoining bedroom. Quickly she removed her skirt, panties and stockings. She stripped hurriedly, yet with ease. Then she stood before him, completely unashamed at her nakedness.

‘I want you to take me, John,’ Anna said, stepping forward and touching him.

‘I ... I told you I—’

‘Stop thinking about it. Just do it.’

She pulled him down on the bed beside her. John felt as if he was about to explode. He quickly removed his pants. Anna wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, spread her legs beneath him and guided him into her. John closed his eyes and thrust deeply, impassioned, yet sick with the fear that he would go soft as in the past. He didn’t; everything else but the soft, wet warmth of Anna’s body faded into the background of his consciousness. The force inside his body was building.

He came a few moments later, and almost immediately his mind was bathed in warmth. His tensions and fears melted away as he collapsed in Anna’s arms.

‘Goddamn,’ he said softly.

‘Hear, hear,’ Anna replied warmly.

He lay still as Anna first bathed him with a warm, wet flannel, then dressed his cuts and bruises. John wanted to speak, but was afraid he couldn’t without sobbing. He remained silent, watching the girl closely. He thought of the body in the other room, but even that somehow seemed unimportant at the moment, paling before the light of the gift Anna had given him; that light blinded him, numbed him. No matter what happened now, he knew he would never forget that gift. He had been drowning and the girl had saved him with her body.

And John knew he loved her.

Anna finished, then dressed and sat down next to him on the bed. She took his hand and smiled down into his face.

‘Are you all right now?’

John nodded.

‘I have to go now,’ the girl said quietly.

John worked his tongue over his lips, then tried his voice. Its steadiness surprised him. ‘Still no explanations?’

The light in the girl’s eyes changed with the tone of her voice. ‘No, John. I don’t think it would be wise. The game is over.’

‘What game were we playing?’

Anna ignored the question. ‘You must leave too,’ she said quietly.

John considered it for a moment, then shook his head. ‘No, I won’t run. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. My fingerprints are all over this place, and they’ve got a nice fresh set down at the police station.’

‘You were arrested?’

‘You didn’t know?’ But John knew the answer to his question before he asked it. The surprise and concern in Anna’s voice had been genuine. The girl’s innocence filled him with a new kind of warmth and almost made him forget the unanswered questions.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he continued. ‘I was falling apart and you put me back together again. Why?’

Something like hurt glinted in Anna’s eyes and John regretted the question. But it was too late to retract it.

Anna squeezed his hand once more, then stood. ‘Goodbye, John,’ she said simply.

John watched her walk to the bedroom door, then turn. He expected her to say something, but she didn’t. She stared at him for a few seconds, then turned round again and walked out. John waited until he heard the outer door open and close, then rose and quickly dressed. He knew he was in deep trouble, and yet he felt oddly removed from it all. He was sorry he would not be able to play Yevgeny Petroff for the world title, but it no longer seemed the end of the world. The pressure of the last few days, the killing, and, finally, the heat of Anna’s body seemed to have burned something out of him, and he found he was not sorry it was gone.

He felt as if he had undergone some sort of exorcism.

He walked into the living-room and glanced at Gligoric’s body. Rigor mortis had already begun to set in and the hands that had almost killed him were now frozen into harmless, ugly, paper-white claws. The eyes were open, but had no more life in them than balls of dough. John took a caftan off the sofa and threw it over the face. Then he went to the telephone, dialled the operator and asked for the police.

‘93rd Precinct,’ a husky voice said. ‘Sergeant Stone speaking.’

John said nothing. His mind was somewhere else, on a stage in an auditorium in a theatre somewhere in Venice. And he was considering ways of getting there, going over alternatives in his mind like they were variations on a chess problem.

‘Hello! Anybody there?’

John hung up, then quickly dialled another number from memory. The phone was answered on the first ring.

‘Arnett.’ Arnett’s voice was sharp and tense.

‘Arnett, this is Butler.’

Arnett's exhalation of breath sounded like a pent-up explosion. 'Butler! Where the hell are you? I've been looking all over the Goddamn place for you!'

John grinned in spite of his pain, his tension. It gave him distinct pleasure to hear Arnett, for once, caught off balance. 'Really?' he said casually. 'Why?'

'Why? Because you're not in your room, that's why! What the hell are you trying to pull?'

'Look, Arnett,' John said evenly, 'I haven't got time for conversation. I've got a plane to catch, and you've got a little mess to clean up.'

Arnett's voice suddenly became very wary 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'The man in the picture you showed me. Gligoric. He's dead. I killed him.'

'You *what*?'

'You'll find the body at the Hotel Carlisle. Room 417. I'd appreciate it if you'd do a good job of covering my tracks.'

'Butler—'

John hung up the phone. He smiled to himself, then rose and walked painfully from the room.

Tom Manning's fingers were bloodless as he stood behind a fence at the boarding gate and clutched at the railing. Behind him, the whine of the jet plane's engines rose to a piercing whine that was painful in his ears, but not as painful as the weight he carried in his heart.

The last passenger had boarded, and now the steward who had agreed to hold up the flight for ten minutes was openly glancing at his watch.

He'd been here before, Tom thought. By now he should be used to the mercurial temperament and tortured soul of John Butler. But he wasn't. He searched inside himself for anger and found only pity and disappointment. This time he had been convinced that things would be different. Obviously, they weren't. Once again John had lost his most important match, that against the inner demons that tormented him.

Tom turned to the steward and started to speak when suddenly the steward glanced up and pointed behind him.

'Isn't that your man?'

Tom spun around and felt his heart leap with excitement at the sight of John. The excitement was quickly tempered by anxiety as Tom saw that John was limping badly. He carried no luggage, and his face—even behind the bandages—was swollen. His right eye was almost closed. The front of his shirt was covered with rust-coloured stains that Tom recognised as blood.

Tom rushed forward. ‘John—’

‘Top of the morning,’ John said cheerfully, brushing past Tom and going directly to the steward. ‘Thank you for waiting for me,’ he said simply.

Tom caught up with him as he was climbing up the ramp into the plane. ‘John, where have you been? What happened?’

‘It’s a long story,’ John said wearily, ‘and I’d rather not get into it now. I need some sleep.’

‘You need a doctor!’

‘That can wait until we get to Venice.’

Tom nodded, fighting back his impatience. ‘Henry isn’t here,’ he said quickly. ‘He called at the last moment and said he was ill. I just don’t understand it.’

It seemed to Tom that John took a long time to answer.

‘Well,’ John said at last. ‘That’s too bad.’

A minute later John had strapped himself into his seat and was asleep before the plane was in the air.

THE MIDDLE GAME

ELEVEN

John woke up in time to have dinner and ordered two stiff drinks before settling down to a steak. Tom watched as the drink began to restore the colour back into John's hands and the parts of his face that were not already black and blue.

Both men ate in silence, and after the meal Tom's patience was rewarded. John ordered a cognac. He sipped at the drink and began to talk about the events of the previous night. His voice was even and he told the story in a matter-of-fact tone, his voice breaking only when he related how he had killed Gligoric. He omitted the part about Anna's lovemaking. John considered that memory a very private thing, easily misunderstood, extremely precious. It was something he was afraid to talk about, as though telling about it would somehow make it lose its magic.

Tom listened in silence, dumbfounded but holding back on his questions. One thing became very clear to him as he listened to the story, and the insight came not from what John said, but the manner in which he said it: the events of the past few hours had changed John Butler. He was no longer the man governed by the knife-edge tension that had formerly permeated his every word and movement. Now John seemed more removed from himself, at once more and less accessible. Tom thought to mention this, and then decided not to. Whatever had changed John, he thought, must have been a very powerful force. Perhaps it had been the act of killing a man, or perhaps it was merely shock. Then again, it might be something that John had left unsaid.

Finally John finished talking. He sat in silence, staring out the window at the great banks of clouds that changed to wisps of smoke as they passed through them.

Tom cleared his throat. 'I've arranged for a heavy security guard.'

'Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd un-arrange it,' John said quietly, without turning away from the window.

Tom shook his head in frustration. Some things hadn't changed. 'A man tried to kill you last night,' he said softly. 'There's no guarantee that someone else won't be waiting for you in Venice.'

'I think it's over now.'

'Over!' Tom exclaimed loudly. A number of passengers turned to stare. Tom leaned close to John and lowered his voice. 'What do you mean, you think it's over?'

John shrugged. 'I don't think they ever wanted to kill me. They wanted to stop me from playing, yes, and they tried everything they could think of. They failed. Then things got out of hand and this man Gligoric decided to improvise. Now they probably know that Gligoric's dead, and they may know that the CIA's involved. I don't think they'll take a chance on having a similar incident in Venice. They'll realise that their time would be better spent getting Petroff ready to play me. But as I said, it's just a feeling.'

'Well, damn your feelings,' Tom said evenly. 'I think you're being downright foolhardy.'

John thought for a moment. 'If you do have anybody watching me, make sure I don't know they're there. That's all I ask. If I see them, I'll make a point of losing them. I mean it. I don't want two gorillas hanging around outside my hotel door. Besides, my guess is that Arnett is going to have a few men around, and they're bound to be better than anyone the USCF is going to hire.'

Tom smiled. 'I suppose you're right about that.' His smile quickly vanished. 'I guess you were also right about the girl not being involved with Gligoric. But there's still the matter of those papers. Why did she give you her brother's games?'

'Who cares?' John said simply. 'Maybe I'll never know. It's enough for me to know that I'm going to beat her brother.'

'Who supposedly wants to defect. Don't forget that. The fact that you might try to help him still makes you a very dangerous person to the Russians.'

John shook his head. 'I don't think Petroff ever intended to defect.'

'How do you know that?'

'The girl.'

'She told you that?'

'Not in so many words. But that's what she meant, and if anybody should know her brother's mind, she should. And she definitely left the impression that she didn't think her brother was a traitor, which is what he would be if he came over to our side, at least in the eyes of the Russians. She described her brother as a patriot. Patriots don't defect.'

'She could be wrong, or she could be lying.'

'I don't think she's wrong and I don't think she's lying.'

'Then why the report?'

'Like I told Arnett, it was a gambit. Except that it wasn't offered by Petroff; it was offered by the Russians. They knew how I'd react and they wanted to put the pressure on.'

Something was working at the back of John's mind. It passed through his consciousness like a speeding train. John tried to follow it and couldn't. Finally he let it go. 'Where's Petroff staying?' he asked.

'The whole Russian contingent is booked into the San Marco. They've been there a couple of days. They've really got Petroff holed up because nobody's seen him.'

'Nobody would. He's always under a tight security guard.'

'He's probably using the time to practise with his grand masters. The Russians sent twelve to help him prepare and analyse adjourned positions.'

John ignored the implied criticism of his own penchant for working alone. 'That suits me fine. The only time I care about seeing him is when we meet over the board.'

'Well, you won't have long to wait.' Tom looked into the other man's face. 'Will you be ready, John?'

'I am ready.'

John turned sideways in his seat and soon went back to sleep. Tom signalled nervously for a drink.

They landed in Mestra, a small city on the outskirts of Venice. From the air, Venice and the surrounding area had appeared like a jewel set in the Adriatic, shimmering and mysterious under the July sun. On the ground the

air was foul, polluted by the heavy, black smoke spewed forth by the heavy industrial plants in Mestra.

They took a bus to the outskirts of Venice, then boarded a water taxi for the trip into the city itself. Both men had been to Venice before and had been enchanted by it; but this was not the time for sightseeing. The beauty of this fantastic city with its streets of water, ancient cathedrals and tiled squares was lost on them, at least for the moment. There would be time later to renew their acquaintance with the city, to have fun, hopefully to celebrate. Now there was work to be done. Tom stared out at the water, going over in his mind all of the preparations that had to be made, the arrangements to be checked.

From the moment they had got off the plane, John had had his face buried in the myriad of chess journals he had instructed Tom to bring with him.

They checked into their hotel and Tom insisted that John immediately be examined by a doctor. The bruises were pronounced superficial, and he had suffered no internal damage. John was ready to play.

John awoke at dawn on the day of the first game. The schedule called for the first game to begin at 5 pm. John's body had quickly recovered from the effects of jet-lag, and his eye was open. The eye was still surrounded by patches of ugly purple, but there was no pain and he felt fit.

He wanted this time in the early morning to study last minute ideas, think, clear his mind. Later he would return to the hotel, eat a big lunch, then sleep until it was time for the game.

He stepped quietly out into the corridor and hesitated in front of Tom's door. He had agreed to let Tom check out all the physical arrangements for the match. Tom had, and had assured John they were satisfactory. Further, he had agreed to let Tom know whenever he wanted to leave the hotel. It made sense, John thought. Unwise decisions in the past had almost cost him the opportunity to play this match, and he did not want to repeat his errors. On the other hand, things had been very quiet during the two days they had been in Venice. He could not see any real purpose in waking Tom: Tom was not a young man, and the strain of the past few months had left their mark on him too. To wake him would only cause needless worry. Besides, John thought, he would be careful.

John walked on down the corridor to the elevator. In keeping with his new resolve to be careful, he got off at the second floor and took a fire exit to the ground level.

It was a bright, sunny day, and the air was clear, a good day, John thought, to take the first step towards the world chess championship. This was also a good time to relax and prepare himself, for the rigours of a match that could last as long as two and a half months.

He walked along the edge of the *piazza*, staring down into the muddy waters of the Grand Canal. And he found himself thinking of Anna. Her face, her perfume, her voice and her body were in his mind. He did not try to push the thoughts away; instead, he savoured them.

An hour later he stopped at a small pavement café for coffee. He sipped the creamy *cappuccino* and worked chess problems in his mind. The man next to him was reading a copy of the *International Herald Tribune*. John casually glanced over the man's shoulder to read the headlines. What he read struck him like a physical blow. AMERICAN GRAND MASTER COMMITS SUICIDE ON EVE OF CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH.

John did not have to read the small print to know that the grand master was Henry Palmer. He suddenly felt sick. He quickly set the cup down, left a few *lire* and walked rapidly away.

A few moments later two men, coming from opposite directions and walking on opposite sides of the square, moved after him. And these men were followed by two others.

The *Theatre Venezia* where the match would be held was a large, modern theatre near the *Palazzo San Marco*. John stood in the warm sunshine beneath a canopy of soaring pigeons and read the marquee which had notices in Italian, English and Russian.

WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH

5:00 PM

Today's Game Sold Out.

Tickets for Future Games Available At Box Office.

John tried one of the lobby doors. It was open. He pushed on it and walked into the darkened lobby.

John waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the dim light, then looked around him. The lobby was huge, with plush red carpeting and gold plaster walls. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling. A dozen closed-circuit television sets were distributed at regular intervals to accommodate the overflow crowd that would not be able to fit into the auditorium. In addition, there were giant demonstration boards at opposite ends of the hall where various grand masters would lecture on the games in progress.

A guard suddenly stepped out of an office. He stopped and froze, startled to see an intruder. He quickly recovered and strode hurriedly forward, his face red with anger. John stood still, and the guard stopped a few paces away. The anger vanished when he recognised John.

‘Prego, Signor Butler,’ he said, making an expansive gesture towards one of the padded, sound-proofed doors that led into the auditorium.

‘Grazie,’ John said. He walked through the door that the guard held open.

The auditorium had seats for two thousand, and had been specially outfitted with sound bafflers for the match. The plush seats sloped gently downward to a stage which was starkly bare except for the needed essentials; a table, a chess set and chairs, two for the players and one for Isaac Green, the Israeli grand master who would referee the match. Above the stage was another demonstration board, electronically controlled, and a neon sign that could flash SILENCE in three languages if the spectators became too enthusiastic.

John walked down the centre aisle and climbed up onto the stage. He sat down in his chair and fingered the white pieces of the chess set, those he would be playing in the first game. Then he looked out towards the empty auditorium. In his mind’s eye he imagined how it would look that afternoon, jammed to capacity with chess aficionados; *patzers*, experts, masters and grand masters from around the world.

He knew he would be nervous at first, seemingly unable to harness his mind and concentrate. His hands might tremble slightly. But he knew Petroff would be experiencing the same difficulties. He would make his opening move and press the clock. Petroff would respond, and the game would be on. That initial stage-fright nervousness would vanish and the tension would evaporate as they both struggled through the opening, springing surprises, battling to enter a favourite line.

Then the tension would increase again; but it would be a new, more terrible tension, that which comes from two men trying to gut one another,

to break the will to resist. More than one chess player has ended in the hospital suffering from that kind of tension. That, John thought, is what he would be trying to do to Petroff. And what Petroff would be trying to do to him. Neither man would emerge from the match the same. Chess was the purest form of gladiatorial combat—and occasionally the most savage. It was one mind pitted against another, and the object was not to momentarily overcome, but to break. That was the only way a twenty-four game match could be approached.

John glanced at his watch. It was noon. It was time to return to the hotel, eat and rest. Then he would return to this place that loomed in his mind as the apex of a lifelong struggle. The end of a journey.

He rose, carefully replaced the pieces in their original positions, then left the theatre through a side exit.

The squares were now crowded with tourists and a profusion of sidewalk artists, all mass-producing their wares as they vied for the attention and *lire* of the spectators.

There was a sound in the air that was somehow incongruous. It took John a moment to identify it: a high-speed power boat was running at full throttle out in the bay beyond the square. It swept along over the glassy water, then made a hairpin turn and started towards the square. There were two white-shirted men in the boat. One was standing up, waving his arms in some kind of signal.

John stood still a moment too long. He was only aware for a split second of the two men who had suddenly flanked him, cutting him off from the rest of the crowd, bumping him in the direction of the water. He gasped with surprise and pain as the long hypodermic needle pierced his clothes and slid into his arm.

The drug acted almost instantaneously, attacking his nervous system, numbing his muscles. He tried to call out and found he could make no sound. His muscles went limp and he started to collapse.

The men gripped him under either arm, then quickly and expertly eased him down into the bottom of the boat. The last sound John heard before losing consciousness was the high-pitched whine of the engine as the boat sped out towards the open water at the edge of the bay.

TWELVE

John slowly regained consciousness. He almost wished he hadn't. His head felt as though it was filled with steel wool, and the arm where the needle had slid in throbbed painfully.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on a canvas cot in the corner of a large room that smelled of animals. A light refreshing breeze blew in from an open door at the opposite end of the room. Outside the door John could see a rutted dirt road with an old panel truck parked at the side of it. Beyond the road he could see fields of ripe grain swaying gently in the breeze. The pastoral scene—and especially the truck—looked most inviting. The burly man with bulldog jowls sitting in a straight-backed chair by the door didn't.

Three other men were crowded around a small table in the centre of the room. John grinned wryly when he saw what they were doing. If he wasn't absolutely sure of the men's nationality before, he was now. American hoodlums would be playing poker, Russians would be playing chess, which was exactly what these men were doing. Two of the men were actually playing, and the third was absorbed in the progression of the game.

John glanced at his watch. It was 2.45. He felt a small tingle of anticipation and hope; there was still time. Then reality seeped in, quashing the elation. First, he could not even be sure it was still the same day. Second, it was obvious that the four men sharing the room with him were going to take a dim view of any attempt on his part to leave it. He abruptly sat up.

Bulldog Jowls pointed with his finger towards the cot. 'Sit down,' he said in broken English.

'Shit!' John exploded. 'What the hell—!'

John started for the door. The three men at the table sprang to their feet. One of the men had grown a gun in his hand. John ignored it; if they wanted to kill him, they could have dumped him in the bay. Bulldog Jowls had risen and was blocking the door. John, blind with rage and frustration, lowered his head and tried to go through him. It was a mistake. Bulldog Jowls put out a hammy hand and stopped him as though he had no more momentum than a drifting feather. The big man gripped John's arm with his left hand, then punched the shoulder just below the collarbone. It was not a hard punch, but it was expertly placed. The entire arm immediately went numb.

'Sit down,' Bulldog Jowls repeated.

John went back to the cot and sat down. The four men looked at each other, and the two chess players began to laugh. The man with the gun waved it in John's direction.

'No-no,' the man said with a huge grin. His English was barely understandable, but the grin was enough to make John want to strangle him. 'Is no-no. You no leave now.'

John glanced at his watch again. It was 3.00.

'You're crazy if you think you can get away with this!' he shouted, knowing he was on the verge of hysteria and not caring. 'Do you think people won't believe me when I tell them I was locked up by a bunch of Russians?'

John suddenly blinked; they probably *wouldn't*, he thought. Another one of Butler's crazy tricks ... Butler couldn't stand the pressure. And even if they did believe him, what difference would it make? The Russians would have retained the championship by forfeit, and, under the rules of FIDE there was no way anyone could force them to relinquish it, short of some kind of proof that John knew it was unlikely he would ever be able to provide.

He pounded the cot in frustration. The two chess players glanced at each other and exchanged a few words in Russian. All four men laughed.

One of the chess players, a man with thick glasses and a collarless white shirt, turned to John.

'We know you not happy with us,' he said with a broad grin. 'We sorry. But you must take it easy. Is that how you say? "Take it easy"?''

John flushed. 'How many games do you want me to spot your man? One? Two? How about letting me out in time to let me play the bastard just *one* game?'

They didn't understand, but they found it funny anyway.

'One game!' Bulldog Jowls howled. 'That good. That good!'

John gripped the edge of the cot with rage. Then, through a tremendous effort of will, he forced himself to release his grip and lean back against the wall. He turned his face away from the four men and stared at the wall.

Losing his temper was the same as giving up, he thought. And he couldn't give up. Not yet. He would have to wait them out. By now Tom Manning would know he was gone and would be raising a hell of a stink. Arnett would probably have a small army of agents out looking for him. In addition, he did not think FIDE would declare the match forfeit after only

one game. If Tom yelled enough, it might be three, or even four. That made a week.

He looked around him. There were cases of dried goods stacked up against the wall, and milk cans that John was sure were filled with water. So they had the provisions. His task would be to find a way out before Isaac Greene awarded the match to Petroff.

John knew he must begin to consider his situation as he would a difficult chess problem. He was in imminent danger of being checkmated, and he had to find a successful way to defend. And defending meant getting out of the farmhouse and back to the match.

Perhaps there was no way to defend; innumerable chess situations were simply hopeless, and that might be the case here. But if there was a solution, John thought, he would find it. Goddamn it, he'd find it.

Flight was out, and they were too professional to all be kept napping at the same time. And there was no way to bull his way out. Bulldog Jowls could tie him up into a knot without any help at-all from the others.

John glanced back towards the centre of the room, and his first idea came to him; a trap. It occurred to him that it might be better to wait for another time. But there might not be another time. Besides, John found he was impatient. He would see just how passionate these men were about their chess, and how impressed they were by the fact that their prisoner was the world title contender.

John slowly rose and moved towards the table where the game was being played. The reaction was immediate: Bulldog Jowls was up out of his chair and guns were once again waving in the air.

John made an innocent gesture in the direction of the chessboard. 'Don't get nervous,' he said quietly. 'I just want to watch the game.' He wasn't sure they understood. 'Chess. *Chess.*' He pointed towards his eyes. 'I want to *watch.*'

The chess players finally grasped his meaning. They exchanged glances, then looked towards Bulldog Jowls who was apparently their leader. One of them said something in Russian. The big man at the door gave it some thought, then nodded curtly. John understood. He moved to the table.

His presence did have an instantaneous impact on the game; the players became even more serious. Both men wanted to impress him. John watched impassively, his arms folded across his chest. He hoped the tension he felt did not show in his face.

Although the game was well into the middle game, John recognised the position as one usually arising out of a Sicilian Defense, which meant that both players were fairly sophisticated. That was good, John thought; his plan depended on the men knowing more than the fundamentals.

John saw the checkmate coming five moves in advance. The man in the collarless shirt saw it too, and attempted to launch a vigorous counter-attack. In the process he left his king side open. His opponent quickly seized the opportunity. He moved his black bishop over to a open diagonal.

‘Checkmate!’ he said, clapping his hands with delight, casting a quick glance towards John.

John gave a quick nod of approval. The man in the collarless shirt groaned.

John motioned towards the board. ‘May I?’ he asked quietly.

Both players nodded enthusiastically. John quickly set the pieces back up in the position that had evolved a few moves before the checkmate. The third man was bending over the table, watching with intent interest.

‘You might have tried this,’ John said slowly to the man in the collarless shirt. He moved the pieces deliberately, demonstrating a possible line of defence the man might have tried.

The man in the collarless shirt nodded, then reached out and completed the combination.

‘Good!’ the third man said. ‘Good!’

‘Yeah,’ John said with a wry smile. ‘That was good. Now watch this.’

He re-set the pieces in another position, then began to move them about. The three men stared on, uncomprehending. John glanced quickly in the direction of Bulldog Jowls and suppressed a grin. Bulldog Jowls was squirming in his seat, anxious to join the others.

John first sacrificed his queen, then a knight and a bishop. When he had finished, the black forces were depleted and the white queen and two rooks were all bearing down on the black king. John stepped back and shrugged, as though the implications of the position were obvious.

‘You see?’

The man in the collarless shirt scratched his head, unable to believe that any grand master would set up such a simple position.

‘White win,’ he said.

John made a gesture of disgust. ‘No, *no*. Black wins.’

There were astonished grunts from the other two men who bent closer to the board.

‘*Black* win?’

‘Black wins,’ John said casually.

‘You show.’

‘Uh-uh. No help. You figure it out for yourself.’

The three men bent over the table. There was much mumbling. John heard his own name mentioned, and the Russian word for ‘grand master’. John turned to one side and smiled. Because he was who he was, the men were unable to believe that the position was as simple as it seemed.

Bulldog Jowls could stand it no longer. He rose from his chair and hurried across the room. The other three men moved aside and made room for him. The four of them began to feverishly analyse.

The man in the collarless shirt thought he saw something. He pushed the others aside and moved the pieces.

‘See!’ he said in Russian. ‘This is possible! This, then this—’

‘Then *this*,’ the man next to him said impatiently. He demonstrated a checkmate of the black king on the next move.

‘Here, then! The pawn moves forward!’

‘That’s impossible, stupid! You’ll still be mated in three moves!’

Bulldog Jowls thought he saw something. He started to move a piece but was distracted by the sound of a truck starting up outside the farmhouse.

‘Shit,’ Bulldog Jowls growled as he turned in time to see John backing the truck at high speed down the rutted road. ‘Shit.’

The sign read: VENEZIA-23km. His watch told him it was 4.30. John pressed the accelerator to the floor; the carburettor coughed, but the needle on the truck’s speedometer did not rise above the 55km mark.

It was very important to John that he reach the theatre in time to play the first game. That gave him an hour and a half. Petroff would start his clock at five, but the game would not be declared forfeit until after an hour had passed. That gave him ninety minutes.

There were a number of reasons for John’s sense of urgency. When he had been a prisoner he had tried to look on the bright side of things; now he contemplated the darker side. First, although it was unlikely, there was no guarantee that Isaac Greene would not declare the entire match forfeit on the basis of one missed game. He was empowered to under FIDE rules, and

the Russians would certainly press for just such a ruling. Second, if he were able to make it to the theatre in time to play the first game, he would enjoy a tremendous psychological advantage over Petroff who, most likely, would be shocked to see him. Even a loss would mean nothing, since he would have lost close to an hour on his clock and nobody would expect any kind of successful performance under that kind of time pressure.

If he could somehow manage to win, it was possible that Petroff's will to win would be crushed at a single blow.

In addition, there was the simple challenge of getting there. He wanted to see the looks on the Russians' faces when he entered the hall.

It was 5.15 by the time he reached the boat dock and large parking area at the edge of Venice. He considered stopping to phone ahead, then decided not to. He was unfamiliar with the telephone system, did not know the number of the theatre, and could not speak Italian. Stopping would just eat up more time. Besides, although it was a calculated risk, he did not think the match would be cancelled if he didn't make it. And he wanted his appearance at the theatre to be total surprise.

Petroff would have punched his clock fifteen minutes before. Now the Russian would be sitting impassively, staring at nothing, waiting for the minutes to pass. The Russians—and Isaac Greene—would be glancing nervously at their watches. The audience would be growing impatient. Tom would be beside himself with nervousness and worry.

John brought the truck to a screeching halt next to a kerb seventy-five yards from the loading platform. He jumped out of the cab and raced towards the dock where a fully loaded water bus was just pulling away. He shouted and waved his arms, then lowered his head and pumped his legs. He slowed to a walk when it became obvious to him that he was not going to make it.

He fought against his rising panic and looked about him. Over to his right a well-dressed business man had just finished tying up his power boat and was taking his briefcase out of a well in the boat. John took a number of deep breaths, then walked over to him.

'Excuse me,' John said. 'Do you speak English?'

The man glanced up, studied John's dishevelled appearance, then shook his head.

John resisted the impulse to look at his watch again. 'John Butler,' he said, pointing to himself. 'I play chess.'

‘Chess?’

‘Chess. Right.’ He pointed out over the water, then to his watch. ‘*Theatro Venezia*. I’m supposed to be there.’

The man shook his head again and started to turn away. Then he hesitated and turned back again. His face lit up with recognition. He pointed a finger at John’s chest. ‘John Butler. *Chess!*’ He made motions with his hands as though he were playing.

John nodded quickly, again pointed to his watch, then the boat. ‘*Theatro Venezia*, please?’

The man grinned and nodded his head. He quickly untied the boat and motioned for John to get in. John quickly climbed in, breathing a sigh of relief. The man climbed into the stern and started the engine. A few moments later the boat sped out into the middle of the canal.

The man seemed highly excited—and not a little amused—at the presence of his famous passenger. He kept up a constant stream of talk which John replied to with an occasional nod of his head. But he was concentrating all his energies on trying to relax. His watch told him it was 5.45.

Other power boats sped by, twisting in and out between the many, multi-coloured gondolas filled with camera-laden tourists. Suddenly the man cut the motor and drifted to a landing stage.

‘*Theatro Venezia*,’ the man said, pointing out over to a large, peaked tower beyond the square.

But John knew exactly where he was, and how to get to the theatre. He reached for his wallet and started to count out some bills. The man shoved his hand away.

‘*No, Signor*,’ the man said gravely.

John removed the packet of complimentary tickets from his pocket, passes that Tom had given him the day before. He pressed these into the man’s hand. The man looked at them, then smiled.

‘*Grazie, Signor*.’

‘*Grazie* to you,’ John said. Then he vaulted over the side of the boat and raced across the square towards an alley at the far end. It was the same way he had come out earlier in the day. He might not be in any shape to play, John thought, but he was going to make it. For today, that was enough.

It was 5.55 as John approached the rear exit to the theatre. The guard glanced up with surprise, but by the time he reacted John had already

sprinted past him and was in the theatre, taking a short flight of steps three at a time. He rounded a corner at the top of the stairs and raced down a long, narrow corridor leading to a backstage door. He burst through the door, past two more startled guards, then raced towards the light shining through a small crack in a curtain backdrop.

He came out through the curtain on to the brightly lit stage. An excited roar cascaded from the audience to his left, but John barely heard it. He was standing very still, frozen in his tracks, staring at Petroff's empty chair. The clock was still.

The officials on stage stared at him incredulously. Tom Manning entered from behind the stage, saw him and let out a whoop. Below, the Russian contingent rose from their seats in the first row of the auditorium and quietly filed out.

John went over to the board, unhesitatingly made his first move, then punched the clock. Petroff's clock started to click.

John slumped in his chair and stared at the empty space across from him.

THIRTEEN

He sat in the dark in the empty theatre, listening to the distant sound of his own thoughts. He searched inside himself for the elation and sense of triumph he knew he should feel and found only emptiness. He had reached the top of the mountain he had been climbing all his life only to find that there was nothing there. He felt as if something had been stolen from him.

He heard the door open out in the auditorium, then muffled footsteps coming down towards the stage. The footsteps became louder as they came up on the stage. Then they stopped behind him. John knew who the footsteps belonged to without looking.

‘Congratulations, champ,’ Arnett said.

There was no mockery in the man’s voice, and John was grateful for that. ‘I would have beaten him,’ he said quietly.

Arnett walked around and sat down in Petroff’s chair across from him. He cleared the chess pieces out of the way and leaned his elbows on the table.

‘What difference does it make?’ Arnett said easily. ‘The Russians have packed up and gone home. You win the world championship by default.’

‘By default. That’s what makes the difference.’

‘You have what you always wanted, and you took the Russians’ best shots to get it.’

‘But that’s not chess.’

‘No, it’s not chess’ Arnett cleared his throat. ‘I’m sorry we missed you down on the square. Those guys were fast, and we weren’t expecting a boat.’

John said nothing. The boat, the farmhouse, all seemed related to incidents that had happened a century before.

‘Tom Manning partially filled me in on how you managed to get here. That was good, Butler. Real good. You keep a clear head.’

John crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. He hoped the other man would take the hint. Arnett didn’t.

‘Manning told me where to find you,’ Arnett continued. ‘What I can’t figure out is why you’re sitting here by yourself in the dark. You should be out celebrating.’

Arnett’s compliments had been sincere, but now something else had crept into the CIA man’s voice. John didn’t feel like trying to figure out what it

was, or what Arnett wanted. He was very tired.

John made an impatient gesture. 'What happened? Do you know? What the hell has been going on here?'

Arnett gestured around the empty auditorium, as though the answer were obvious. 'Petroff didn't show. And the Russians knew all along he wasn't going to show.'

'You think they killed him?'

'No. All they wanted was a six month postponement. If *you* didn't show up, then they'd have it, and they'd worry about your story and the publicity later. The most important thing was getting the postponement. That would seem to indicate that they expected Petroff to be ready to play in six months.'

'If he's sick—'

'No, he's not sick. That would be too simple. Remember, the Russians didn't want to give a reason for their request. If Petroff had claimed illness, FIDE would have insisted that he be examined by one of their doctors. It's obvious the Russians didn't want that. Therefore, the postponement would have to have been by mutual consent. That's why they initially started harassing you. They figured you'd blow up under the pressure and the USCF would give them the postponement gladly.'

'What about the report that he wanted to defect?'

'Who knows? Maybe it was just another pressure tactic, or maybe it was real and the Russians found out about it. They wanted six months to instill a little patriotism in him.'

John thought about it, then shook his head. 'It still doesn't add up. Not all of it. Whatever was happening, Petroff's sister must have known about it. *She* wanted me to postpone. Yet, she gave me Petroff's game and analysis. You can't imagine how valuable those games would be to a potential challenger.'

'I have some idea,' Arnett said dryly. 'I've made it my business to find out.'

There was a long silence. Finally John spoke softly, as if to himself. 'After I killed Gligoric, I was coming apart at the seams. If she didn't want me to play, all she had to do was leave me in that apartment. Instead ... she gave me herself, filled me up. I wouldn't have made it here if it hadn't been for her.'

'Sounds like quite a woman.'

It was too casual and easy, and it made John angry.

‘What kind of a stupid remark is that? I want to know why she did it!’

Arnett spread his open palms out on the table, as if to show that he had meant no offence. ‘My, my,’ he said, ‘the girl seems to be a sensitive subject.’

John said nothing.

‘Maybe there’s a simple answer to that, John,’ Arnett continued seriously. ‘The girl cares for you. She found out the game was getting a bit rough and she backed away from it. Is it so hard for you to believe that someone could fall in love with you?’

‘Go to hell, Arnett,’ John said without emotion.

One of Arnett’s empty hands reached into his jacket pocket and came out with the record of Petroff’s games; in Arnett’s hand the papers seemed like a weapon. John tensed as Arnett spread the papers out on the chessboard between them. Then the other man produced a felt-tipped pen and drew a heavy circle around the legend at the top of the first page.

‘I suspect this is where you’ll find the answers,’ Arnett said. ‘The Moscow Institute.’

John suddenly understood what had been in Arnett’s voice, and why he was here. Arnett had been using his emotions as a line to reel him in, playing him like a fish. The game wasn’t over.

‘You expect me to go to *Russia*?’

Arnett shrugged. ‘Right now, I’d say that’s where the action is. And my guess is that that’s what you’re still looking for. Under the circumstances, it’s not enough for you to be told you’re world champion. You want to know why.’

John ignored the feeler. ‘And how do you propose to get me there?’ he asked scornfully. The awareness that Arnett could apparently see into the depths of his soul made him profoundly uncomfortable. ‘You’ve got Gligoric’s body and the microfilm. Which one are you going to throw at me first?’

‘Neither,’ Arnett said easily. ‘I’m not going to try to force you to go. As a matter of fact, I can’t. Palmer wrote out a full confession about planting the microfilm, and Gligoric’s body has been efficiently disposed of. I have no hold over you.’

‘Then why should I agree to go?’

‘I think you’re going to go because you want to. Maybe because you have to. I’m just suggesting that I can make things a little easier for you.’

‘You’re crazy. Even if I wanted to go, I doubt that I could get in. I’d be recognised on sight. They may not know who I am in my own country, but they sure as hell do in Russia. I don’t think they’d exactly roll out the red carpet for me.’

‘Oh, I don’t think there will be any great problem,’ Arnett said casually. ‘For one thing, Russia is probably the last place in the world any Russian would expect you to show up at the moment. So, you’ll have surprise on your side.’

Arnett reached into his pocket again and withdrew a leather traveller’s packet tied around the middle with a cord. He untied the cord and spread the packet to reveal two inner pockets filled with documents. One of them was a passport. Arnett took out the passport and held it open for John to see. John could recognise himself in the passport photo, but only barely. No one else would ever recognise him; the photo had been expertly retouched, up to and including a head topped with bright red hair. John did not even bother asking where Arnett had got the photo.

‘That should get you out of the starting gate,’ Arnett said with a trace of a smile.

‘You people don’t miss a trick, do you?’

Arnett rose. ‘The photo’s a composite, but it will pass. The wig’s waiting for you back at your hotel, along with a few other papers that you may find useful.’

‘You knew I’d go,’ John said quietly. He added as an afterthought: ‘Goddamn you, Arnett.’

‘You’re booked on a charter flight with a tourist group,’ Arnett continued evenly. ‘It’s a teachers’ group, so you’d better give some thought to what it is you’re supposed to be teaching. The plane leaves Venice at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. You’ll be in and around Moscow for five days. Sometime during your sightseeing, I suggest that you get lost long enough to check out this Moscow Institute.’

‘What am I supposed to tell Tom?’

‘Absolutely nothing. You let me take care of all the telling that has to be done.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘You have a few hours to think it over.’

‘Thanks, but I think I just may pass. That would surprise you, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes, it would. There’s been a neat reversal of situations, John. Before, you always considered yourself good enough to be world champion. Now you *are* world champion ... and the problem is convincing yourself.’

John remained silent. Arnett abruptly turned and walked off the stage. His footsteps receded as he walked through the auditorium. Suddenly the footsteps stopped and Arnett’s voice, disembodied and ghostly, came at John out of the darkness.

‘There’s one more thing I forgot to mention, John. Our sources tell us the girl’s in Moscow.’

THE END GAME

FOURTEEN

The flight to Moscow was uneventful. The wig John was wearing was too tight and had given him a headache. He nursed the pain with two scotches, read for a while, then dozed intermittently. He frequently found himself longing for a chess journal and a set to analyse with, but he had purposely left behind anything that might attract attention and raise suspicions about his true identity.

No one bothered him. There was an open bar on the flight, and an hour after they were in the air a full party was in swing, complete with a reasonable folksinger who accompanied herself on a battered guitar.

John stared out the window and thought of the journey ahead of him, a journey to what? Petroff? Anna? He was sure Arnett knew more than he had let on. The CIA man was using him, John thought, for his own mysterious reasons. But, then, it was also true that he was using Arnett, at least for a trip to Moscow that he probably would have wanted to make one day anyway. Like Arnett, he was convinced that the final answers to all his questions lay in Moscow.

Once he fell asleep and dreamed of Anna. She was standing at the end of a long corridor, beckoning him forward with one hand, warning him away with the other. He awoke in a cold sweat.

He filled out his Tourist Information Card in the name of John Williams—the name on his passport—and handed it in to the steward. Then he sat back and waited to see what would happen at the airport.

Nothing happened. His passport and visa were collected along with the others, then given back to him at the passport control desk by a guard who didn't give him a second glance. A customs officer opened one of his bags, casually rummaged through it, then closed it and marked all the bags. John was safely in Moscow.

The group was checked into a moderately priced hotel in the north-east section of Moscow. The first thing John did was to lock the door to his room and study the maps of the city Arnett had given him. The Moscow Institute was clearly marked on one of the maps. It was three blocks south of the building housing the Bolshoi ballet.

A few hours later they were fed a large dinner and introduced to their tour guide, an affable young man by the name of Anatoly Zharkov who spoke English with a pronounced British accent. Zharkov announced the itinerary for their stay.

They were scheduled to attend a matinee performance of the Bolshoi ballet on Wednesday, the third day of their stay.

The first two days blended easily into one another. Despite his tension and sense of anticipation, John found that he was enjoying himself. He found the Russians he met to be pleasant and open, anxious to make their American guests comfortable and at home. John looked into the faces of these people and could find no trace of the brutal savagery he had seen in Gligoric. But Gligoric belonged to a shadow world, John thought, and he was international in that respect. The Russians would certainly have no monopoly on cruelty, or barbarians in their employ.

He thought of Arnett; smooth-talking, urbane, and undoubtedly capable of killing a man in cold blood if the occasion demanded. Such was the nature of the man he was co-operating with, albeit for his own personal reasons.

His decade-old hatred of the Russians was erased by the Moscow streets. Zharkov, the shopkeepers, housewives, businessmen and children had nothing to do with the high-pressure world of international chess or politics. On his visits to the various Russian art museums he found himself impressed by what these people had accomplished—and stunned by his own ignorance. He reflected on the fact that he had travelled around the world many times—and had seen nothing. This was the first time in his life he had ever been out of his own country and had not been lost in chess journals or distracted by some chess problem. He had much to learn, he thought.

He began immediately educating himself. He paid close attention to Zharkov's lectures at the various places of interest, bought and read books on Russian history.

This was Petroff's land, John thought. And Anna's. This knowledge gave a new perspective to his thoughts and studies. Underlining everything was the knowledge that—if Arnett was right—Anna was somewhere within a few miles of him.

Zharkov, an admitted ballet enthusiast, was highly excited on the morning of the third day. He hurried through the morning schedule of sightseeing, constantly interspersing his talk with references to the spectacle they would see that afternoon at the Bolshoi. They would be performing *Swan Lake*, Zharkov announced, one of his favourites, and he could hardly wait to share this experience with the others.

John found that he regretted that Zharkov would have to be disappointed by the absence of one member of his entourage.

Zharkov brought them to the ballet an hour before the scheduled starting time of 2 00 pm. John found himself looking up at an imposing, squarish building, grand in its simplicity. Zharkov spent fifteen minutes lecturing on the elegance they would find inside.

John never heard the end of the lecture. As Zharkov began to talk, John moved to the rear of the group, then stepped quickly into the midst of a crowd of German tourists that was passing by. He walked a hundred yards with the Germans, then slipped away and crossed the street.

He had no trouble finding the building that housed the Moscow Institute. The small sign on the steel post beside the open gate had the same letters as those on Petroff's games.

The large, white building sat in the middle of a sea of grass and white statuary. There were small flower gardens, and cool, dark, sheltered groves of trees separating sections of lawns. A fence surrounded the grounds, extending right round the building. Despite the warm sun, John felt a chill as he stared at the open gate. It was inconceivable to him that the Moscow Institute was what it appeared to be.

But, he thought, he had come too far to turn back just because the building reminded him of the hospital where his mother was kept.

In an act of defiance, as if to exorcise his fears, John reached up and pulled off his wig. He stuck the wig into an inside pocket of his jacket, smoothed his hair down, then walked purposefully through the open gate, down a long walk to the main entrance. The door was locked, and it did not escape John's notice that many of the windows in the façade were barred.

He rang the bell at the side of the door. A few seconds later the door was opened by a swarthy attendant in an immaculately white uniform. The man had coal-black eyes that might have shown kindness in their depths if they were not filled with suspicion.

The attendant said something in Russian.

John reached into his pocket and withdrew one of the documents Arnett had provided him with. As instructed, he showed the paper to the man at the door. The attendant studied it, then gave a slight bow and stepped aside for John to enter. John waited as the attendant carefully locked the door again, then followed the man down a corridor.

The corridor was long and wide, lined on both sides with rooms, many with the doors open. Any doubts in John's mind that the Moscow Institute was, indeed, a mental hospital vanished now that he was inside its walls; it had the same smell of emotional sickness and desperation, of people sweating away their lives in the nightmarish, locked saunas of their minds. Someone was moaning from behind one of the locked doors. In other rooms, slack-jawed patients vacantly stared at him.

John felt paralysed, unable to move. He would stand there until he fell, he thought, staring back at those faces until he became one of them.

The attendant touched his arm solicitously and spoke.

'I'm all right,' John said.

They proceeded down the corridor. The attendant stopped in front of a closed, glass door. He knocked once, then opened the door and motioned for John to go in.

John walked past the attendant into the office. The room was large, spacious and airy. One wall was covered with portraits of various Russian leaders, past and present. There was a single, wide, oak desk. The man who rose from behind it was in his mid-fifties, with large, expressive blue eyes and a full head of prematurely silver hair. He had an unmistakable air of authority.

The director nodded perfunctorily to John, then studied the papers the attendant brought to him. Finally he glanced up at John. A veil of suspicion had dropped over his eyes, and he spoke sharply.

'I'm sorry,' John said. 'I don't speak Russian.'

The director paused and stared hard at John. Then he spoke in fluent English.

‘I asked you where you got these,’ the director said. ‘These are government papers, obviously forged, but good enough to get you in to see me.’

There was no way to go but forward. ‘The papers were given to me,’ John said evenly. ‘My name is John Butler. I’ve come to see Yevgeny Petroff.’

The director motioned for the attendant to leave. The attendant hurried out of the office, closing the door behind him.

The director’s face broke into a wide grin. ‘Butler!’ he said. ‘I should have recognised you! You’ve come! You’ve really come!’

John stood and stared, not sure how to react.

‘My name is Yakov,’ the director said, shaking John’s hand. ‘I am very glad to meet you.’

John shook his head in amazement. ‘What is this place?’

Yakov’s smile faded. ‘I thought you knew. This is a hospital for the mentally ill.’

‘What’s Petroff doing here?’

Once again the other man’s eyes were veiled. ‘I will take you to see Yevgeny,’ he said quietly.

FIFTEEN

Dr Yakov led John down another long corridor, stopped and knocked on the door of the room at the very end. A deep, husky voice boomed from inside. Yakov opened the door and motioned for John to go in.

The room was nicely furnished, one in a suite, with a view looking out over the vast flower garden. There were original oil paintings on the wall, with the name Petroff scribbled in the lower right hand corners. There were three vases filled with cut flowers.

Petroff sat in a chair at the opposite end of the room, like a great hulking toad in the midst of a flower bed. He was not at all what John had expected. He gave the appearance more of a prize fighter than a chess champion. He was short and bulky, with huge arms and shoulders. His full, leonine head of hair and granite features set off a pair of eyes that were large, and the blackest John had ever seen, bright with intelligence and love of living. The eyes burned in Yevgeny Petroff's head like twin lasers.

The craggy face broke into a grin that encompassed all his features. 'Butler!' Petroff exclaimed. Then he added something in Russian.

Yakov translated. 'Yevgeny bids you welcome.'

Petroff rose and extended a large hand. John took it and found the grip to be firm, yet delicate, like that of a surgeon. He searched for something to say but couldn't find it.

Still grinning, Petroff went to a cabinet to the right that turned out to be a hidden bar with a single bottle of vodka and glasses. Petroff glanced at Yakov who shook his head. Petroff poured two glasses, brought one to John. John, still speechless, took the glass from the outstretched hand.

Petroff raised his glass. 'Cheers,' he said in fragmented English.

'Yeah,' John said. 'Cheers.'

Both men downed their drinks.

John felt Anna's presence before he saw her. He turned and found her standing in the door. To John, she was even more beautiful than he remembered, with the same dark eyes as her brother. He did not have to be told that she was glad to see him; the look on her face in that single, unguarded moment told him all he needed to know. Regardless of what happened, John thought, that single glance had made his journey worthwhile.

Anna smiled warmly. 'Hello, John. You've been expected. Why don't you sit down?'

The warmth in her voice could not entirely smother the apprehension.

'Thanks, but I'll stand,' John said. 'At least until somebody tells me what this is all about.'

Anna spoke to her brother in Russian Petroff rose and poured her a drink Anna took the drink and sat down in a chair. She sipped slowly at the vodka, looking at John over the rim of the glass She cast a quick glance at her brother.

'What's your brother doing here? Is he really cr ... mentally ill?'

'Yevgeny will speak for himself,' Anna said.

She turned to Petroff and translated John's question. Petroff laughed, then replied. Anna turned back to John.

'My brother wishes to reassure you that he is quite sane; it is the leaders of our country who are mad. He adds that you, as an American, should fully understand that situation.'

John shook his head. 'I'm sorry, but I don't understand anything.'

Anna spoke to her brother again. He hesitated for a few moments, then nodded his head. As Anna spoke, John could feel Petroff's eyes on him, gauging him. John could feel the power of that gaze. Petroff might be a poet, painter, journalist and chess champion, John thought, but he was also a hunter.

'As you probably know,' Anna said, 'Yevgeny is not very popular with the leaders of our government.'

'To say the least,' Yakov interjected, looking up at the ceiling.

'He has been protected up to now because of his chess skill. However, a few months ago some of Yevgeny's friends were arrested They were writers for the literary journal he edits. They were tried and sentenced to long prison terms. Yevgeny was told that his friends would be released if he agreed to stop distributing his writings.' She paused and looked at her brother. Her face glowed with pride and affection. 'Yevgeny's reply was that he would not play for the championship unless they released his friends. That is why he's here. It's a common form of ... punishment.'

John drew his breath in sharply. 'Putting a man in a mental hospital?'

Petroff suddenly broke in, obviously asking questions about what John had said. He and his sister spoke animatedly for a few minutes, then Petroff laughed.

The laugh impressed John. It was hearty, booming, a rite of exorcism. That was Petroff's great strength, John thought; not his tremendous brawn, but his laugh, a sense of humour that had, so far, enabled him to survive a situation that John knew would tear most men—including himself, or especially himself—into pieces.

'Yevgeny wants me to explain to you that the leaders of our country consider anyone who would try to blackmail the State insane.' Petroff said something and Anna giggled like a schoolgirl. 'Now he says they're probably right.'

Anna's mood quickly grew serious. 'Imprisonment in a mental hospital is a common form of "treatment" for what our leaders consider political dissidents. I am very proud of my country and its accomplishments; of this thing I am terribly ashamed.' Anna paused and lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. Petroff, noticing her discomfort, started to rise and go to her. Anna shook her head and Petroff sat down. 'They felt they would be able to change Yevgeny's mind, but not in time for the match in Venice. That's why they asked for a postponement.'

'The King's Gambit,' John said quietly, making no effort to mask his admiration for the other man's courage. 'Except that it's the king himself offering to be sacrificed.'

Petroff, curious again, interrupted. Anna translated. Once again Petroff laughed.

Anna turned to John and smiled. 'Yevgeny likes what you said about the king's gambit. He appreciates your sense of humour.'

John slowly shook his head. Images of his mother danced on the screen of his mind, like flash frames in a bad movie. 'I wasn't trying to be funny. My God, to be locked up in a mental hospital just because ...' He decided to change the subject. 'Why did you bring me those papers?'

'My brother is a proud man, John. The papers were his way of communicating with you. Since he wasn't able to come to you, I was to try to get you to come to him. That was before it became apparent how dangerous such an act would be.'

'Why? Why did he want me to come here?'

Anna spoke to her brother. This time Petroff set his glass aside and spoke directly to John. There was no change in his expression, unless it was a slight thinning of his smile, a gathering edge to his voice.

John waited until Petroff had finished, then turned to Anna. 'What did he say?'

'Yevgeny says that he was willing to give up the championship for something he felt was more important,' Anna said uneasily. 'But he still wanted to play you because you are such a fine chess player.'

John looked directly at Petroff. 'I don't think that's all he said.'

Anna sighed, then continued evenly. 'He said that he wants to play you because he doesn't like you. He says you are a spoiled child who thinks more of a game than of people. He says that you may be world champion, but you are still second-rate. He says that he is a better chess player.'

John flushed angrily. He stared hard at Petroff who calmly returned his gaze. Then, without knowing why, John found himself laughing. The whole situation had suddenly struck him as outrageously funny. In a few moments Petroff started to laugh. Anna and Yakov exchanged perplexed glances.

John wiped his eyes as Petroff rose and threw a brawny arm around his shoulder.

John said to Anna: 'You tell your brother that I appreciate *his* sense of humour. Tell him that I think he may be in the right place after all. To prove it, I'll play him a full twenty-four-game-match Starting right now.'

Anna translated to Petroff who suddenly grew gravely serious. He shook his head, then turned away.

'Yevgeny says no,' Anna said to John 'As I said, it is too dangerous now. Neither of us had realised the lengths our government would go to trying to keep the title in this country. When I did realise what was happening, I had to try to keep you away. I wasn't successful, but that doesn't change the situation.'

'No, it doesn't. But I am here now.'

'You can't stay. By now they'll know Gligoric is dead. Eventually they'll discover that you're here—if they don't know already. You will be in a great deal of trouble if they find you.'

John gave it some thought, then nodded towards Petroff. 'What about the rumour that he wanted to defect?'

Anna drew herself up. 'If you knew my brother, you would know how absurd that rumour was. It was planted by our diplomats as a means of putting pressure on you.'

Petroff suddenly spoke sharply to his sister. Anna nodded. 'You should go now.'

John shook his head impatiently. 'How would we have played the match here?'

Anna translated the question to Petroff who smiled. He said something to Yakov. Petroff, Anna and the director of the hospital laughed.

'Yevgeny says that all the doctors here are great chess fans,' Anna said. 'They have a true perspective of values as they should be.'

Petroff broke in and spoke for a few moments seriously. Yakov turned away, obviously embarrassed.

'Yevgeny also wants you to know that Dr Yakov is first and foremost a doctor, not a politician. He is a fine doctor, and a fine man. Dr Yakov and Yevgeny are friends, and Dr Yakov considers it his duty to protect Yevgeny's mental health while he is confined here. Dr Yakov felt the match would be good for Yevgeny, and he was willing to arrange it. It was the act of a true friend.'

John looked into the eyes of the girl. 'And you?' he said slowly, 'that night in the apartment; was that the act of a friend?'

Anna blushed, then quickly regained control of herself. 'I'd helped to involve you in this business,' she said, avoiding his gaze. 'I couldn't just leave you there.'

'And that was the only reason?'

Anna's eyes suddenly flashed. 'I won't answer that, John. That's something you'll have to decide for yourself.'

Petroff broke in impatiently. Anna spoke to him and he glanced at John sharply.

John was about to ask Anna what she had told her brother when the sound of angry voices drifted in from outside the door. There were approaching footsteps, and the voices, speaking in Russian, grew louder. John shook his head in disbelief. He recognised one of the voices.

Arnett, dressed in a white doctor's smock and carrying a set of papers similar to the ones he had given John, suddenly appeared in the doorway. The attendant was still remonstrating with him. Arnett suddenly drew an ugly, snub-nosed revolver and pushed the attendant into the room, slamming him up against the wall. A second later he was standing next to the director, the revolver tight against Yakov's stomach. Yakov paled and closed his eyes.

It had all happened in the space of a few moments. Finally John found his voice.

‘Arnett! What the hell—?’

‘You just sit tight, Butler,’ Arnett growled. His face was flushed from his exertion, but his eyes were cold, taking in everything and everyone in the room, calculating their reactions.

Anna, her eyes wide with shock, backed into a corner of the room. Petroff cursed and rose up out of his chair. Arnett quickly swung the gun in his direction, pointing it directly between Petroff’s eyes. Petroff, his eyes ablaze with rage and hatred, pale with the effort to control himself, slowly sank back into his chair. But he remained tense, his muscles knotted, as though an electric current was passing through his body.

Arnett began to speak rapidly to Petroff. John listened, unable to understand anything, but amazed at Arnett’s fluency in Russian.

He had no trouble interpreting Petroff’s reply. When Arnett had finished Petroff spat on the floor. The gob of spittle sailed through the air and landed at Arnett’s feet. The blood drained from Arnett’s face. The air in the room suddenly smelled of hate and impending violence.

John quickly took a step forward. ‘What the hell’s going on, Arnett?’

The muscles in Arnett’s jaw knotted like worms. But the colour slowly came back to his face.

‘We have a problem here,’ Arnett said after a long pause. ‘Your friend doesn’t want to be rescued. I’m offering him a way out of this nut house and he doesn’t want to take it.’

‘But the report was a phony!’

‘Sure it was a phony. But the more we thought about the idea, the better it seemed. If Petroff didn’t think of it, he should have. We decided to stoke up his imagination.’

‘His defection would be a big feather in your cap,’ John said quietly. ‘Especially if you brought him out yourself. That’s it, isn’t it?’

Arnett grunted. The violence was still in the air, foul-smelling and electric. John had just begun to realise the enormity of the risk Arnett was taking, and the knowledge made John’s stomach churn. High risk for high stakes, a combination that made Arnett a very dangerous man.

‘My brother’s no traitor,’ Anna said coldly.

John spoke quickly, as though his words could somehow ease the pressure of Arnett’s finger on the gun’s trigger. ‘You knew where he was all the time, didn’t you?’

‘Not in the beginning. But it wasn’t hard to find out.’

‘He doesn’t want to go. You can see that.’

‘Well, I think he should give it some more thought’ Arnett’s tone had taken on the texture of silk, but the threat was still unmistakable. ‘Now that you’re champion, I’d say his goose was just about cooked.’

Anna stepped forward, placing herself between Arnett and her brother. Arnett had removed the gun from Yakov’s stomach and Yakov had opened his eyes. But he remained rigid against the wall, intelligent enough to know that there was no way he could successfully attack the man who was only a few inches away from him. The attendant had sat down on the floor and drawn his knees up to his chest.

‘My brother’s done what he has because he *loves* his country,’ Anna said evenly to Arnett. ‘Is that so difficult for you to understand? One day all this will change, and that change will come about because of the courage of men like my brother. Yevgeny fights *for* our country, and he would never do anything to embarrass Russia or bring her shame. You must understand that! Killing him will do no one any good, and that is what you would have to do if you tried to take him with you.’

Arnett said nothing His eyes were like two opaque marbles. John thought of what might be going on in the brain behind those eyes and it frightened him.

‘You sent me here as bait,’ John said quietly.

‘If you like,’ Arnett said without looking at him He was still thinking of his next move, and he spoke absently. ‘But I didn’t send you; coming here was your idea, remember?’

‘Why?’

‘I wanted Petroff to get a good look at the competition. I wanted him to think about chess, to give some thought to the things he’s going to be throwing away if he tries to keep up his role as martyr. I think he’s lost his audience.’

John glanced at Petroff. Anna was standing next to him, quietly translating the exchange between John and Arnett. Petroff’s face revealed nothing but scorn and anger. There was no fear.

John turned back to Arnett. ‘And I think you struck out.’

Once again the muscles in Arnett’s jaw had begun to knot ‘Well, we don’t have a lot of time to argue. It’s only a matter of time before the Russians find out that one or both of us is here. When that happens, they’re going to

be swarming all over this place.' He nodded in Petroff's direction. 'You talk to him.'

'Me? Why should I do anything for you?'

'Don't do it for me; do it for Petroff. He's obviously a fanatic and an egomaniac. That gives the two of you something in common. What he doesn't seem to realise is that he's shot his wad over here. Now it's all over. He was world champion; now he's nothing. They'll summarily ship him off to Siberia if he tries to stay here. If he wants to keep fighting, his only chance is to let me take him to the United States.'

'Where they'll use him for propaganda.'

'Sure. And he'll use us as a base of operations for his own activities. That seems like a fair bargain to me.'

John hesitated. What Arnett had said seemed to make sense. He turned to Petroff who looked at him coldly.

'Look,' John began, 'I know you don't understand—'

'He already knows what you've said so far,' Anna broke in. 'Say what you have to say and I'll translate. Just remember that this man is right about your not having much time.'

'Look, Petroff,' John said tightly, glancing back and forth between the man and his sister. 'It seems to me that Arnett makes sense—'

Petroff cut him off with a scornful wave of his hand. Then he turned and spoke to his sister.

'Yevgeny feels it is better to be imprisoned in Russia than free in your country.'

John flushed angrily. 'That's nonsense! It's *stupid*! Look what they've done to him! And Arnett's right; they'll probably never let him play chess again.'

Anna whispered in her brother's ear, then translated his reply 'Yevgeny says that if all he wanted was to stay out of prison, he would not have taken the course of action he has. He would have kept his mouth shut. He says that chess is not the most important thing in the world to him.'

'In America you'd be free to speak out, to continue—!'

Anna suddenly cut in, and it took John a moment to realise that she was simultaneously translating Petroff's words as he spoke.

'Your country is dying; you have no soul. America is falling apart. You offer me freedom, and I laugh at you. Freedom is what I am fighting for *here*, in my own country. My leaders are midgets, your leaders are midgets;

what is the difference? The difference is that yours are murderous midgets, and what good is freedom in a land of murderous midgets? One day our people will have the same political freedom that you have had—and squandered. We will know what to do with our freedom. We will not become a nation of butchers!’

‘*Jesus!*’ Arnett said softly. ‘Talk about a dyed-in-the-wool communist!’

John made no effort to hide his anger. ‘Who the hell is a Russian to talk about butchers?’

Again, Anna translated back and forth.

‘Yes, the Russians are murderers, too. That is why I fight. But there is one big difference between the Russians and the Americans—’

Anna stopped and looked at her brother who had suddenly stopped speaking. He gestured for her to come closer, then whispered something in her ear. Anna nodded, then whispered back. She repeated her words twice, then Petroff nodded and looked directly at John.

‘We,’ Petroff said, struggling with the strange words, ‘do not bomb mothers and their babies.’

John shook his head, then turned to Arnett. ‘He’s not going to go. You can see that.’

Something cold, dark and dangerous moved behind Arnett’s eyes. John involuntarily found himself taking a step backwards.

‘You’re wrong,’ Arnett said in clipped tones. ‘A number of people have gone to a lot of trouble to save this stupid bastard’s skin. I’m not leaving without him.’

Arnett suddenly crossed the room in three quick strides and grabbed Anna. He pressed the barrel of the revolver to her temple. Anna stiffened, fully expecting at any moment to feel a steel-jacketed bullet tearing through her brain. Petroff leaped out of his chair with a bellow, then froze when Arnett seemed ready to pull the trigger.

‘Arnett!’ John screamed.

‘He’ll come with me,’ Arnett said easily, ‘or I’ll spatter his sister’s brains all over the rug.’

Both Yakov and the attendant were ashen-faced, hardly breathing as Arnett repeated the threat in Russian.

‘Please,’ Petroff said, slowly raising his hand ‘Please no.’

Anna spoke to her brother. Petroff stiffened.

‘It won’t work,’ Anna said tightly to John. ‘He’ll have to kill me, because otherwise I’ll start screaming the minute I can. He’ll have to kill everybody in this room, except for you, John, and my brother. It’s the only way he can make it work. Because I won’t let him take my brother.’

Beads of sweat broke on Arnett’s forehead. He cursed softly, and the tendons in the hand holding the gun suddenly stood out like steel cords.

He was going to shoot, John thought. Arnett had gone out of his head and was going to shoot.

‘Arnett!’ John yelled. ‘It’s a game! Remember that it’s all just a game!’

John sucked in his breath and imagined that he could hear the echo of his words in the closed space. A nerve twitched in Arnett’s cheek. He looked at Petroff and Anna, then turned his gaze on John. Shadows moved rapidly in the depths of his eyes, whirling like colours in a child’s kaleidoscope.

Suddenly Arnett laughed. It was a harsh, dry sound. Then abruptly he put the gun away. The attendant began to weep with hysteria. Yakov was talking to himself. John could taste vomit in his mouth.

‘Butler, you son-of-a-bitch,’ Arnett said after a long pause, ‘you’re absolutely right.’ He nodded towards the door. ‘Let’s you and I check out of here.’

‘I’m not going,’ John heard himself saying.

‘John, don’t talk like a fool.’ He paused. ‘You want to go over?’

‘I want to play chess.’

Anna let out a cry. ‘John, you can’t—’

‘Don’t say anything,’ John said sharply to Anna. ‘I happen to agree with Arnett that your brother’s a fool. They’re just going to send him away.’

Anna stiffened. ‘Perhaps,’ she said proudly. ‘But he will have set an example for others to follow. Others will step forward to take his place.’

‘That’s fairy-tale talk,’ John said. ‘Don’t count on it.’

Anna’s eyes were suddenly very moist. ‘Then why do you want to stay?’

There was no answer, John thought, none that made any sense. He picked the best substitute he could find.

‘I told you: I want to play chess. To tell you the truth, I don’t understand, or really care about, any of the things we’ve been talking about. I only know about myself; I play chess. I believe I’m the greatest player who’s ever lived. The most I can do here is to prove that I’m the greatest living player. I’ll settle for that.’

‘No, John. That’s not all. Not anymore.’

‘All right. There are other reasons why I want to stay. Anna, I love you.’

Anna did not answer, but she did not look away.

Arnett grunted contemptuously. ‘Butler, that’s the craziest statement I’ve ever heard.’

‘Shut up,’ John said evenly, without looking in Arnett’s direction ‘This has nothing to do with you. Not now.’ He turned towards Petroff and spoke slowly. ‘I want to play you.’

Arnett grabbed John’s arm John pulled away.

‘Butler, you’re talking like a madman! You stay here and you’re on your own!’

John slowly smiled. ‘Oh, I don’t know. Look what good care you’ve taken of me up to this point. Except for a slight lapse in Venice, there’s not a scratch on me. Of course, there was Gligoric, but I can’t really blame that on you.’

Arnett shook his head His voice was serious. ‘This isn’t a game, John. I can’t protect you.’

‘Yes it is, and you can, and you know it. This is *your* game. You’ll find some way of using me even here. Now *I’m* world champion, you’ll have a propaganda field day if the Russians lay a finger on me. The Russians know that too, so they’ll make a lot of noise, but they won’t do anything Also, since I know the truth about Petroff, I suspect they won’t do much to him either That is, assuming you can manage to play your game as well as I play mine.’

Arnett shook his head again, but this time there was the trace of a smile on his face. ‘All right, Butler. I hope you beat the bastard’s ass.’

Arnett abruptly turned and walked quickly out of the room. The tension went with him, leaving John weak-kneed and breathing hard Petroff let out a deep sigh, cursed, and sank back into his chair. Anna covered her face with her hands.

The attendant rose to his feet and said something to Dr Yakov. Yakov shook his head.

John turned to Petroff and grinned. ‘So?’ he said, holding his palms open in front of him. ‘Let’s play.’

Anna translated. Petroff smiled and gave a quick nod of his head.

‘There may not be time to—’

John took Anna’s hand. ‘We’ll play as much as we can. Then we’ll simply adjourn and wait for more suitable playing conditions.’

Anna giggled and translated to Petroff. Once again Petroff's booming laugh filled the room.

Yakov spoke to the attendant who hurried out of the room. Then Yakov took John's arm. 'Shall we go to the playing room?'

The four of them went out of the room, down the corridor a few steps and into a large day room where a number of patients were eagerly setting up folding chairs around a card table that had been set up in the middle of the room. On the table was a chess set with small, plastic pieces and a battered chess clock. The patients stopped what they were doing when the four people entered the room and applauded. The attendant beamed.

'Do you mind an audience?' Yakov asked.

'The more the merrier,' John said evenly.

Petroff motioned for John to sit on the right hand side of the table where the white pieces had been set up. John nodded and sat down. The room immediately fell silent. Anna sat down next to John. He did not look at her, but John could feel her eyes on his face.

He was happy, John thought. For the first time in his life he was truly happy.

Petroff sat down. Already his face was immobile as he stared at the board, concentrating on his opening moves.

Yakov cleared his throat. 'If there is no objection, Mr Butler, I will act as referee.'

'I have no objection.'

'Very well.' Yakov reached forward and started John's clock. 'Mr Butler, you will move first.'

John made his opening move, noted it on the pad beside him. Petroff grunted and leaned forward, cupping his chin on his hands.

John punched the clock, sat back and waited.



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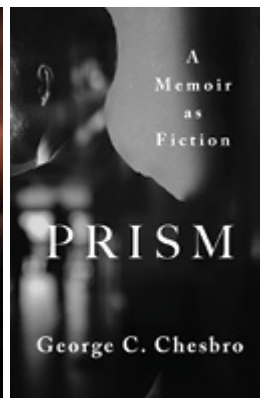
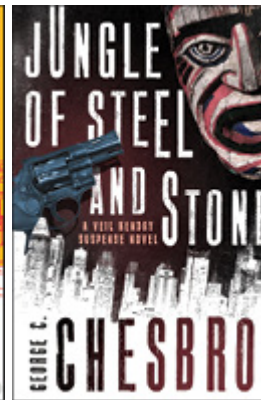
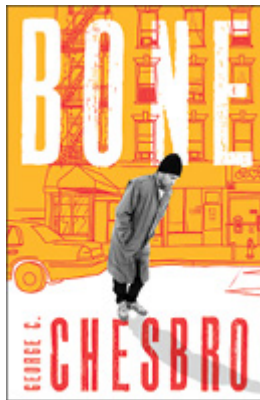
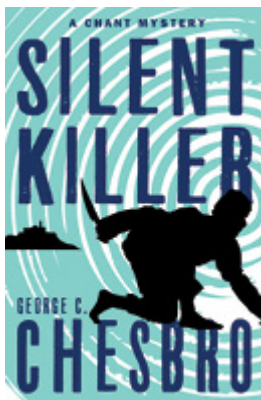
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