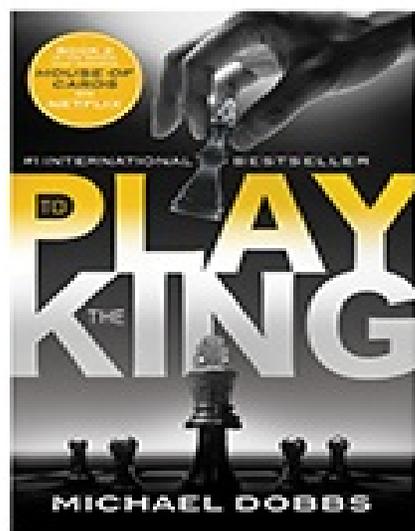
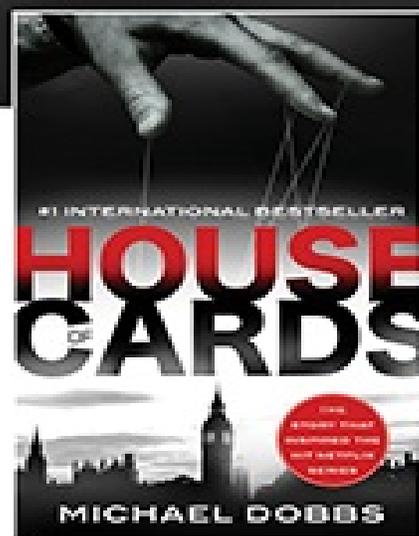


THE HOUSE OF CARDS COMPLETE TRILOGY

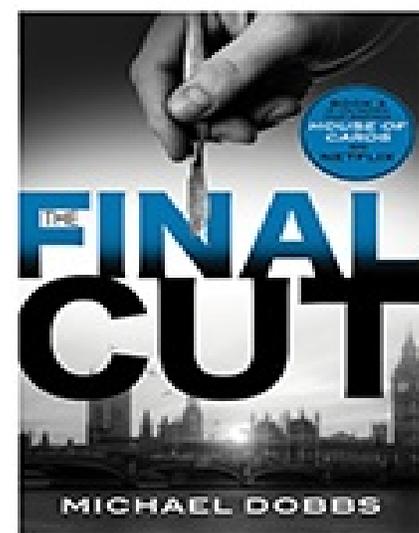
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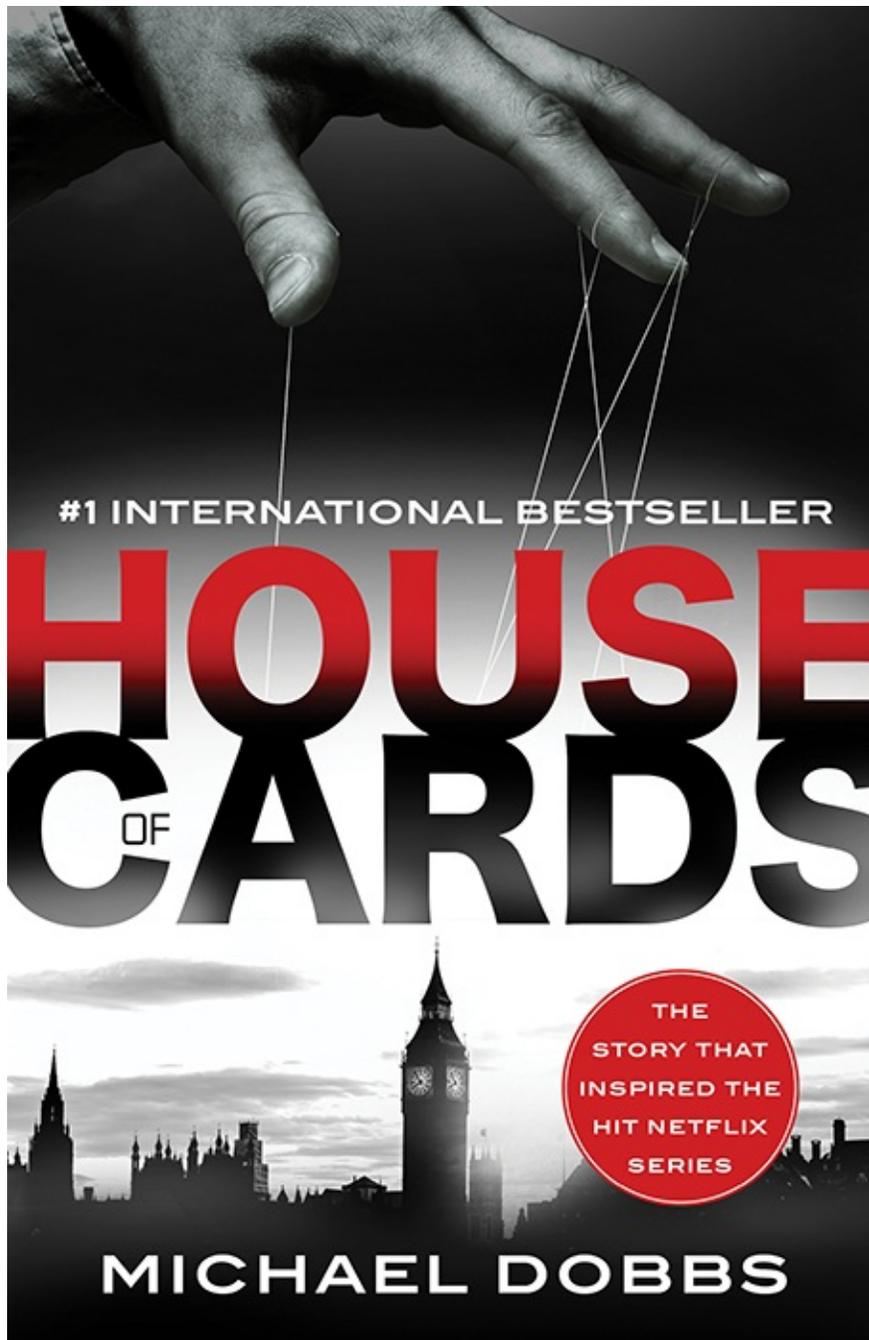
HOUSE OF CARDS



TO PLAY THE KING

THE FINAL CUT





#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

HOUSE OF CARDS

THE
STORY THAT
INSPIRED THE
HIT NETFLIX
SERIES

MICHAEL DOBBS

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House of Cards

[Front Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[PART ONE: THE SHUFFLE](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[PART TWO: THE CUT](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[PART THREE: THE DEAL](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-One](#)

[Forty-Two](#)

[Forty-Three](#)

[Forty-Four](#)

[Forty-Five](#)

[Forty-Six](#)

[Forty-Seven](#)

[Forty-Eight](#)

[Afterword](#)

PART ONE

THE SHUFFLE

Nothing lasts, not forever. Not laughter, not lust, not even life itself. Not forever. Which is why we make the most of what we have.

Why waste a life in search of an epitaph? "Fondly Remembered." Who other than a half-wit has that chiseled above his head? It is nothing but sentimental incontinence. Let's face facts, life is a zero-sum game and politics is how we decide who wins, who loses. And whether we like it or not, we are all players.

"Respected By All Who Knew Him." Another monumental whimper. Not for my gravestone. It's not respect but fear that motivates a man; that's how empires are built and revolutions begin. It is the secret of great men. When a man is afraid you will crush him, utterly destroy him, his respect will always follow. Base fear is intoxicating, overwhelming, liberating. Always stronger than respect.

Always.

One

Thursday, June 10

It seemed scarcely a moment since she had made it back home, stumbling up the last step in exhaustion, yet already the morning sun was sticking thumbs in her eyes as it crept around the curtain and began to nestle on her pillow. She turned over irritably. Her head was thick, her feet sore, and the bed beside her empty. Helping finish off that second bottle of Liebfraumilch had been a lousy idea. She'd let down her defenses, got herself stuck in a corner with some creep from the *Sun* who was all acne and innuendo. She'd had to spill the last of the wine down his shirt before he'd backed off. She took a quick peek under the duvet, just to make sure she hadn't screwed up completely and he wasn't lurking there. She sighed; she hadn't even got round to taking off her socks.e

Mattie Storin beat her pillow into submission and lay back once again. She deserved a few extra moments in bed; she knew she wouldn't get any sleep tonight. Election night. Day of Damnation. Voters' Vengeance. The past few weeks had been ferocious for Mattie, under siege from her editor, stretched too tightly between deadlines, tossed between excitement and exhaustion. Maybe after this evening she could take a few days off, sort her life out, find a better quality of both wine and man to spend her evening with. She pulled the duvet more closely around her. Even in the glare of the early summer sun she felt a chill.

It had been like that ever since she had left Yorkshire almost a year before. She'd hoped she could leave all the accusations and the anger behind her, but they still cast a cold shadow that followed her everywhere, particularly into her

bed. She shivered, buried her face in the lumpy pillow.

She tried to be philosophical. After all, she no longer had any emotional distractions, nothing to get in the way of discovering whether she really had what it took to become the best political correspondent in a fiercely masculine world. Only herself to bother about, not even a cat. But it was difficult to be philosophical when your feet were freezing. And when you didn't have any clean laundry. She threw back the duvet and clambered out of bed, only to discover that her underwear drawer was bare. She'd miscalculated, forgotten, too much to do and so little time to do any of it, least of all the bloody washing. She searched other drawers, every corner, made a mess but found nothing. Damn, she was glad no man had to watch her do this. She dived into her laundry basket, ferreted around and came up with a pair of knickers a week old but only a day worn. She turned them inside out, stepped into them. Ready for battle. With a sigh Mattie Storin threw open the bathroom door and got on with her day.

* * *

As dusk began to settle across the June skies, four sets of HMI mercury oxide television lamps clicked on with a dull thud, painting the front of the building with high intensity power. The brilliant light pierced deep behind the mock Georgian façade of the Party's headquarters. A curtain fluttered at a third floor window as someone took a quick glance at the scene outside.

The moth also saw the lamps. It was waiting for the approaching night, resting in a crevice of one of the nearby towers of St. John, the graceful church built by Wren in the middle of Smith Square. The church had long been deconsecrated, St. John dismissed, but its four limestone towers still dominated this now godless square in the heart of Westminster. They stared down, frowning in disapproval. But not the moth. It began to tingle with excitement. It stretched its wings, drawn by ten thousand watts and a million years of instinct.

The moth strained in the early evening air, forcing its body along the river of light. It flew above the heads of the growing crowd, beyond the bustle and gathering pace of preparations. Nearer and nearer it flew, eager, passionate, erratic, ambitious, heedless of everything other than the power it was being drawn to, power beyond dreams, beyond resistance. It had no choice.

There was a bright flash as the moth's body hit the lens a millisecond before its wings wrapped around the searing glass and vaporized. Its charred and blackened carcass gave off little vapors of despair as it tumbled toward the ground. The night had gained its first victim.

* * *

Another of the night's early victims was propping up the varnished bar at the Marquis of Granby, just around the corner from the growing commotion. The original Marquis of Granby had been a popular military figure more than two hundred years earlier and had more pubs named after him than any other figure in the land, but the marquis had succumbed to politics, lost his way, and died in debt and distress. Much the same fate lay in store for Charles Collingridge, according to his many tolerant friends. Not that Charlie Collingridge had ever been elected, but neither had the marquis, it wasn't the done thing in those early days. Collingridge was in his midfifties, looked older, worn, and hadn't had a particularly glorious military career, two years of national service that had left him with little more than a sense of his own inadequacy in the order of life. Charlie had always tried to do the decent thing but he was accident prone. It happens when you have a drinking habit.

His day had started early with a shave and a tie, but now the stubble was beginning to show and the tie was hanging at half-mast. The eyes told the barman that the large vodka he had served two glasses ago hadn't been the first of the day. But Charlie was a genial drunk, always ready with a smile and a generous word. He pushed his empty glass back across the counter.

"Another?" The barman asked, dubious.

"And one for yourself, my good man," Charlie replied, reaching for his wallet. "Ah, but it seems I'm a little short," he muttered, staring at a solitary note in disbelief. He searched through his pocket and pulled out keys, a gray handkerchief, and a few coins. "I'm sure, somewhere..."

"The note will do," the barman replied. "Nothing for me, thanks. It's going to be a long night."

"Yes. It will. My younger brother, Hal, you know him?"

The barman shook his head, pushed the drink across the varnish, glad the old

drunk was out of money and soon out of his bar.

“You don’t know Hal?” Charlie asked in surprise. “You must.” He sipped. “Everyone knows Hal.” Another sip. “He’s the Prime Minister.”

Two

It's a very good idea for a politician to have vision. Yes, the Vision Thing, just the ticket. Really useful, don't you think? Why, on a clear day most politicians can see as far as—well, I know some who can see almost as far as Battersea.

Francis Ewan Urquhart was a man of many parts, a Member of Parliament, a Privy Councilor that gave him the prefix of Right Honorable, a Minister of the Crown, and a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. He was all these things and this was his night, yet still he wasn't enjoying himself. He was squashed into the corner of a small and stuffy living room, pressed hard up against a hideous 1960s standard lamp that showed every sign of toppling over. He was hemmed in by a posse of matrons who doubled as his constituency workers and who had cut off his means of escape as they chattered proudly about their last-minute mail drops and pinched shoes. He wondered why they bothered. This was suburban Surrey, the land of the A and B social classes in the terminology of pollsters, where passports lay at the ready and Range Rovers stood in the driveway. Range Rovers? The only time they ever encountered mud was when being driven carelessly over front lawns late on a Friday night or when dropping off their little Johnnies and Emmas at their private schools. Canvassing in these parts was held to be almost vulgar. They didn't count votes here, they weighed them.

“Another vol-au-vent, Mr. Urquhart?” A plate of sagging pastry was thrust in front of him by an overweight woman whose bosom was clad in large floral print and seemed to be hiding two fractious cats.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Morecombe. I fear I shall explode!”

With impatience. It was a fault, one that stretched back many generations. The Urquharts were a proud warrior family from the Highlands of Scotland, their castle on the banks of Loch Ness, but the MacDonalds had arrived and the castle now lay in ruins. Urquhart’s childhood memories were of the bracing, crystal air of the moors, in the company of an old gillie, lying for hours in the damp peat and sweetly scented bracken waiting for the right buck to appear, just as he had imagined his older brother Alastair was doing, waiting for the Germans in the hedgerows outside Dunkirk. His brother had called him FU, a nickname that had often got them both a clout from their father, even though it was years before Francis understood why. He didn’t mind, happy to tag along behind his big brother. But Alastair hadn’t come home. His mother had crumbled, never recovered, lived in memory of her lost son and neglect of Francis, so FU had eventually come south, to London. To Westminster. To Surrey. Abandoned his duties. His mother had never spoken to him again. To have sold his heritage for the whole of Scotland would have been unforgivable, but for Surrey?

He sighed, even as he smiled. This was the eighteenth committee room of the day, and the enthusiasm that had knitted together the early morning humor had long since unraveled and turned to thread. It was still forty minutes before the polling booths closed and the last vote was cast. Urquhart’s shirt was wringing wet. He was tired, uncomfortable, penned in by the posse of women who pursued him with spaniel-like persistence.

Yet still he kept his smile afloat, because his life was about to change, whatever the result. Urquhart had spent years climbing the political ladder, from backbencher through Junior Ministerial jobs and now attending Cabinet as Chief Whip, one of the two dozen most powerful posts in the Government. It provided him with splendid offices at 12 Downing Street, just yards from the Prime Minister’s own. It was behind the door of Number 12 that two of the most celebrated Britons of all time, Wellington and Nelson, had met for the first and only time. The walls echoed with history and with an authority that was now his.

Yet Urquhart’s power didn’t stem directly from his public office. The role of Chief Whip didn’t carry full Cabinet rank. Urquhart had no great Department of

State or massive civil service machine to command; his was a faceless task, toiling ceaselessly behind the scenes, making no public speeches and giving no television interviews. A man of the shadows.

And also a man of discipline. He was the Enforcer, the one whose job it was to put a bit of stick about. That meant he was not simply respected but also a little feared. He was the minister with the most acute political antennae in government. In order to deliver the vote, day after day, night after night, he needed to know where his Members of Parliament were likely to be found, which meant he needed to know their secrets—with whom they were conspiring, with whom they might be sleeping, whether they would be sober enough to vote, whether they had their hands in someone else's pocket or on someone else's wife. All these secrets with their sharp little edges were gathered together and kept in a black book, locked inside a safe, and not even the Prime Minister had access to the keys.

In Westminster, such information is power. Many in Urquhart's Parliamentary Party owed their continuing position to the ability of the Whips' Office to sort out and occasionally cover up their personal problems. Backbenchers intent on rebellion or frontbenchers distracted by ambition found themselves changing their minds when reminded of some earlier indiscretion that had been forgiven by the Party, but never forgotten. It was astonishing how pliable politicians became when confronted by the possibility of a collision between their public and private lives. Why, even that dyspeptic Staffordshire soul, the Transport Secretary, a man who had planned to make a conference speech way outside his remit and far too close to the Prime Minister's home turf, had come to his senses. All it had taken was a phone call to his mistress's mews house rather than the marital home.

“Francis, how the fuck did you find me here?”

“Oh, Keith, have I made some terrible mistake? I'm so sorry, I wanted to have a quick chat with you about your little speech, but it seems I looked for your number in the wrong set of accounts.”

“What the bloody hell do you mean?”

“Oh, don't you know? We keep two sets of books. One is the official tally, the other...Well, don't worry, we keep our little black book under very careful

control. It won't happen again." A pause before: "Will it?"

The Transport Secretary had sighed, a sound full of melancholy and guilt. "No, Francis, it bloody well won't." Another sinner came to rapid repentance.

The Party owed Francis Urquhart, everyone knew that. And, after this election, it would be time for the debt to be called in.

Suddenly Urquhart was brought back to the moment by one of his devoted ladies. Her eyes were excited, her cheeks flushed, her breath heavy with the sour afterlife of egg and watercress sandwiches, her sense of coyness and discretion overcome by the heat and excitement of the day.

"Tell us, Mr. Urquhart, what are your plans? Will you still stand at the next election?" she inquired brashly.

"What do you mean?" he replied, taken aback, his eyes flaring in affront.

"Are you thinking of retiring? You're sixty-one, aren't you? Sixty-five or more at the next election," she persisted.

He bent his tall and angular figure low in order to look her directly in the face. "Mrs. Bailey, I still have my wits about me and in many societies I would just be entering my political prime," he responded through lips that no longer carried any trace of good nature. "I still have a lot of work to do. Things I want to achieve."

He turned away from her, not bothering to hide his impatience, even while deep down he knew she was right. The strong red hues of his youth had long since vanished, gold turned to silver, as he liked to joke. He wore his hair over-long, as if to compensate. His spare frame no longer filled the traditionally cut suits as amply as in earlier years, and his blue eyes had grown colder with the passing of so many winters. His height and upright bearing presented a distinguished image in the crowded room, but one minister, a man he had crossed, had once told him he had a smile like the handle on an urn of cold ashes. "And may those ashes soon be yours, you old bastard," the man had snapped. Urquhart was no longer in the first flush of middle age and he couldn't hide it, even from himself. Experience was no longer an ally.

How many years had he watched younger and less gifted men finding more rapid advancement? How many times had he dried their eyes, wiped their arses, buried their secrets deep from view in order to clear their way? Yes, they owed

him! He still had time to make his mark, but both he and Mrs. Bailey knew he hadn't so much of it.

Yet even as he turned from her she pursued him, haranguing him about the proposed one-way system for the High Street shopping center. He raised his eyes in supplication and managed to catch the attention of his wife, Mortima, busily engaged in platitudes on the far side of the room. One glance told her that his rescue was long overdue and she hurried to his side.

"Ladies, you will have to excuse us, we have to go back to the hotel and change before the count. I can't thank you enough for all your help. You know how indispensable you are to Francis."

Urquhart even managed a smile for Mrs. Bailey; it was like a mayfly, so brief it almost died before it could be seen but enough to repair relations. He made quickly for the door. He was saying good-bye to the hostess when he was waved to a halt by his election agent who was busily scribbling down notes while talking into the telephone.

"Just getting the final canvass returns together, Francis," she explained.

"And there was me wondering why that hadn't been done an hour ago." Again the faintest of amused expressions that died long before it reached the eyes.

"It doesn't look quite as cheerful as last time," she said, blushing from the rebuke. "A lot of our supporters seem to be staying at home. It's difficult to read but I suspect the majority will be down. I can't tell how much."

"Damn them. They deserve a dose of the Opposition for a few years. Maybe that would get them off their rumps."

"Darling," his wife soothed as she had done on countless previous occasions, "that's scarcely generous. With a majority of nearly twenty-two thousand we could allow for just the tiniest of little dips, couldn't we?"

"Mortima, I'm not feeling generous. I'm feeling hot, I am tired, and I've had about as much chatter about doorstep opinion as I can take. For God's sake get me out of here."

He strode on as she turned round to wave thanks and farewell to the packed room. She was just in time to see the standard lamp go crashing to the floor.

* * *

The air of controlled menace that usually filled the editor's office had vanished, replaced by a brooding sense of panic that was threatening to get out of hand. The first edition had long since gone to press, complete with a bold front page headline proclaiming: "Home and dry!" But that had been at 6:00 p.m., four hours before the polls closed. The editor of the *Daily Chronicle* had taken his chance on the election result in order to make his first edition of even marginal interest by the time it hit the streets. If he was right, he would be first with the news. If he got it wrong, he'd be up to his neck in it with the alligators circling.

This was Greville Preston's first election as an editor and he wasn't feeling comfortable. His nervousness showed in his constant change of headlines, his insatiable demand for updates from his political staff, and his increasingly lurid language. He'd been brought in just a few months earlier by the new owner of Chronicle Newspapers with one simple and irreducible instruction: "Succeed." Failure wasn't an option in his contract, and he knew he wouldn't be given a second chance—any more than he showed any hint of remorse for the others who worked at the *Chronicle*. The demands of the accountants for instant financial gratification had required ruthless pruning, and a large number of senior personnel had found themselves being "rationalized" and replaced by less experienced and considerably less expensive substitutes. It was great for the bottom line but had kicked the crap out of morale. The purge left the remaining staff insecure, the loyal readers confused and Preston with a perpetual sense of impending doom, a condition that his proprietor was determined to do nothing to dispel.

Preston's strategy for increasing the circulation had taken the paper down-market, but it had yet to reap the promised harvest. He was a small man who had arrived at the paper with the air of a new Napoleon but who had lost weight until he required braces to haul up his trousers and a tide of coffee to keep open his eyes. The once smooth and dapper appearance had begun to be washed away by countless beads of perspiration that collected on his brow and made his heavy rimmed glasses slip down his nose. Fingers that had once drummed in thought now snapped in impatience. The carefully manufactured attempt at outward

authority had been eaten away by the insecurity within, and he was no longer certain he could rise to the occasion, any occasion. He'd even stopped screwing his secretary.

Now he turned away from the bank of flickering television monitors piled against one wall of his office to face the member of staff who had been giving him such a hard time. "How the hell do you know it's going wrong?" he shouted.

Mattie Storin refused to flinch. At twenty-eight she was the youngest recruit to the paper's political staff, replacing one of the senior correspondents who had fallen foul of the accountants for his habit of conducting interviews over extended lunches at the Savoy. Yet despite her relative youth and recent arrival, Mattie had a confidence about her judgment that inadequate men mistook for stubbornness. She was used to being shouted at and no stranger at yelling back. Anyway, she was as tall as Preston, "and almost as beautiful" as she often quipped at his expense. What did it matter if he spent most of his time staring at her breasts? It had gotten her the job and occasionally won her a few of their arguments. She didn't find him a sexual threat. She knew his secretary too well for that, and being harassed by short men in lurid red braces was the price she had chosen to pay by coming south. Survive here and she could make her career anywhere.

She turned to face him with her hands thrust defensively into the pockets of her fashionably baggy trousers. She spoke slowly, hoping her voice wouldn't betray her nervousness. "Grev, every single Government MP I've been able to talk to in the past two hours is downgrading their forecast. I've telephoned the returning officer in the Prime Minister's constituency who says the poll looks like it's down by five percent. That's scarcely an overwhelming vote of confidence. Something is going on out there, you can feel it. The Government aren't home and certainly not bloody dry."

"So?"

"So our story's too strong."

"Crap. Every poll during the election has talked of the Government getting home by a sodding mile, yet you want me to change the front page on the basis of—what? Feminine instinct?"

Mattie knew his hostility was built on nerves. All editors live on the edge; the secret is not to show it. Preston showed it.

“OK,” he demanded, “they had a majority of over a hundred at the last election. So you tell me what your feminine instinct suggests it’s going to be tomorrow. The opinion polls are predicting around seventy seats. What does little Mattie Storin think?”

She went up on tiptoes, just so she could look down on him. “You trust the polls if you want, Grev, but it’s not what’s going on in the streets. There’s no enthusiasm among Government supporters. They won’t turn out. It’ll drag the majority down.”

“Come on,” he bullied. “How much?”

She couldn’t stand on tiptoe forever. She shook her head slowly to emphasize her caution, her blond hair brushing around her shoulders. “A week ago I’d have said about fifty. Now—I reckon less,” she responded. “Perhaps much less.”

“Jesus, it can’t be less. We’ve backed those bastards all the way. They’ve got to deliver.”

And you’ve got to deliver, too, she mused. They all knew where their editor stood, in the middle of one of the largest swamps in Fleet Street. Preston’s only firm political view was that his newspaper couldn’t afford to be on the losing side, and that wasn’t even his own view but one thrust on him by the paper’s new cockney proprietor, Benjamin Landless. It was one of his few attractive aspects that he didn’t bother being coy and trying to hide his true opinions, he wore them in full public view. As he constantly reminded his already insecure staff, thanks to the Government’s competition policy it was easier to buy ten new editors than one new newspaper, “so we don’t piss off the Government by supporting the other fucking side.”

Landless had been as good as his word. He had delivered his growing army of newspapers into the Government camp, and all he expected in return was for the Government to deliver the proper election result. It wasn’t reasonable, of course, but Landless had never found being reasonable helped get the best out of his employees.

Preston had gone over to stare at the bank of television screens, hoping for better news. Mattie tried again. She sat herself on the corner of the editor’s vast

desk, obliterating the pile of opinion polls on which he so blindly relied, and marshaled her case. “Look, Grev, put it in perspective. When Margaret Thatcher at last ran out of handbag time and was forced to retire, they were desperate for a change of style. They wanted a new fashion. Something less abrasive, less domineering; they’d had enough of trial by ordeal and being shown up by a bloody woman.” You of all people should understand that, she thought. “So in their wisdom they chose Collingridge, for no better reason than he was confident on TV, smooth with little old ladies, and likely to be uncontroversial.” She shrugged her shoulders dismissively. “But they’ve lost their cutting edge. It’s rice pudding politics and there’s no energy or enthusiasm left. He’s campaigned with as much vigor as a Sunday school teacher. Another seven days of listening to him mouthing platitudes and I think even his wife would have voted for the other lot. Anything for a change.”

Preston had turned from the television screens and was stroking his chin. At last he seemed to be paying attention. For the tenth time that evening Mattie wondered if he used lacquer to keep his carefully coiffured hair so immaculate. She suspected a bald patch was developing. She was certain he used eyebrow tweezers.

He returned to the charge. “OK, let’s dispense with the mysticism and stick to hard numbers, shall we? What’s the majority going to be? Are they going to get back in, or not?”

“It would be a rash man who said they wouldn’t,” she replied.

“And I have no goddamned intention of being rash, Mattie. Any sort of majority will be good enough for me. Hell, in the circumstances it would be quite an achievement. Historic, in fact. Four straight wins, never been done before. So the front page stays.”

Preston quickly brought his instructions to an end by pouring out a glass of champagne from a bottle that was standing on his bookcase. He didn’t offer her any. He started scrabbling through papers in dismissal but Mattie was not to be so easily put off. Her grandfather had been a modern Viking who in the stormy early months of 1941 had sailed across the North Sea in a waterlogged fishing boat to escape from Nazi-occupied Norway and join the RAF. Mattie had inherited from him not only her natural Scandinavian looks but also a

stubbornness of spirit that didn't always commend itself to inadequate men, but what the hell.

"Just stop for a moment and ask yourself what we could expect from another four years of Collingridge," Maddie challenged. "Maybe he's too nice to be Prime Minister. His manifesto was so lightweight it got blown away in the first week of the campaign. He's developed no new ideas. His only plan is to cross his fingers and hope that neither the Russians nor the trade unions break wind too loudly. Is that what you think the country really wants?"

"Daintily put, as always, Mattie," he taunted, patronizing once more. "But you're wrong. The punters want consolidation, not upheaval. They don't want the toys being thrown out of the pram every time the baby's taken for a walk." He wagged his finger in the air like a conductor bringing an errant player back to the score. "So a couple of years of warm beer and cricket will be no bad thing. And our chum Collingridge back in Downing Street will be a marvelous thing!"

"It'll be bloody murder," she muttered, turning to leave.

Three

Jesus told us to forgive our enemies, and who am I to second-guess the Almighty? But in his infinite wisdom he didn't mention a damned thing about forgiving our friends, and least of all our families. I'm happy to take his advice on the matter. In any case, when it comes to it, I find it much easier to forgive myself.

It was the Number 88 bus thundering past and rattling the apartment windows that eventually caused Charles Collingridge to wake up. The small one-bedroom flat above the travel agency in Clapham was not what most people would have expected of the Prime Minister's brother, but reduced needs must. Since he had run out of money at the pub he had come home to regroup. Now he lay slumped in the armchair, still in his crumpled suit, although his tie was now completely missing.

He looked at his old wristwatch and cursed. He'd been asleep for hours yet still he felt exhausted. He'd miss the party if he didn't hurry, but first he needed a drink to pick himself up. He poured himself a large measure of vodka, not even Smirnoff any more, just the local supermarket brand. Still, it didn't hang on the breath or smell when you spilled it.

He took his glass to the bathroom and soaked in the tub, giving the hot water time to work its wonders on those tired limbs. Nowadays they often seemed to belong to an entirely different person. He must be getting old, he told himself.

He stood in front of the mirror, trying to repair the damage of his latest binge. He saw his father's face, reproachful as ever, urging him on to goals that were always just beyond him, demanding to know why he never managed to do things

quite like his younger brother Henry. They both had the same advantages, went to the same school, but somehow Hal always had the edge, and gradually had overshadowed him in his career and his marriage. Charles didn't feel bitter about it, was a generous soul, far too generous, and indulgent. But Hal had always been there to help when he needed it, to offer advice and to give him a shoulder to cry on after Mary had left him. Yes, particularly when Mary had left him. But hadn't even she thrown Hal's success in his face? "You're not up to it. Not up to anything!" And Hal had much less time to worry about any other chap's problems since he had gone to Downing Street.

As young boys they had shared everything; as young men they still shared much, even an occasional girlfriend or two. And a car, one of the early Minis, before Charlie had driven it into a ditch, staggering away, persuading the young policeman it was shock and bruising rather than alcohol that made him so unsteady. But these days there was little room left in Hal's life for his younger brother, and Charlie felt—what did he feel, deep down, when he allowed himself to be honest? Angry, stinking bloody one-bottle-a-time furious—not with Hal, of course, but with life. It hadn't worked out for him, and he didn't understand why.

He guided the razor past the old cuts on his baggy face and began putting the pieces back together. The hair brushed over the thinning pate, the fresh shirt, and a new, clean tie. He would be ready soon for the election night festivities to which his family links still gave him passage. A tea towel over his shoes gave them back a little shine, and he was almost ready. Another glance at the wristwatch. Oh, it was all right after all. Just time for one more drink.

* * *

North of the river a taxi was stuck in traffic on the outskirts of Soho. It was always a bottleneck and election night seemed to have brought an additional throng of revelers onto the streets. In the back of the taxi Roger O'Neill cracked his knuckles in impatience, watching helplessly as bikes and pedestrians flashed past. He was growing agitated, he didn't have much time. He'd had his instructions. "Get over here quick, Rog," they had said. "We can't wait all fucking night, not even for you. And we ain't back till Tuesday."

O'Neill neither expected nor received preferential treatment, he'd never tried to pull rank. He was the Party's Director of Publicity but he hoped to Christ they knew nothing of that. There were times when he thought they must have recognized him, seen his photo in the papers, but when he was less paranoid he realized they probably never read a newspaper, let alone voted. What did politics matter to these people? Bloody Hitler could take over for all they cared. What did it matter who was in government when there was so much loose tax-free money to make?

The taxi at last managed to make it across Shaftesbury Avenue and into Wardour Street, only to be met by another wall of solid traffic. Shit, he would miss them. He flung open the door.

"I'll walk," he shouted at the driver.

"Sorry, mate. It's not my fault. Costs me a fortune stuck in jams like this," the driver replied, hoping that his passenger's impatience wouldn't lead him to forget a tip.

O'Neill jumped out into the road, jammed a note into the driver's hand, and dodged another motorcyclist as he made his way past the endless huddle of peep shows and Chinese restaurants into a narrow, Dickensian alley piled high with rubbish. He squeezed past the plastic bin liners and cardboard boxes and broke into a run. He wasn't fit and it hurt, but he didn't have far to go. As he reached Dean Street he turned left, and a hundred yards further down ducked into the narrow opening to one of those Soho mews which most people miss as they concentrate on finding fun and dodging traffic. Off the main street the mews opened out into a small yard, surrounded on all sides by workshops and garages that had been carved out of the old Victorian warehouses. The yard was empty and the shadows deep. His footsteps rang out on the cobbles as he hurried toward a small green door set in the far, gloomiest corner of the yard. He stopped only to look around once before entering. He didn't knock.

It took less than three minutes before he re-emerged. Without glancing to either side he hurried back into the crowds of Dean Street. Whatever he had come for, it evidently hadn't been sex.

* * *

Behind the brick façade of Party Headquarters in Smith Square, opposite the limestone towers of St. John's, the atmosphere was strangely subdued. For the past weeks this had been a place of ceaseless activity, but on election day itself most of the troops had disappeared, heading for the constituencies, those far outposts of the political world where they had tried to drum up the last few converts for the cause. By this hour most of those who remained were taking an early supper at nearby restaurants or clubs, trying to exude confidence but lapsing repeatedly into insecure discussion of the latest rumors about voter turnout and exit polls and critical seats. Few of them had much appetite and they soon began drifting back, pushing their way through the ever-growing crowds of spectators, beyond the cordons of police and past the mounting piles of scorched moths.

During the last month these offices had grown overcrowded, overheated, and impossibly cluttered, but tomorrow everything would be different. Elections are a time of change, and of human sacrifice. By the weekend, no matter what the result, many of them would be out of a job, but almost all of them would be back for more, sucking at the nipple of power. For now they settled in for what would seem an interminable wait.

Big Ben struck ten o'clock. It was over. The polling booths had closed and no further appeal, explanation, attack, insinuation, libel, or god-awful cock-up could now affect the outcome. As the final chime of the old clock tower faded into the night air a few of the Party workers shook each other's hand in silent reassurance and respect for the job well done. Just how well done they would discover very shortly. As on so many previous evenings, like a religious ritual they turned their attention to the news screens and the familiar voice of Sir Alastair Burnet. He appeared like a latter-day Moses, with his reassuring tones and ruddy cheeks, his flowing silver hair with just enough backlighting to give him a halo effect.

"Good evening," he began in a voice like a gently flowing stream. "The election campaign is over. Just seconds ago thousands of polling booths across the country closed their doors, and now we await the people's verdict. The first result is expected in just forty-five minutes. We shall shortly be going over live for interviews with the Prime Minister, Henry Collingridge, in his Warwickshire constituency and the Opposition leader in South Wales. But, first, ITN's

exclusive exit poll conducted by Harris Research International outside one hundred and fifty-three polling booths across the country during today's voting. It gives the following prediction..."

The country's most senior newsreader opened a large envelope in front of him, as reverently as if the A4 manila contained his own death certificate. He extracted a large card from within the envelope, and glanced at it. Not too quickly, not too slowly he raised his eyes once more to the cameras, holding his congregation of thirty million in the palm of his hand, teasing them gently. He was entitled to his moment. After twenty-eight years and nine general elections as a television broadcaster, he had already announced that this was to be his last.

"ITN's exclusive exit poll forecast—and I emphasize this is a forecast, not a result—is..." He glanced once more at the card, just to check he hadn't misread it.

"Get on with it, you old sod!" a voice was heard to cry from somewhere within the Smith Square complex; from elsewhere came the sound of a champagne cork being loosened in premature celebration, but for the most part they stood in profound silence. History was being made and they were part of it. Sir Alastair stared at them, kept them waiting a heartbeat longer.

"...that the Government will be re-elected with a majority of thirty-four."

The building itself seemed to tremble as a roar of triumph mixed with relief erupted from within. Thirty-bloody-four! It was victory, and when you are in a game to the death it's really only the winning that matters, not how the game has been played or how close the result. Time enough later for sober reflection, for history to reach its verdict, but to hell with history—for the moment it was enough to have survived. In every corner there were tears of joy, of exhaustion, and of release that many found almost as good as orgasm and, in the view of a few old hands, considerably better.

The screen divided briefly between mute shots of the Party leaders taking in the prediction. Collingridge was seen nodding, in acceptance, his smile thinner than satisfaction, while the broad grin and shake of his opponent's head left viewers in no doubt that the Opposition had yet to concede. "Wait and see," he was mouthing, in triumph. Then his lips moved again, saying something that lip readers later thought had been in Welsh. Two words, both very inappropriate.

* * *

“Bollocks!” Preston was shouting, his hair falling into his eyes, revealing the secrets of the shiny scalp beneath. “What the fuck have they done?” He looked at the ruins of his first edition and began furiously scribbling on his notepad. “Government Majority Slashed!” he tried. It was hurled into the bin.

“Too close to call,” Mattie suggested, trying to hide any hint of satisfaction.

“Collingridge squeaks in,” the editor tried once more.

They all ended up in the bin.

He looked around desperately for some help and inspiration.

“Let’s wait,” Mattie advised. “It’s only thirty minutes to the first result.”

Four

The crowd is vulgar. Always play to the crowd, praise the common man, and let him think he is a prince.

Without waiting for the first result, celebrations were already well under way at the Party's advertising agency. With the confidence shown by all positive thinkers, the staff of Merrill Grant & Jones Company PLC had been squashed for nearly three hours in the agency's reception area to witness history in the making and every wrinkle of it projected on two vast TV screens. A river of champagne was flowing, washing down an endless supply of deep pan pizzas and Big Macs, and predictions of a drastically reduced majority only served to spur the party-goers on to more feverish efforts. Even at this early hour it was clear that two ornamental fig trees that had graced the reception area for several years wouldn't survive the night; it seemed probable that several young secretaries wouldn't either. Most of the wiser heads were pacing themselves, but there seemed little reason to exercise excessive restraint. Ad men don't do restraint. Anyway, the client was setting a fearsome example.

Like many expatriate Dublin adventurers, Roger O'Neill was renowned for his quick wit, his irresistible capacity for exaggeration and his unquenchable determination to be involved in everything. So overwhelming were his energies and so varied his enthusiasms that no one could be entirely certain what he had done before he joined the Party—it was something in public relations or television, they thought, and there were rumors about a problem with the Inland Revenue, or was it the Irish Garda—but he had been available when the post of Publicity Director became vacant and he'd filled it with both charm and ability,

fueled by a ceaseless supply of Gauloises and vodka tonics.

As a young man he had shown great promise as a fly-half on the rugby field but it was a talent that was never to be fulfilled, his highly individualistic style making him ill-suited for team games. “With him on the field,” complained his coach, “I’ve got two teams out there, Roger and fourteen others. Screw him.” And so Roger had been duly screwed, in many areas of his life, until Fortune had smiled and brought him to Smith Square. At the age of forty he sported an unruly shock of dark hair that was now perceptibly graying and his muscle tone had long since gone, but O’Neill refused to acknowledge the evidence of his middle age, hiding it beneath a carefully selected wardrobe worn with a deliberate casualness that displayed the designers’ labels to their best advantage. His non-conformist approach and the lingering traces of an Irish accent hadn’t always endeared him to the Party’s grandees—“All bullshit and no bottom,” one of them had loudly observed—but others were simply overwhelmed by his unusual vigor.

His path through the thicket had been made much easier by his secretary. Penelope—“Hi, I’m Penny”—Guy. Five foot ten, an exciting choice of clothes and a devastating figure on which to hang them. There was that other aspect that made her stand out from the Westminster crowd. She was black. Not just dusky or dark but a polished hue of midnight that made her eyes twinkle and her smile fill the entire room. She had a university degree in the History of Art and 120 wpm shorthand and was ruthlessly practical. Inevitably there had been a riptide of gossip when she’d first arrived with O’Neill, but her sheer efficiency had silenced, if not won over, the Doubting Thomases, of which there were still many.

She was also totally discreet. “I have a private life,” she explained when asked. “And that’s just how it’s going to stay.”

Right now at Merrill Grant & Jones—Grunt & Groans, as Penny preferred to call them—she was effortlessly providing the center of attention for several red-blooded media buyers plus the deputy creative director while at the same time managing to ensure that O’Neill’s glass and cigarettes were always available but closely rationed. She didn’t want him going over the top, not tonight of all nights. For the moment he was dug in deep with the agency’s managing director.

“The future starts right here, Jeremy. Let’s not lose sight of that. We need that marketing analysis as soon as possible. It’s got to show just how effective our efforts have been, how brilliant the ads, how much impact they’ve had, how we hit our target voters. If we win, I want everyone to know they owe it to us. If we lose, God help us...” Suddenly he sneezed with great violence. “Shit! Excuse me. Damned hay fever. But if we lose I want to be able to show the entire bloody world that we beat the other side hands down at our communications game and it was only the politics which blew it.” He drew close so they were almost touching foreheads. “You know what’s needed, Jeremy. It’s our reputations on the line, not just the politicians’, so don’t screw it up. Make sure it’s ready by Saturday morning at the latest. I want it in the Sunday papers and I want it as prominent as an actress’s arse.”

“And I thought I was supposed to be the creative one,” Jeremy reflected, sipping more champagne. “But that doesn’t give us much time.”

O’Neill lowered his voice, drew closer still so that the ad man could smell the sourness of French tobacco on his breath. “If you can’t get the figures, make the bloody things up. They’ll all be too exhausted to look at them closely, and if we get in there first and loudest we’ll be fine.” He paused only to blow his nose, which did nothing to ease the other man’s visible discomfort. “And don’t forget the flowers. I want you to send the most enormous bouquet around to the PM’s wife in Downing Street first thing in the morning. In the shape of a gigantic letter ‘C.’ Make sure she gets them as soon as she wakes up.”

“From you, of course.”

“She’ll get in a twist if they don’t arrive because I’ve already told her they’re coming. I want the TV cameras to film them going in.”

“And to know who’s sent them,” the other man added.

“We’re all in this together, Jeremy.”

Yet with only your name on the card, Jeremy almost added, but didn’t. It was possible to take sincerity too far. He was used to his client’s breathless monologues by now, and to the irregular instructions and accounting procedures demanded by O’Neill. A political party wasn’t like any other client; it played by different and sometimes dangerous rules. But the last two years working on the account had given Jeremy and his youthful agency more than enough publicity

to stifle the lingering doubts. Yet, as they waited nervously for the results, a silent fear struck him as he thought of what would happen if they lost. Despite O'Neill's assurances that they were all in this together, he had no doubts the agency would be made the scapegoat. It had all looked rather different when they'd started their work, with the opinion polls predicting a comfortable win, but his confidence had begun to evaporate with the exit polls. His was an industry of images where reputations withered like yesterday's flowers.

O'Neill rattled on, effervescent, irrepressible, until their attention was grabbed by the six-foot image of Sir Alastair, who was now holding his ear with his head cocked to one side. Something was coming through his earpiece.

"And now I believe we are ready for the first result of the evening. Torbay once again, I'm told. Breaking all records. Just forty-three minutes after the polls have closed and already I see the candidates are gathering behind the returning officer. It's time to go over live..."

* * *

The Assembly Room, Torbay. Victorian, crowded, humid, desperately hot, crackling with tension. Bundles of counted votes stretched out along trestle tables, empty black tin ballot boxes stacked to one side. On the stage at one end, amid the banks of hyacinths and spider plants, the rosettes and mayoral regalia, the candidates were gathered. The first result was about to be announced, yet the scene resembled more a village pantomime than an election; the promise of nationwide media coverage had attracted more than the usual number of crank candidates who were now doing their best to capture the moment by waving balloons and brightly colored hats to attract the cameras' attention.

The Sunshine Candidate, dressed from head to toe in a searing yellow leotard and waving a plastic sunflower as ludicrous as it was large, was standing directly and deliberately in front of the sober-suited Tory. The Tory, his suit pressed and hair cut for the occasion, tried to move to his left to escape from the embarrassment but succeeded only in bumping into the man from the National Front, who was inciting a minor riot in the crowd by displaying a clenched fist and an armful of tattoos. The Tory, desperate to do the right thing and uncertain what his candidate's manual prescribed in such circumstances, retreated with

reluctance back behind the sunflower. Meanwhile, a young woman representing the Keep Our Seas Clean party and who was clad in blue and green chiffon, walked back and forth in front of everyone, trailing yards of cloth that billowed like an incoming tide.

The mayor coughed into his microphone. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I, as returning officer for the constituency of Torbay, hereby declare that the votes cast in the election were as follows...”

* * *

“So there we have it from colorful Torbay,” Sir Alastair’s sepulchral tones intervened. “The Government hold the first seat of the night but with a reduced majority and a swing against them of, the computer says, nearly eight percent. What does that mean, Peter?” the newscaster asked as the screen cut to the channel’s academic commentator. A bespectacled, rather tussled figure in Oxford tweeds was given on the screen.

“It means the exit poll is just about right, Alastair.”

Five

Politics requires sacrifice. The sacrifice of others, of course. Whatever a man can achieve by sacrificing himself for his country, there's always more to be gained by allowing others to do it first. Timing, as my wife always says, is everything.

“Great show, Roger, isn't it? Another majority. I can't tell you how absolutely thrilled I am. Relieved. Delighted. All of that. Well done. Well done, indeed!” The breathless enthusiasm of the chairman of one of Grunt & Groans's major retail clients poured into O'Neill's face without any visible effect. The thick-waisted industrialist was enjoying himself, sweating, smiling; the evening was turning into a full-fledged victory party irrespective of the fact that the Government had just lost its first two seats of the night.

“That's very kind of you, Harold. Yes, I think a thirty- or forty-seat majority will be enough. But you must take some of the credit,” O'Neill replied. “I was reminding the Prime Minister just the other day how your support goes way beyond the corporate donation. I remember the speech you gave at the Industrial Society lunch last March. By God it was good, so it was, if you'll forgive a touch of blasphemy, you really banged the message home. Surely you've had professional training?” Without waiting for an answer, O'Neill rushed on. “I told Henry—I'm sorry, the PM!—told him how good you were, that we need to find more platforms for captains of industry like you. Giving us the view from the coal face.”

“There was no need for that, I'm sure,” replied the captain without the slightest trace of sincerity. The champagne had already overcome his natural

caution and images of ermine and the House of Lords began to materialize in front of his eyes. “Look, when this is all over perhaps you and I could do lunch together. Somewhere a little quieter, eh? I’ve several other ideas he might find interesting, on which I’d very much welcome your views.” The eyes bulged expectantly. He took another huge mouthful of wine. “And talking of banging home the message, Roger, tell me, that little secretary of yours—”

Before the thought could be pursued any further, O’Neill burst into a series of volcanic sneezes that bent him almost double, leaving his eyes bloodshot and rendering any hope of continued conversation impossible. “Sorry,” he spluttered, struggling to recover. “Hay fever. Always seem to get it early.” As if to emphasize the point he blew his nose with the sound of many trumpets and what seemed like a few bass drums. The moment gone, the industrialist backed off.

The Government lost another seat, a junior minister with responsibility for transport, a callow man who’d spent the last four years rushing to every major motorway crash scene in the country, dragging the media behind him. He had developed an almost religious conviction that the human race’s capacity for violent self-sacrifice was unquenchable; it didn’t seem to be helping him very much to accept his own. His chin jutted forward to meet adversity while his wife dissolved in tears.

“More bad news for the Government,” commented Sir Alastair, “and we’ll see how the Prime Minister is taking it when we go over live for his result in just a few minutes. In the meantime, what is the computer predicting now?” He punched a button and turned to look at a large computer screen behind his shoulder. “Nearer thirty than forty, by the look of it.”

A studio discussion began as to whether a majority of thirty was enough to see a government through a full term of office, but the commentators were constantly interrupted as more results began to pour in. Back at the agency, O’Neill excused himself from the group of overheated businessmen and fought his way through a growing and steadily more voluble group of admirers that was pressing in on Penny. In spite of their protests he drew her quickly to one side and whispered briefly in her ear. Meanwhile the ruddy face of Sir Alastair intruded once more to announce that the Prime Minister’s own result would soon be declared. A respectful silence took hold of the revelers. O’Neill returned to

the industrial captains. All eyes were fixed on the screen. No one noticed Penny gathering her bag and slipping quietly out.

In the studio an Opposition gain from the Government was announced. A less than splendid night. Then it was Collingridge's turn. His appearance brought forth a roar of loyal approval from the Grunt & Groans staff, most of whom had by now lost whatever political convictions they'd brought with them beneath the tidal wave of celebration. Hell, it was only an election.

As they stared, Henry Collingridge waved back from the screen, his stretched smile suggesting he was taking the result rather more seriously than was his audience. His speech of thanks was formal rather than polemical, his face gray with exhaustion beneath the makeup. For a moment they watched somberly, almost soberly, as he hurried from the platform to begin his long drive back to London. Then they set to celebrating once more.

It was a few minutes later that a shout pierced the party atmosphere. "Mr. O'Neill! Mr. O'Neill! There's a call for you." The security guard who was presiding over the reception desk held the telephone up in the air and gesticulated dramatically at the mouthpiece.

"Who is it?" mouthed O'Neill back across the room.

"What?" queried the guard, looking nervous.

"Who is it?" O'Neill mouthed again.

"Can't hear you," the guard yelled above the hubbub.

O'Neill cupped his hands to his mouth and once more demanded to know who it was in a voice and with a volume that would have done justice to a winning try at Lansdowne Road.

"It's the Prime Minister's Office!" screamed the frustrated guard, unable to restrain himself and not quite sure whether he should be standing to attention.

His words had an immediate effect. The room fell an expectant hush. An avenue to the telephone suddenly opened up in front of O'Neill. Obediently he stepped forward, trying to look modest and matter-of-fact.

"It's one of his secretaries. She'll put you through," the guard said, in awe, grateful to hand over the awesome responsibility.

"Hello. Hello. Yes, this is Roger." A brief pause. "Prime Minister! How very good to hear from you. Many, many congratulations. The result is really

excellent in the circumstances. My old father used to say that a victory is sweet whether you win 5–0 or 5–4...” His eyes darted around the room; every face was turned to him. “What did you say? Oh, yes. Yes! That’s so kind. I’m at the advertising agency right this moment as it happens.”

The room was now hushed to a point where they could hear the fig trees weeping.

“I think they’ve performed marvelously, and I certainly couldn’t have done it without their support...May I tell them that?”

O’Neill placed his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to the audience, which was held in total rapture. “The Prime Minister just wants me to thank you all on his behalf for helping run such a fantastic campaign. He says it made all the difference.” He went back to the phone and listened for a few seconds more. “And he’s not going to demand the money back!”

The room erupted into a great roar of applause and cheers. O’Neill held the phone aloft to catch every last sound.

“Yes, Prime Minister. I want to tell you that I’m totally thrilled, overwhelmed to receive your first telephone call after your own election...I look forward to seeing you, too. Yes, I shall be at Smith Square later...Of course, of course. See you then. And congratulations once again.”

He replaced the telephone gently in its cradle, his expression heavy with the honor that had been done him. He turned to face the room. Suddenly his face burst into a broad smile and the gathering broke into a series of resounding cheers and everyone attempted to shake his hand at once.

They were still saluting him with a chorus of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” as, in the next street, Penny replaced the car phone in its cradle and began to adjust her lipstick in the mirror.

Six

It was my old gillie who taught me a lesson, up on the moor, one I've always remembered. I was a child—what, eight years old? But cast your own mind back; it's at that sort of age the lessons sink in, take hold.

He said this to me: "If you must inflict pain, make sure it is irresistible and overwhelming, so that he knows you will always do him more harm than he can ever do to you." The gillie was talking about wild dogs, of course. But it's been a good lesson in politics, too.

Friday, June 11

The crowd in Smith Square had increased dramatically in size as supporters, opponents, and the merely curious waited for the Prime Minister's arrival. Midnight had long since tolled but this was a night when biological clocks would be stretched to the limit. The onlookers could see from the TV technicians' monitors that his convoy, escorted by police outriders and pursued by camera cars, had long since left the M1 and was now approaching Marble Arch. It would be less than ten minutes before they arrived, and three youthful cheerleaders employed by the Party were encouraging the crowd to warm up with a mixture of patriotic songs and shouts.

They were having to work harder than at previous elections. While people appeared more than happy to wave enormous Union Jacks there seemed to be less enthusiasm to brandish the large mounted photographs of Henry Collingridge that had just appeared through the doorway of Party Headquarters. Several members of the crowd were wearing personal radios and informing those around them of the results. It didn't seem to lift spirits. Even the

cheerleaders would stop occasionally to form a huddle and discuss the latest news. There was also an element of competition because several Opposition supporters, emboldened by what they'd heard, had decided to infiltrate and were now proceeding to wave their own banners and chant slogans. Half a dozen policemen moved in to ensure that emotions on both sides didn't bubble over. A coach with a dozen more was parked around the corner in Tufton Street. Appear, don't interfere, was the instruction.

The computers were now forecasting a majority of twenty-eight. Two of the cheerleaders broke away from their work to engage in an earnest discussion as to whether this constituted an adequate working majority. They concluded that it probably was and returned to their task, but spirits were flagging, the early enthusiasm increasingly deflated with concern, and they decided to save their effort until Henry Collingridge arrived.

Inside the building, Charles Collingridge was getting increasingly drunk. One of the senior members of the Party had put him in the Chairman's office with a comfortable chair where he could sit beneath a portrait of his brother, and somehow Charlie had found a bottle. His capillared face was covered in perspiration, his eyes were liquid and bloodshot. "A good man, brother Hal. A great Prime Minister," he was babbling. There was no denying the alcoholic lisp that had begun to take control of his voice as he repeated the familiar family history. "Could have taken over the family business, you know, made it one of the country's truly great companies, but he always preferred politics. Mind you, manufacturing bath fittings was never my cup of tea, either, but it kept Father happy. D'you know they even import the ruddy stuff from Poland nowadays? Or is it Romania...?"

He interrupted his own monologue by knocking what was left of his glass of whiskey over his trousers. Amidst the fluster of apologies the Party Chairman, Lord Williams, took the opportunity to move well out of range. His wise old eyes revealed none of it but he resented having to extend hospitality to the Prime Minister's brother. Charlie Collingridge wasn't a bad man, never that, but he was a weak man who was becoming a bloody nuisance on a regular basis, and Williams liked to run a tight ship. Yet the aging apparatchik was an experienced navigator and knew there was little point in trying to throw the admiral's brother

overboard. He had once raised the problem directly with the Prime Minister, tried to discuss the increasing rumors and the growing number of snide references to his brother in the gossip columns. As one of the few men left who had been a prominent sailor even in the pre-Thatcher days, he had the seniority, and some would argue even the responsibility, to do so. But it had been to no avail.

“I spend half my time spilling blood, that’s the job I do,” the Prime Minister had pleaded. “Please don’t ask me to spill my own brother’s.”

The Prime Minister had vowed he would get Charlie to watch his behavior, or rather that he would watch Charlie’s behavior himself, but of course he never had the time, not to babysit. And he knew Charlie would promise anything even while he became increasingly incapable of delivering. Henry wouldn’t moralize or be angry, he knew it was always the other members of the family who suffered most from the pressures of politics. In part it was his fault. Williams understood that, too, for hadn’t he gone through three marriages since he’d first arrived in Westminster nearly forty years ago? There was always plenty of collateral damage; politics left a trail of pain and tortured families in its wake. Williams watched Collingridge stumble from the room and felt a twinge of sorrow, but quickly stifled it. Emotion was no basis on which to run a Party.

Michael Samuel, the Secretary of State for the Environment and one of the newest and most telegenic members of the Cabinet, came over to greet the old statesman. He was young enough to be the Chairman’s son and he was something of a protégé; he’d been given his first major step up the greasy ministerial pole by Williams when, as a young Member of Parliament and on Williams’s recommendation, he’d been made a Parliamentary Private Secretary. It was the most meager of parliamentary accolades, an unpaid job as skivvy to a senior minister, to fetch, to carry, to do so without complaint and without question—qualities designed to impress prime ministers when selecting candidates for promotion. Williams’s help had ignited a spectacular rise through ministerial ranks for Samuel and the two men remained firm friends.

“Problem, Teddy?” Samuel inquired.

“A prime minister can choose his friends and his Cabinet,” the old man sighed, “but not his relatives.”

“Any more than we get to choose our bedfellows.”

Samuel nodded toward the door. Urquhart had just entered with his wife after driving up from his constituency. Samuel’s glance was cold. He didn’t care for Urquhart, who hadn’t supported his promotion to Cabinet and who on more than one occasion had been heard to describe Samuel as “a latter-day Disraeli, too good looking and too clever for his own good.”

The veneer over the traditional and still lingering anti-Semitism wore very thin at times, but Williams had offered the brilliant young lawyer good counsel. “Francis is right,” he had said. “Don’t be too intellectual, don’t look too successful. Don’t be too liberal on social matters or too prominent on financial matters.”

“You mean I should stop being Jewish.”

“And for God’s sake watch your back.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve been doing that for two thousand years.”

Now Samuel watched unenthusiastically as Urquhart and his wife were forced by the crush of people toward him. “Good evening, Francis. Hello, Mortima.” Samuel forced a smile. “Congratulations. A seventeen thousand majority. I know about six hundred MPs who are going to be very jealous of you in the morning with a victory like that.”

“Michael! Well, I’m delighted you managed to hypnotize the female voters of Surbiton once more. Why, if only you could pick up their husbands’ votes as well, you too could have a majority like mine!”

They laughed gently at the banter, accustomed to hiding the fact that they did not enjoy each other’s company, but it quickly passed to silence as neither of them could think of a suitable means for disengaging from the conversation.

They were rescued by Williams, who had just put down the phone. “Don’t let me interrupt, but Henry will be here any minute.”

“I’ll come down with you,” Urquhart volunteered immediately.

“And you, Michael?” asked Williams.

“I’ll wait here. There will be a rush when he arrives. I don’t want to get trampled, from behind.”

Urquhart wondered whether Samuel was having a gentle dig at him but chose to ignore it and accompanied Williams down the stairs, which had become

crowded with excited office staff. Word of the Prime Minister's imminent arrival had spread and the appearance of the Party Chairman and Chief Whip outside on the pavement galvanized the crowd. An organized cheer went up as the armored black Daimler with its battalion of escorts swung around the square, appearing from behind the skirts of St. John's to be greeted by the brilliance of television lights and a thousand flaring flashguns as cameramen, both professional and amateur, tried to capture the scene.

As the car drew to a halt, Collingridge emerged from the rear seat and turned to wave to the crowd and the cameras. Urquhart pushed forward, tried just a little too hard to shake his hand and instead managed to get in the way. He retreated apologetically. On the other side of the car Lord Williams, with the chivalry and familiarity that comes of many years, carefully assisted the Prime Minister's wife out of the car and planted an avuncular kiss on her cheek. A bouquet appeared from somewhere along with two dozen party officials and dignitaries, all of whom were struggling to get in on the act. It seemed a minor miracle that the heaving throng managed to squeeze through the swing doors and into the building without casualties.

Similar scenes of confusion and congestion were repeated inside as the Prime Minister's party pushed its way upstairs, pausing only for a traditional word of thanks to the staff. It had to be repeated because the press photographers hadn't been assembled quickly enough. Through it all, the delay, the gentle pushing, the noise, the Prime Minister smiled.

Yet once upstairs in the relative safety of Lord Williams's suite, the signs of strain that had been so well hidden all evening began to appear. The television set in the corner was just announcing that the computer was predicting a still lower majority, and Collingridge let out a long, low sigh. "Turn the bloody thing off," he whispered. Then his eyes wandered slowly round the room.

"Has Charlie been around this evening?" he asked.

"Yes, he's been here, but..."

"But what?"

"We seem to have lost him."

The Prime Minister's eyes met those of the Chairman.

"I'm sorry," the older man added, so softly that it almost required the Prime

Minister to lip read.

Sorry for what? The fact that my brother's a drunk? Sorry that I've almost thrown away this election, put so many of our colleagues to the sword, done more damage than Goering? Sorry that you'll have to wade through the sewage that's about to hit us along with me? But anyway, thanks for caring, old friend.

The adrenalin had ceased flowing and suddenly he was desperately tired. After weeks of being hemmed in on all sides and without a single private moment to himself, he felt an overwhelming need to be on his own. He turned away to find somewhere a little quieter and more private but he found his way blocked by Urquhart who was standing right by his shoulder. The Chief Whip was thrusting an envelope at him.

"I've been giving some thought to the reshuffle," Urquhart said, his eyes lowered, his voice betraying a mixture of discomfiture and hesitation. "While this is hardly the time, I know you will be giving it some thought over the weekend, so I've prepared a few suggestions. I know you prefer positive ideas rather than a blank sheet of paper, so..." He held out his handwritten note. "I hope you find this of use." He was demanding his place at the top table, and by right rather than invitation.

Collingridge looked at the envelope and something inside him broke, the little wall that keeps politeness and honesty well apart. He raised his exhausted eyes to his colleague. "You're right, Francis. This is scarcely the time. Perhaps we should be thinking about securing our majority before we start sacking our colleagues."

Urquhart froze in embarrassment. The sarcasm had cut deep, deeper than the Prime Minister had intended, and he realized he had gone too far.

"I'm sorry, Francis. I'm afraid I am a little tired. Of course you're quite right to think ahead. Look, I'd like you and Teddy to come round on Sunday afternoon to discuss it. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to let Teddy have a copy of your letter now, and send one round to me at Downing Street tomorrow—or, rather, later this morning."

Urquhart's face refused to betray the turmoil that was growing within. He had been too anxious about the reshuffle and cursed himself for his folly. Somehow his natural assurance deserted him when it came to Collingridge, the product of a

grammar school who in social terms would have had trouble gaining membership to any of Urquhart's clubs. The role reversal in Government unnerved him, unsettled him; he found himself acting out of character when he was in the other man's presence. He had made a mistake and he blamed Collingridge for that more than he blamed himself, but now was not the time to reclaim the ground he had lost. Instead, he retreated into affability, bowing his head in acceptance. "Of course, Prime Minister. I will let Teddy have a copy straight away."

"Better copy it yourself. Wouldn't do to have that list getting around here tonight." Collingridge smiled as he tried to bring Urquhart back into the conspiracy of power that always hovers around Downing Street. "In any event, I think it's time for me to depart. The BBC will want me bright and sparkling in four hours' time, so I shall wait for the rest of the results in Downing Street."

He turned to Williams. "By the way, what is the wretched computer predicting now?"

"It's been stuck on twenty-four for about half an hour now. I think that's it." There was no sense of victory in his voice. He had just presided over the Party's worst election result in nearly two decades.

"Never mind, Teddy. A majority is a majority. And it will give the Chief Whip something to do instead of sitting idly around with a majority of over a hundred. Eh, Francis?" And with that he strode out of the room, leaving Urquhart forlornly clutching his envelope.

* * *

Within minutes of the Prime Minister's departure the crowds both inside and outside the building began perceptibly to melt. Urquhart, still feeling bruised and not in a mood either to celebrate or to sympathize, made his way to the back of the first floor where he knew the photocopying office could be found. Except that Room 132A was scarcely an office at all, little more than a windowless closet barely six feet across and kept for supplies and confidential photocopying. Urquhart opened the door and the smell hit him before he had time to find the light switch. Slumped on the floor by the narrow metal storage shelves was Charles Collingridge. He had soiled his clothes even as he slept. There was no

glass or bottle anywhere to be seen but the smell of whiskey was heavy in the air. Charlie, it seemed, had crawled away to find the least embarrassing place to collapse.

Urquhart reached for his handkerchief and held it to his face, trying to ward off the stench. He stepped over to the body and turned it on its back. A shake of the shoulders did little other than disrupt the fitful heavy breathing for a moment. A firmer shake gave nothing more, and a gentle slap across the cheeks produced equally little result.

He gazed with disgust at what he saw. Suddenly Urquhart's body stiffened, his contempt mingled with the lingering humiliation he had suffered at the Prime Minister's hands. And here, surely, was an opportunity for repayment of the slight. He grabbed at the lapels of Charlie's jacket, hauled him up, drew back his arm, ready to strike, to lash the back of his hand across this pathetic wretch's face, to release his humiliation and anger at all the Collingridges. Urquhart was trembling now, poised.

Then an envelope fell from Charlie's jacket pocket, an unpaid electricity bill by the look of it, a final demand, covered in red, and suddenly Urquhart realized there was another way to even up the scales of injustice, to tilt them back and over to his side. He wouldn't hit Charlie after all, not out of any particular sense of fastidiousness, nor any feeling that Charlie was entirely innocent of any offense against him, apart from the smell. Urquhart knew he could hurt Henry Collingridge by inflicting pain upon his brother, of that there was no doubt, but the hurt wouldn't be enough, wouldn't last. Anyway, this wasn't the way, not in some noisome cupboard, nor was it the time. Francis Urquhart was better than this, much better. Better than them all.

He allowed the sleeping form of Charles Collingridge to fall back gently to the floor, straightened the lapels, left him to rest. "You and I, Charlie, we're going to become very close. Great friends. Not right this moment, of course. After you've cleaned yourself up a bit, eh?"

He turned to the photocopier, took the letter from his pocket, made one copy, after which he took the bill from Charlie's pocket and made a copy of that, too. Then he left the drunken form of his new friend to sleep it off.

Seven

Wasn't it that fellow Clausewitz who once said that war is the continuation of politics by other means? He was wrong, of course, ridiculously wrong. Politics? War? As my dear wife Mortima constantly reminds me, there is no distinction.

Sunday, June 13

Urquhart's official car turned from Whitehall into Downing Street to be greeted by a policeman's starched salute and a hundred exploding flashguns. It was Sunday, shortly before four. He had left Mortima at home in Pimlico with their guests, eight of them, more than usual for a Sunday but this was the anniversary of his father's death and he was in the habit of filling it with distraction. The men and handful of women of the press were gathered behind the barriers on the far side of the street from the world's most famous front door, which stood wide open as the car drew up—like a political black hole, Urquhart had often thought, into which new prime ministers disappeared and rarely if ever emerged without being surrounded by protective hordes of civil servants, and only after they had sucked the life out of them.

Urquhart had made sure to travel on the left-hand side of the car's rear seat so that as he climbed out in front of Number Ten, he would provide an unimpeded view of himself for the TV and press cameras. He stretched himself to his full height and was greeted by a chorus of shouted questions from the press huddle, providing him with an excuse to walk over for a few words. He spotted Manny Goodchild, the legendary Press Association figure, firmly planted under his battered trilby and conveniently wedged between ITN and BBC news camera

crews.

“Well, Manny, did you have any money on the result?” he inquired.

“Mr. Urquhart, you know my editor would frown on putting his money where my mouth is.”

“Nevertheless.” Urquhart raised an eyebrow.

The old press man’s lips wriggled like two unrelated caterpillars. “Put it this way, Mrs. Goodchild has already booked her holiday in Majorca, and thanks to Mr. Collingridge I’m going with her, too.”

Urquhart sighed theatrically. “’Tis an ill wind.”

“And talking of ill winds, Mr. Urquhart”—his colleagues pressed closer as Manny got into his stride—“are you here to advise the Prime Minister about the reshuffle? Won’t there have to be a pretty good clear out after a disappointing result like that? And does it all mean a new job for you?”

“Well, I’m here to discuss a number of things, but I suppose the reshuffle might come into it,” Urquhart responded coyly. “And we won, remember. Don’t be so downbeat, Manny.”

“It’s rumored that you’re expecting a major new post.”

Urquhart smiled. “Can’t comment on rumors, Manny, and anyway you know that’s one for the PM to decide. I’m here simply to give him some moral support.”

“You’ll be going to advise the PM along with Lord Williams, will you then?”

The smile struggled to survive. “Lord Williams, has he arrived yet?”

“More than an hour ago. We were wondering when someone else was going to turn up.”

It took every ounce of experience gathered through Urquhart’s many years in politics not to let his surprise show. “Then I must go,” he announced. “Can’t keep them waiting.” He gave a courteous nod of his head, turned on his heel, and strode back across the road, ditching his plan to wave at the cameras from the doorstep of Number Ten, just in case it looked presumptuous.

On the other side of the black-and-white tiled hallway, a carpeted corridor led toward the Cabinet Room. The Prime Minister’s youthful political secretary was waiting for him at the end. As Urquhart approached, he sensed that the young man was uneasy.

“The Prime Minister is expecting you, Chief Whip.”

“Yes, that’s why I’m here.”

The secretary flinched. “He’s in the study upstairs. I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.” Duty done, and not waiting for any further hint of sarcasm, he bounded off up the stairs.

It was twelve knuckle-cracking, watch-tapping minutes before he reappeared, leaving Urquhart to stare distractedly at the portraits of previous prime ministers that adorned the famous staircase. He could never get over the feeling of how inconsequential so many of the recent holders of the office had been. Uninspiring, unfitted for the task. By contrast, the likes of Lloyd George and Churchill had been magnificent natural leaders, but would they be allowed to rise to the top nowadays? One had been promiscuous and had sold peerages, the other had spent far too much time in drink, debt, and hot temper; both were giants, yet neither man would have made it past the modern media. Instead the world had been left to the pygmies, men of small stature and still less ambition, men chosen not because they were exceptional but because they didn’t offend, men who followed the rules rather than making their own, men...Well, men like Henry Collingridge.

The return of the political secretary interrupted his thoughts. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Chief Whip. He’s ready for you now.”

The room used by Collingridge as his study was on the first floor, overlooking the Downing Street garden to St. James’s Park. A modest room, as so much else in this jumble of spaces that made up the second most important address in the country. As Urquhart entered he could see that, in spite of efforts to tidy up the large desk, there had been much shuffling of paper and scribbling of notes in the previous hour or so. An empty bottle of claret stared out of the waste bin and plates covered with crumbs and a withered leaf of lettuce lurked on the windowsill. The Party Chairman sat to the right of the Prime Minister, his notes spilling over the green leather top. Beside them stood a large pile of manila folders containing MPs’ biographies.

Urquhart brought up a chair, one without arms, and sat in front of the other two, feeling rather like a schoolboy in the headmaster’s study. Collingridge and Williams were silhouetted against the windows. Urquhart squinted into the light,

balancing his own folder of notes uneasily on his knee.

“Francis, you were kind enough to let me have some thoughts on the reshuffle,” the Prime Minister began. No ceremony, straight down to business. “I am very grateful; you know how useful such suggestions are in stimulating my own thoughts.”

Urquhart inclined his head in silent gratitude.

“You’ve obviously put a lot of work into them. But before we get down to specifics I thought we should chat about the broad objectives first. You’ve suggested—well, what shall I call it?—a rather radical reshuffle.” Collingridge peered at the sheet of paper in front of him, through reading glasses he kept only for private occasions. His finger ran down the list. “Six new members for the Cabinet, some extensive swapping of portfolios among the rest.” He sighed, sat back in his chair, as though distancing himself from it all. “Tell me why. Why such a heavy hand? What do you think it would achieve?”

Urquhart’s senses were on alert. He didn’t care for this. He had hoped to be brought in at the earliest stage but the other two were already well ahead of him and he didn’t know where. He’d found no chance to sniff out the Prime Minister’s own views, to read his mind; it was an unhealthy place for a Chief Whip to be in. He wondered whether he was being set up.

As he blinked against the sunlight that was streaming in from behind the Prime Minister’s head, he could read nothing of the expression. He wished now that he hadn’t committed his thoughts to paper—it left him no wriggle room, no escape route—but it was too late for regrets. Williams was staring at him like a hawk. He spoke slowly, so as not to raise alarm, searching for words that might cover his tracks.

“Of course, Prime Minister, they are only suggestions, indications really, of what you might be able to do. I thought, in general, in the round, that it might be better to err on the side of action, as it were, to undertake more rather than fewer changes, simply to indicate that you are firmly in charge. That you are expecting a lot of new ideas and new thinking from your ministers. And a chance to retire just a few of our older colleagues; regrettable, but necessary if you are to bring in some new blood.”

Damn, he thought suddenly, what a bloody inept thing to say with that

ancient bastard Williams sitting on the PM's right hand. But it had been said, there was no means of retreat.

"We've been in power for longer than any Party since the war, which presents a new challenge," he continued. "Boredom. We need to ensure we have a fresh image for the Government team. We must guard against going stale."

The room fell silent. Then, slowly, the Prime Minister began tapping his pencil on the desk.

"That's very interesting, Francis, and I agree with you—to a large extent."

Oh, that hesitation, that little pause, what might that denote? Urquhart found that his hands were clasped, the nails digging into the flesh.

"Teddy and I have been discussing just that sort of problem," the Prime Minister continued. "Bring on a new generation of talent, find new impetus, put new men in new places. And I find many of your suggestions for changes at the lower ministerial levels below Cabinet very persuasive."

But they were not the ones that mattered, they all knew that. And the Prime Minister's tone had changed, grown more somber.

"The trouble is that too much change at the top can be very disruptive. It takes most cabinet ministers a year to find their feet in a new Department, and right now a year is a long time without being able to show positive signs of progress. Rather than your Cabinet changes helping to implement our new program, Teddy's view is that on balance it would more likely delay the program."

What new program? Urquhart was screaming inside his skull. The manifesto had about as much backbone as a sack of seaweed.

"But, with respect, Prime Minister, don't you think that by cutting our majority the electorate was telling us of its desire for some degree of change?"

"An interesting point. But as you yourself said, no government in our lifetimes has been in office as long as we have. Without in any way being complacent, Francis, I don't think we could have rewritten the history books if the voters believed we'd run out of steam. On balance, I think it suggests they are content with what we offer."

It was time to change tack. "You may very well be right, Prime Minister."

"There's another point, pretty damned vital in the circumstances,"

Collingridge continued. "We have to avoid giving the impression that we're panicking. That would send entirely the wrong signal. Remember that Macmillan destroyed his own Government by sacking a third of his Cabinet. They took it as a sign of weakness. He was out of office inside a year. I'm not anxious for a repeat performance." He gave one final beat with the pencil, then put it aside. "I'm thinking of a much more controlled approach myself."

Collingridge slipped a piece of paper across the desk toward his Chief Whip. On it was printed a list of Cabinet positions, twenty-two in all, with names alongside them.

"As you see, Francis, I am suggesting no Cabinet changes at all. I hope it will be seen as a sign of strength. We have a job to do, I think we should show we want to get straight on with it."

Urquhart quickly returned the paper to the desk, anxious that the tremble in his hand might betray his inner feelings. "If that is what you want, Prime Minister."

"It is." There was the slightest pause. "And of course I assume I have your full support?"

"Of course, Prime Minister."

Urquhart scarcely recognized his own voice, it sounded as though it came from an entirely different part of the room. Not his words. But he had no choice: it was either support or suicide through instant resignation. Yet he couldn't leave it there. "I have to say that I...was rather looking for a change myself. A bit of new experience...a new challenge." His words faltered as he found his mouth suddenly dry. "You may remember, Prime Minister, we had discussed the possibility..."

"Francis," the Prime Minister interrupted, but not unkindly, "if I move you, I have to move others. The whole pile of dominoes begins to tumble. And I need you where you are. You are an excellent Chief Whip. You have devoted yourself to burrowing right into the heart and soul of the Parliamentary Party. You know them so well. We have to face up to the fact that with such a small majority there are bound to be one or two sticky patches over the next few years. I need to have a Chief Whip who is strong enough to handle them. I need you, Francis. You're so good behind the scenes. We can leave it to others to do the job out front."

Urquhart lowered his eyes, not wanting them to see the turmoil of betrayal that flushed through them. Collingridge took it as an expression of acceptance.

“I am truly grateful for your understanding and support, Francis.”

Urquhart felt the cell door slam shut. He thanked them both, took his farewell. Williams hadn't uttered a single word.

He left by the back route through the basement of Number Ten. It took him past the ruins of the old Tudor tennis court where Henry VIII had played, then to the Cabinet Office that fronted onto Whitehall, along the road from the entrance to Downing Street and well out of sight of the waiting press. He couldn't face them. He had been with the Prime Minister less than half an hour and he couldn't trust his face to back up the lies he would have to tell them. He got a security guard at the Cabinet Office to telephone for his car to be brought round. He didn't bother with small talk.

Eight

The truth is like a good wine. You often find it tucked away in the darkest corner of a cellar. It needs turning occasionally. And given a gentle dusting, too, before you bring it out into the light and start using it.

The battered BMW had been standing outside the house in Cambridge Street, Pimlico for almost a quarter of an hour. The vacant seats were smothered in a chaos of discarded newspapers and granola bar wrappers that only a truly busy single woman could produce, and in the middle of it all Mattie Storin sat biting her lip. The announcement of the reshuffle late that afternoon had led to febrile discussion as to whether the Prime Minister had been brilliant and audacious, or simply lost his nerve. She needed the views of the men who had helped shape the decisions. Williams had been persuasive and supportive as usual, but Urquhart's phone had rung and rung, unanswered.

Without fully understanding why, after her shift at the *Chronicle* had finished Mattie had decided to drive past Urquhart's London home, just ten minutes from the House of Commons in one of the elegant side streets that adorn the better parts of Pimlico. She expected to find it dark and empty but instead she discovered the lights were burning and there were signs of movement. She telephoned once more, yet still there was no answer.

The world of Westminster is a club of many unwritten rules and is guarded jealously by both politicians and press—and particularly the press, the so-called “lobby” of correspondents that quietly and discretely regulates media activity in the Palace of Westminster. It allows, for instance, briefings and interviews to take place on the strict understanding that the source will never be identified, not

even a hint, everything in the shadows. This encourages politicians to be wildly indiscreet and to break confidences; in turn it allows the lobby correspondents to meet their deadlines and create the most remarkable headlines. The code of *omertà* is the lobby correspondent's passport; without it he—or she—would find all doors closed and mouths firmly shut. Revealing sources is a hanging offense, banging on a minister's private door only slightly lower down the list of contemptible behavior designed to cut off all forms of useful contact. Political correspondents don't pursue their quarry back to their homes; it's bad form, black marks and bollockings all round.

Mattie gave the inside of her cheek another bite. She was nervous. She didn't lightly bend the rules but why was the bloody man not answering his phone? What on earth was he up to?

A thick Northern voice whispered in her ear, the voice she had so often missed since leaving the *Yorkshire Post* and the wise old editor who had given Mattie her first proper job. What had he said? "Rules, my girl, are nothing more than a comfort blanket for old men, something to wrap themselves up in against the cold. They exist for the guidance of the wise and the emasculation of the foolish. Don't you ever dare come into my office and tell me you missed out on a good story because of somebody else's sodding rules."

"OK, OK, you miserable bugger, get off my back," Mattie said out loud. She checked her hair in the mirror, running a hand through it to restore some life, opened the car door, stepped out onto the pavement and instantly wished she were somewhere else. Twenty seconds later the house echoed to the sound of the front door's ornate brass knocker.

Urquhart answered the door. He was alone, casually dressed, not expecting visitors. His wife had returned to the country and the maid didn't work weekends. As his eyes fell on Mattie they were filled with impatience; in the darkness of the street he didn't immediately recognize the caller.

"Mr. Urquhart, I've been trying to contact you all afternoon. I hope it's not inconvenient."

"Ten thirty at night? Not *inconvenient*?" The impatience had turned to exasperation.

"Forgive me, but I need some help. No Cabinet changes, not one. It's

extraordinary. I'm trying to understand the thinking behind it."

"The *thinking* behind it?" Urquhart's voice dipped deeper into sarcasm. "I'm sorry but I have nothing to say." He began to close the door only to see his unwanted visitor take a stubborn step forward. Surely the silly girl wasn't going to put her foot in the door, it would be too comic for words. But Mattie spoke calmly and quietly.

"Mr. Urquhart. That's a great story. But I don't think you'd want me to print it."

Urquhart paused, intrigued. What on earth did she mean? Mattie saw the hesitation, and threw a little more bait in the water.

"The story would read, 'There were signs last night of deep Cabinet divisions over the non-shuffle. The Chief Whip, long believed to have harbored ambitions for a move to a new post, refused to defend the Prime Minister's decision.' How would you care for that?"

Only now, as his eyes adjusted to the shadows beyond his doorstep, did Urquhart recognize the *Chronicle's* new correspondent. He knew her only slightly but had seen and read enough of her in action to suspect she was no fool. It made him all the more astonished that she was now camped on his doorstep trying to intimidate him. "You cannot be serious," Urquhart said slowly.

Mattie broke into a broad smile. "Of course I'm not. But what's a girl supposed to do? You won't answer your telephone or talk face-to-face."

Her honesty disarmed him. And, as she stood beneath the light from the lamp above his door, highlights glinting in her short, blond hair, he had to admit that he'd come across less attractive sights in the lobby.

"I'd really like your help, Mr. Urquhart. I need something of substance, something I can get my teeth into, otherwise all I've got is thin air. And that's all you're leaving me at the moment. Please—help me."

Urquhart sniffed, stared. "I ought to be bloody furious. On the phone to that editor of yours demanding an apology for such blatant harassment."

"But you won't. Will you?" She was being deliberately coquettish. While their previous encounters had been minimal, she remembered the glance he had thrown at her one day as they'd passed in the Central Lobby, the discreet male glint in the eye that had taken in all of her without for a moment appearing to

deviate from the direct.

“Perhaps you had better come in after all—Miss Storin, isn’t it?”

“Please, call me Mattie.”

“The sitting room is upstairs,” he said. He made it sound like a small confession. He led the way to a tasteful if very traditionally decorated room, its mustard walls covered in oil paintings of horses and country scenes, the furniture inlaid and elegant. There were tall shelves of books, family photos in frames, a white marble fireplace. The shades were silk, the lighting sparse, the atmosphere intense. He poured himself a large single malt, an old Glenfiddich, and without asking did the same for her before settling into a dark leather armchair. A book with a cracked spine was balanced on the arm, plays by Molière. Mattie sat opposite, nervously perching on the edge of the sofa. She retrieved a small notebook from her shoulder bag but Urquhart waved it away.

“I’m tired, Miss Storin—Mattie. It’s been a long campaign and I’m not sure I would express myself particularly well. So no notes, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. Lobby terms. I can use what you tell me but I can’t attribute it to you in any way. No fingerprints.”

“Precisely.”

He put away Molière, she her notebook and settled back on the sofa. She was wearing a white cotton blouse; it was tight. He noticed, but not in a predatory fashion. He seemed to have eyes that absorbed things, penetrated deeper than most. They both knew they were playing a game.

He took a cigarette from a silver cigarette box, lit it and inhaled deeply, then he began. “What would you say if I told you, Mattie, that the Prime Minister sees this as the best way of getting on with the job? Not letting ministers get confused with new responsibilities? Full steam ahead?”

“I would say, Mr. Urquhart, that we would scarcely have to go off the record for that!”

Urquhart chuckled at the young journalist’s bluntness. Drew deep on the nicotine. The combination seemed to satisfy him.

“I would also say,” Mattie continued, “that in many people’s eyes the election showed the need for some new blood and some new thinking. You lost a lot of seats. Your endorsement by the voters wasn’t exactly gushing, was it?”

“We have a clear majority and won many more seats than the main opposition party. Not too bad after so many years in office...Wouldn't you say?”

“I'm here for your views, not mine.”

“Indulge me.”

“But not really full of promise for the next election, is it? More of the same. Steady as she sinks.”

“I think that's a little harsh,” Urquhart said, knowing he should be protesting more.

“I came to one of your election rallies.”

“Did you, Mattie? I'm flattered.”

“You spoke about new energy, new ideas, new enterprise. The whole thrust of what you were saying was that there would be change—and some new players.” She paused but Urquhart didn't seem keen to respond. “Your own election address—I have it here...” She fished a glossy leaflet from a wad of papers that were stuffed into her shoulder bag. “It speaks about ‘the exciting challenges ahead.’ All this is about as exciting as last week's newspapers. And I'm doing too much of the talking.”

He smiled, sipped. Stayed silent.

“Let me ask you bluntly, Mr. Urquhart. Do you really think this is the best the Prime Minister could do?”

Urquhart didn't answer directly but raised his glass slowly once more to his lips, staring at her across the crystal rim.

“Do you think Henry Collingridge is the best this country can do?” she persisted, more softly.

“Mattie, how on earth do you expect me to reply to a question like that? I am the Chief Whip, I am totally loyal to the Prime Minister—and his shuffle. Or rather non-shuffle.” The edge of sarcasm was back in his voice.

“Yes, but what about Francis Urquhart, a man who is very ambitious for his party and is desperately anxious for its success. Does he support it?”

There was no reply.

“Mr. Urquhart, in my piece tomorrow I shall faithfully record your public loyalty to the reshuffle and your justification of it. But...”

“But?”

“We’re speaking on lobby terms. All my instincts suggest you don’t care for what’s happening. I want to know. You want to ensure that your private thoughts don’t get back to my colleagues, or your colleagues, or become common Westminster gossip. I give you my word on that. This is just for me, because all this might be important in the months ahead. And by the way, no one else knows I came to see you tonight.”

“You are offering me a deal?” he muttered softly.

“Yes. I think you want one. Someone like me. A mouthpiece.”

“And why do you think I would want that?”

“Because you let me in.”

He stared with blue eyes that seemed to dig deep inside her, stirring excitement.

“You want to be a player, not simply a pawn,” she said.

“Better a man of any reputation than a forgotten one, eh?”

“I think so,” she said, returning the stare, holding his eyes, smiling.

“Let us try this, Mattie. A simple tale. Of a Prime Minister surrounded by ambition, not his own but the ambition of others. Those ambitions have grown since the election. He needs to keep them in check, to stifle them, otherwise they might escape and completely obliterate him.”

“Are you telling me that there’s a lot of rivalry and dissent within the Cabinet?”

He paused to consider his words carefully before continuing in a slow, deliberate voice. “A great elm waiting to rot. And once that rot has taken hold it is only a matter of time. So there are some who, you might suppose, are wondering what life might be like in another eighteen months, or two years, what position they want to be in if—when—the tree comes crashing down. As they all do in the end.”

“So why doesn’t he get rid of the troublesome ones?”

“Because he can’t risk having disgruntled former Cabinet ministers rampaging all over the backbenches when he’s got a majority of only twenty-four which could disappear at the first parliamentary cock-up. He has to keep everything as quiet, as low key as possible. He can’t even move the Awkward Brigade to new Cabinet posts because every time you send a new minister to a

new Department they get a rush of enthusiasm and want to make their mark. They become of renewed interest to important people in the media, like you. Suddenly we find that ministers aren't simply doing their jobs but also promoting themselves for a leadership race that must inevitably come. It's a cancer. Government thrown into chaos, everyone looking over their shoulders, confusion, disharmony, accusations of lack of grip—and suddenly we have a leadership crisis.”

“So everyone has to remain where they are. Do you think that's a sound strategy?”

He took a deep mouthful of whiskey. “If I were the captain of the *Titanic* and I saw a bloody great iceberg dead ahead, I think I'd want a change of course.”

“Did you tell this to the Prime Minister this afternoon?”

“Mattie,” he scolded, “you take me too far. I am thoroughly enjoying our conversation but I fear I would be going too far if I started divulging the details of private discussions. That's a shooting offense.”

“Then let me ask you about Lord Williams. He was with the PM an extraordinarily long time this afternoon if all they were deciding was to do nothing.”

“A man grown gray in the service of his party. Have you heard the phrase, ‘Beware of an old man in a hurry’?”

“He surely can't think he could become Party Leader. Not from the Lords!”

“No, of course not. Even dear Teddy isn't that egotistical. But he's an elder statesman, he would like to make sure the leadership found its way into suitable hands.”

“Whose hands?”

“If not him, then one of his young acolytes.”

“Like who?”

“Don't you have thoughts of your own?”

“Samuel. You mean Michael Samuel,” she said excitedly, pursing her lips.

“You might think that, Mattie.”

“How do you know that?”

“I couldn't possibly comment.” Urquhart smiled, finished his whiskey. “I think I have allowed you to speculate enough. We should call this conversation

to a halt.”

Mattie nodded reluctantly. “Thank you, Mr. Urquhart.”

“For what? I have said nothing,” he said, rising.

Her mind was buzzing with theories as she tried to place the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together. They were shaking hands by the front door before she spoke again.

“Mrs. Urquhart?”

“Isn’t here. She is in the country.”

Their hands were still linked.

“Please give her my best wishes.”

“I shall, Mattie. I shall.”

She let go of his hand and turned to leave, before hesitating. “One last question. A leadership election. If there were to be one, would you be part of it?”

“Good night, Mattie,” Urquhart said, closing the front door.

* * *

Daily Chronicle. Monday, June 14. Page 1.

• • •

The Prime Minister shocked many observers yesterday by announcing there were to be no Cabinet changes. After conferring for several hours with his Party Chairman, Lord Williams, and also with the Chief Whip Francis Urquhart, Henry Collingridge issued a “steady as she goes” message to his party.

However, senior Westminster sources last night expressed astonishment at the decision. It was seen in some quarters as revealing the weakness of the Prime Minister’s position after what was seen as a lackluster campaign.

There was growing speculation that Collingridge is unlikely to fight another election, and some senior ministers already appear to be maneuvering for position in the event of an early leadership contest. One Cabinet minister compared the Prime Minister to “the captain of the Titanic as it was entering the ice pack.”

The decision not to make any Cabinet changes, the first time since the

war that an election has not been followed by some senior reshuffle, was interpreted as being the most effective way for Collingridge to keep the simmering rivalries of his Cabinet colleagues under control. Last night the Chief Whip defended the decision as being “the best means of getting on with the job” but speculation is already beginning about likely contenders in a leadership race.

Contacted late last night, Lord Williams described any suggestion of an imminent leadership election as “nonsense.” He said, “The Prime Minister has gained for the Party an historic fourth election victory. We are in excellent shape.” Williams’s position of the Party Chairman would be crucial during a leadership race and he is known to be close to Michael Samuel, the Environment Secretary, who could be one of the contenders.

Opponents were quick to pounce on what they saw as the Prime Minister’s indecisiveness. The Opposition Leader said: “The fires of discontent are glowing within the Government. I don’t think Mr. Collingridge has the strength or the support to put them out. I am already looking forward to the next election.”

A senior source within the Government described the situation as being like “a great elm waiting to rot.”

Nine

Some men never manage to live with their principles. In Westminster it helps to be seen lunching with them occasionally, but not too often, in case you find yourself mistaken for a prude.

Tuesday, June 22

O'Neill had been delighted and, at first, a little surprised to get an invitation from Urquhart to lunch at his St. James's Street club. The Chief Whip had never shown much warmth toward the Party's communications man in the past, but now he suggested they "celebrate the splendid work you did for us all throughout the campaign." O'Neill took it as recognition of his rising eminence in the Party.

It had been a damned good lunch, too, all the trimmings. O'Neill, hypertense as always, had fortified himself with a couple of mighty vodka tonics before he'd arrived, but they hadn't been necessary. Two bottles of Château Talbot '78 and a couple of large cognacs were enough, even for his Irish appetites. He had talked too much, he knew, always did, but he couldn't help it. In the past Urquhart had made him feel nervous. It was something about the cool reserve of the man, and the fact that Urquhart had once been overheard talking about him as "a marketing johnny," but he had proved an attentive host as the other man babbled on. Now they were sitting in the substantial cracked leather armchairs that surrounded the snooker tables in the back room at White's. When the tables were not in use the seats offered a quiet and confidential spot for members to take their guests.

"Tell me, Roger, what are your plans now the election is over? Are you going

to stay on with the Party? We can't afford to lose good men like you."

O'Neill flashed yet another winning smile, stubbed out the cigarette he was smoking in the hope that a decent Havana might be in the offing, and assured his host that he would stay on as long as the Prime Minister wanted him.

"But how can you afford to, Roger? May I be just a little indiscreet? I know how little the Party pays its employees, and money is always tight after an election. The next couple of years are likely to be tough. Your salary will get frozen, your budget cut. It's always the same, we politicians being our typical short-sighted selves. Aren't you tempted by some of the more handsome offers you must be getting from outside?"

"Well, it's not always easy, Francis, as you've already guessed. It's not so much the salary, you understand. I work in politics because I'm fascinated by it and love to play a part. But it would be a tragedy if the budget gets cut. So much work still to do." His smile was broad, his eyes bright, but they began dancing in agitation as he considered what the other man had said. He began to fidget nervously with his glass. "We should start working for the next election now. Particularly with all these ridiculous rumors flooding round about splits within the Party. We need some positive publicity, and I need a budget to create it."

"An interesting point. Is the Chairman receptive to all this?" Urquhart raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Are chairmen ever?"

"Perhaps there's something I can do about that, Roger. I would like to be able to help you. Very much. I could go in to bat with the Chairman about your budget, if you want."

"Really? That'd be astonishingly kind of you, Francis."

"But there is something I must ask you first, Roger. And I must be blunt."

The older man's ice eyes looked directly into O'Neill's, taking in their habitual flicker. Then O'Neill blew his nose loudly. Another habit, Urquhart knew, as was the constant tapping of the two middle fingers on his right hand. It was as if there were another life going on within O'Neill that was quite separate from the rest of the world, and that communicated itself only through O'Neill's hyperactive mannerisms and twitching eyes.

"Had a visit the other day, Roger, from an old acquaintance I used to know in

the days when I held directorships in the City. He's one of the financial people at the Party's advertising agency. And he was very troubled. Very discreet, but very troubled. He said you were in the habit of asking the agency for considerable sums of cash to cover your expenses."

The twitching stopped for a moment. Urquhart reflected just how rarely he had ever seen O'Neill stop moving.

"Roger, let me assure you I am not trying to trap you or trick you. This is strictly between us. But if I am to help you, I must be sure of the facts."

The face and the eyes started up again, as O'Neill's ready laugh made a nervous reappearance. "Francis, let me assure you there's nothing wrong, nothing at all. It's silly, of course, but I'm grateful that you raised it with me. It's simply that there are times when I incur expenses on the publicity side which are easier for the agency to meet rather than putting them through the Party machine. Like buying a drink for a journalist or taking a Party contributor out for a meal." O'Neill was speeding on with his explanation, which showed signs of having been practiced. "You see, if I pay for them myself I have to claim back from the Party. Which takes its own sweet time writing the bloody check—two months or more. You know what they're like, takes forever for the ink to dry. Frankly, with the way they pay me, I can't afford it. So I charge them through the agency, I get the money back immediately while they put them through their own accounts. It's like an interest-free loan for the Party. And in the meantime I can get on with my job. The amounts are really very small."

O'Neill reached for his glass while Urquhart steeped his fingers and watched the other man empty his glass.

"Like £22,300 in the last ten months small, Roger?"

O'Neill all but choked. His face contorted as he struggled simultaneously to gulp down air and blurt out the required denial. "It's nothing like that amount," he protested. His jaw dropped as he debated what to say next. This part of the explanation he hadn't practiced. O'Neill's twitching now resembled a fly caught in a spider's web. Urquhart spun more silken threads.

"Roger, you have been charging regular expenses to the agency without clearly accounting for those amounts to the tune of precisely £22,300 since the beginning of September last year. What began as relatively small amounts have

in recent months grown to £4,000 a month. You don't get through that many drinks and dinners even during an election campaign."

"I assure you, Francis, that any expenses I've charged have all been entirely legitimate!"

"Expensive, isn't it? Cocaine."

O'Neill's glazed eyes had frozen in horror.

"Roger, as Chief Whip I have to become familiar with every problem known to man. I've had to deal with cases of wife beating, adultery, fraud, mental illness. I've even had a case of incest. No, it's all right, we didn't let him stand for re-election, of course, but there was nothing to be gained by making a public fuss. That's why you almost never hear about them. Incest I draw the line at, Roger, but in general we don't moralize. In my book every man is allowed one indulgence—so long as it remains a private one."

He paused; a flicker was returning to O'Neill's eyes, one of desperation.

"One of my Junior Whips is a doctor. I appointed him specifically to help me spot the signs of strain. After all, we have well over three hundred MPs to look after, all of whom are living under immense pressure. You'd be surprised, too, how many cases of drug abuse we get. There's a charming and utterly private drying-out farm just outside Dover where we send them, sometimes for a couple of months. Most of them recover completely, one of them is even a senior Minister." He leaned forward to close the gap between them. "But it helps to catch them early, Roger. And cocaine has become a real problem recently. They tell me it's fashionable—whatever that means—and too damned easy to obtain. Makes a good man brilliant, so they say. Pity it's so addictive. And expensive."

Urquhart hadn't taken his eyes off O'Neill for a second during his narrative. He found something exquisite and compelling in the agony that was stripping the flesh off O'Neill. Any doubt he might have had about the diagnosis was swept aside by the trembling hands and the lips that parted but could not speak. When, at last, O'Neill found words, they came as a whimper.

"What are you saying? I am not a drug addict. I don't do drugs!"

"No, of course not, Roger." Urquhart adopted his most reassuring tone. "But I think you must accept that there might be some people who could jump to the most unfortunate conclusions about you. And the Prime Minister, you know,

particularly in his present mood, is not a man to take chances. Please believe me it's not a matter of condemning a man without trial, simply of opting for a quiet life."

"Henry can't believe this! You haven't told him surely..." O'Neill gasped as if he had been butted by a charging bull.

"Of course not, Roger. I want you to regard me as a friend. But the Party Chairman..."

"Williams? What has he said?"

"About drugs? Nothing. But I'm afraid the dear Lord isn't one of your greatest fans. He wasn't very helpful with the Prime Minister. Seems to think you should be blamed for the election result rather than himself."

"What?" The word emerged as a squeak.

"Don't worry, Roger, I spoke up for you. There's nothing to fear. As long as you have my support."

Urquhart knew what he was doing, understood full well the paranoia that grips the mind of a cocaine addict and the impact his invented story about the Chairman's disaffection would leave on O'Neill's tender emotions. The man had a lust for notoriety that could only be met through the continued patronage of the Prime Minister; it was something he couldn't bear to lose. "As long as you have my support." The words rang in O'Neill's ears. "One slip and you are dead," it was saying. The web of fear had closed around O'Neill. Now was the time to offer him a way out.

"Roger, I've seen gossip destroy so many men. The corridors around Westminster can become a killing field. It would be a tragedy for which I could never forgive myself if you were placed upon the rack either because of Teddy Williams's hostility toward you or simply because people misunderstood your arrangement about expenses and your—hay fever."

"What should I do?" The voice was plaintive.

"Do? Why, Roger, I would suggest that you trust me. You need a strong supporter in the inner circles of the Party, particularly right now. There's a swell on the water, it's growing, the Prime Minister's boat is taking on water, he won't give a second thought to throwing someone like you overboard if it might help save himself. People like that think you're little more than ballast."

The words were having the desired effect. O'Neill was writhing in his chair, sipping blindly at a crystal glass that was already empty, the old leather groaning beneath him. Urquhart paused for a moment to take in every detail.

"Help me, Francis."

"That's why I invited you, Roger."

The other man wept. Tears were falling down his face.

"I will not let them push out a good man like you, Roger." His tone was that of a vicar reading out a psalm. "Every penny of your expenses is legitimate. That is what I shall tell the agency. I shall advise them to continue with the arrangement, and keep it confidential, so as to avoid unhelpful jealousy from those within the Party who want to slash the advertising budget. But there is more to be done. We shall make sure the Prime Minister is fully informed of the good works you are doing. And I shall advise him not to drop his guard, to continue with a high level of campaigning if he's to get through the difficult months ahead. Your budget will survive. And so will you, Roger."

"Francis, you know I would be most grateful..." O'Neill mumbled.

"But there is something I will need in return, Roger."

"Anything."

"If I'm to guard your back I shall need to know everything that's going on at Party Headquarters."

"Of course."

"And in particular what the Chairman is up to. He's a very ambitious and dangerous man, playing his own game while professing loyalty to the Prime Minister. You must be my eyes and ears, Roger, and you will have to let me know immediately of anything you hear of the Chairman's plans. Your future could depend upon it."

O'Neill was drying his eyes, blowing his nose, his handkerchief an appalling mess.

"You and I, Roger, must work together on this. You will have to help steer the Party through some difficult times ahead. Horatio at the bridge."

"Francis, I don't know how to thank you."

"You will, Roger, you will."

* * *

A door slammed. Mortima was back. She scurried up the stairs, searching for him in every room, until she found him on their roof terrace, gazing out across the London night to the Victoria Tower that stood in spot-lit splendor at the southern end of the Parliament building. The Union flag was unfurling in the gentle currents of air thrown up from the hot streets. The building seemed as though it had been carved from honeycomb. Urquhart was smoking, a rare sight.

“Francis, are you OK?”

He turned, startled, as though surprised to see her, then went back to searching out across the rooftops of Westminster to the Victoria Tower.

“When you called and said something had happened I thought you might be sick. You scared me and...”

“They have Charles I’s death warrant in there, in the tower. And the Bill of Rights. Acts of Parliament dating back more than five hundred years.” He spoke as though he had not heard her or noticed her concern.

“Something *has* happened.” She drew close, took his arm. His eyes seemed held by an apparition or prospect that only he could see and that lay somewhere out in the night.

“If you listen carefully, Mortima, you can hear the cries of the mob outside the gates.”

“Can you?”

“I can.”

“Francis?” Her voice still trembled with concern.

Only then did he come back to her. He squeezed her hand. “It was kind of you to rush back. I’m so sorry if I caused you concern. No, I’m not sick, I am fine. In fact I feel better than I have for a long while.”

“I don’t understand. You were so disappointed not to have been moved.”

“Nothing lasts. Not great empires, least of all weak prime ministers.” His voice was riddled with contempt. He held out his cigarette to her; she drew deeply on the strong vapors.

“You will need helpers,” she whispered, returning the cigarette.

“I think I may have found some.”

“That young journalist you mentioned?”

“Perhaps.”

She didn't reply for a while. They stood in the darkness, sharing the night, the muffled sounds of the lives that were going on beneath them, the air of conspiracy.

“Will she be loyal?”

“Loyalty among journalists?”

“You must bind her in, Francis.”

He looked at her sharply, offered a thin smile that vanished quickly. There was no humor in it. “She is far too young, Mortima.”

“Too young? Too beautiful? Too intelligent? Too ambitious? I think not, Francis. Not for a man like you.”

His smile returned, warmer now. “As so often, Mortima, I am in your debt.”

She was twelve years younger than he was, still vibrant, and wore the few extra pounds the years had put on her with elegance. She was his closest friend, the only one he allowed to dig inside him, on whom he could rely without question. They had their different lives, of course, his in Westminster and hers... Well, she loved Wagner. Never one of his enthusiasms. She would disappear for days, travel abroad, with others, to share the passions of the *Ring* cycle. He never questioned her loyalty, nor she his.

“This will not be easy,” he said.

“Neither is failure.”

“Are there any limits?” he asked, as gently as such a question would allow.

She rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, then returned inside, leaving him with the night.

Ten

I knew a man once whose memory was so desiccated that he quite forgot he'd hung a Howard Hodgkin on its side for three years without realizing, yet who remembered he'd been a trustee of the Tate, which he never was. He became Minister for the Arts, of course. I wonder what ever happened to him after that?

Wednesday, June 30

The Strangers' Bar in the House of Commons is a small room of dark paneling and quiet corners overlooking the Thames where Members of Parliament may take their "Stranger" or non-Member guests. It's usually crowded and noisy with rumor and gossip, occasionally with moral violence, sometimes physical violence, too. Some politicians just don't do sober.

O'Neill was propped up on one elbow against the bar while struggling with the other to avoid knocking the drink out of his host's hand. "Another one, Steve?" he asked of his immaculately dressed companion.

Stephen Kendrick was a newly-elected Opposition MP who had yet to find his place. He gave off a mixture of messages, his light gray Armani mohair suit and pearl white cuffs contrasting with the pint of Federation bitter that he clasped in his immaculately manicured hand. "You know better than me that Strangers can't buy drinks here. Anyway, since I've only been in this place a couple of weeks I think it's a little early to ruin my career by being caught spending too long with the Prime Minister's pet Irish wolfhound. Some of my more dogmatic colleagues would treat that as treachery. One more and that's my limit!" He grinned and winked at the barmaid. Another pint of dark bitter and a

double vodka tonic appeared in front of them.

“You know, Rog, I’m still pinching myself. I never really expected to get here. Still can’t decide whether it’s a dream or just a bloody awful nightmare.” His voice was thick with the back streets of Blackburn. “Funny thing, fate, ain’t it? When we worked together at that little PR shop seven years ago, who’d have guessed you would now be the Prime Minister’s chief grunter and I’d be the Opposition’s newest and most talented MP?”

“Not that little blond telephonist we used to take turns with.”

“Dear little Annie.”

“I thought her name was Jennie.”

“Rog, I never remember you being fussy about what they were called.”

The banter finally broke the ice. When O’Neill had telephoned the new MP to suggest a drink for old times’ sake they had both found it difficult to revive the easy familiarity they had known in earlier years. Throughout the first couple of rounds they had sparred gently, avoiding the subject of politics that now dominated their lives. Now O’Neill decided it was time to take the plunge.

“Steve, as far as I’m concerned I don’t mind you buying the drinks all night. Christ, the way my masters are going at the moment I think a saint would be driven to drink.”

Kendrick accepted the opening. “It’s got bloody messy, bloody quick, that’s for sure. Your lot do seem to have lost the elastic in their knickers. Hell’s bells, I can’t believe the gossip. Samuel furious with Williams for putting his head on the block with the PM, Williams hacked off with Collingridge for screwing up the election, Collingridge raging about everything and just about everyone. Bloody brilliant!”

“They’re all knackered, can’t wait to get away on holiday. Squabbling about how to pack the car.”

“You’ll not mind me saying, old chum, but your gaffer’s going to have to put an end to all the bickering pretty damned quick, or else. I may be wet behind the ears but once rumors like that start, they begin to gain a life of their own. They become reality. Still, that’s where you and your mighty publicity machine come to the rescue, I suppose, like the Seventh Cavalry over the hill.”

“More like Custer’s last stand,” O’Neill said with some bitterness.

“What’s the matter, Rog, Uncle Teddy run off with all your toy soldiers or something?”

O’Neill emptied his glass with a savage flick of his wrist. Kendrick, his caution overcome by curiosity, ordered another round.

“Since you ask, Steve—between you and me, as old friends—our ancient and vastly overrated Chairman has decided to retreat behind the barricades. Just when we need to come out fighting.”

“Ah, do I detect the cries of a frustrated Publicity Director who’s been told to shut up shop for a while?”

O’Neill banged his glass down on the bar in exasperation. “I shouldn’t tell you this, I suppose, but you’ll know about it soon enough. You know the hospital expansion program we promised at the election, matching Government funds for any money raised locally? Brilliant idea. And we had a wonderful promotional campaign ready to go throughout the summer while you cloth-capped bastards were off on the Costa del Cuba or wherever it is you go.”

“But?”

“Not going to happen, is it? I had everything in place, Steve, ready to go. And by the time your lot had packed away their buckets and spades and come back in October, I would have won the hearts and minds of voters in every marginal seat in the country. We had the campaign all set. Advertising, ten million leaflets, direct mail. ‘Nursing Hospitals Back to Health.’ But...The old bastard’s pulled the plug. Just like that.”

“Why?” Kendrick asked consolingly. “Money problems after the election?”

“That’s what’s so ruddy ridiculous about it, Steve. The money’s in the budget and the leaflets have already been printed, but he won’t let us deliver them. He just came back from Number Ten this morning and said the thing was off. Lost their nerve, they have. Then he had the balls to ask whether the bloody leaflets would be out of date by next year. It’s so amateurish!”

He took another large mouthful of vodka and stared into the bottom of his glass. O’Neill prayed he had followed Urquhart’s instructions not to show too much disloyalty, nothing more than professional pique and a little gentle alcoholic excess. He was still puzzled. He had no idea why Urquhart had told him to concoct an entirely spurious story about a non-existent publicity

campaign to pass on in the Strangers' Bar, but if it involved landing Williams in the shit, he was all for it. As he swirled the slice of lemon around his glass he saw Kendrick give him a long and deliberate glance.

“What’s going on, Rog?”

“If only I knew, old chum. Complete bloody mystery. Total fucking mess.”

Thursday, July 1

The Chamber of the House of Commons is of relatively modern construction, rebuilt following the war after one of the Luftwaffe’s bombs had missed the docks and carelessly scored a direct hit on the Mother of Parliaments instead. Yet in spite of its relative youth the Chamber has an atmosphere centuries old. If you sit quietly in the corner of the empty Chamber on one of the narrow green benches, the freshness fades and the ghosts of Chatham, Walpole, Fox, and Disraeli pace the gangways once again.

It is a place of character rather than convenience. There are seats for only around four hundred of the six hundred and fifty Members, who cannot listen to the rudimentary loudspeakers built into the backs of the benches without slumping to one side and giving the appearance of being sound asleep. Which sometimes they are.

The design is based on the old St. Stephen’s Chapel, where the earliest parliamentarians sat, like choirboys in facing pews, yet there is little that is angelic in the modern set-up. Members face each other in confrontation, as antagonists. They are separated by two red lines on the carpet, whose distance apart represents the distance of two sword lengths, yet this is misleading, for the most imminent danger is never more than a dagger’s distance away, on the benches behind.

Almost all prime ministers end up being hacked, chopped, or forced bloodily from office. More than half the members of the Government’s Parliamentary Party usually believe they can do the job far better. Those who have been sacked, or who have never been offered a job, sit behind their leader measuring the width between his or her shoulder blades. The pressure is relentless. Every week prime ministers are called to account at Prime Minister’s Question Time, an institution honored only for its excess. In principle it gives Members of

Parliament the opportunity to seek information from the leader of Her Majesty's Government; in practice it is an exercise in survival that owes more to the Roman arena of Nero and Claudius than to the ideals of parliamentary democracy. The questions from Opposition Members usually don't even pretend to seek information, they seek only to criticize, to inflict damage. Will this pathetic excuse for a Prime Minister fuck off?—or words to that effect. Similarly the answers given rarely seek to give information but are intended to retaliate and to cause pain and humiliation. And prime ministers always have the last word, it gives them the advantage in combat, like the gladiator allowed the final thrust. That is why a prime minister is expected to win. Woe betide the prime minister who does not. Tension and terror are never far behind the confident smile. It made Macmillan sick with tension, caused Wilson to lose sleep and Thatcher to lose her temper. And Henry Collingridge was never quite up to any of their standards.

The day following O'Neill's evening foray into the Strangers' Bar hadn't been running smoothly for the Prime Minister. The Downing Street press secretary had been laid low by his children's chicken pox so the normal daily press briefing was of inferior quality and, even worse to the impatient Collingridge, was late. So was Cabinet, which had gathered at its accustomed time of 10:00 a.m. on Thursday but had dragged on in confusion as the Chancellor of the Exchequer sought to explain, without any evident offense to Collingridge, how the Government's reduced majority had taken the edge off the financial markets, making it impossible in this financial year to implement the hospital expansion program they had promised so enthusiastically during the election campaign. The Prime Minister should have kept a grip on the discussion, but it rambled on and ended in embarrassment.

"A pity, perhaps, that the Chancellor wasn't a little more cautious before allowing us to run off and make rash commitments," the Education Secretary commented, dripping acid.

The Chancellor muttered darkly that it wasn't his fault the election results were worse than even the cynics in the Stock Market had expected, a comment he had instantly regretted. Collingridge tried to knock heads together and instructed the Health Secretary to prepare a suitable explanation for the change

of plans. It was also decided that this change of course would be announced in a fortnight's time, during the last week before Parliament ran away for recess.

"Let us hope," said the septuagenarian Lord Chancellor, "that by then minds will be on the follies of summer."

So Cabinet overran by twenty-five minutes, which meant that the Prime Minister's briefing meeting with officials for Question Time was also late, and his ill-temper ensured that he took in little of what they were saying. When he strode into a packed Chamber just before the appointed time for questions, he was neither as well armed nor as alert as usual.

This didn't seem to matter much as Collingridge batted back questions from the Opposition and accepted plaudits from his own party with adequate if not inspired ease. Business as usual. The Speaker of the House, the man in charge of parliamentary proceedings, glanced at the clock and decided that with just over a minute left of the session there might be time for just one more outing to round off the session. The next question on the Order Paper was from one of the new members; a good moment, he decided, to initiate new blood.

"Stephen Kendrick," he called across the Chamber.

"Number Six, sir." Kendrick rose briefly to his feet to indicate the question from the Order Paper that stood in his name: "To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for the day." It was a hollow question, identical to Questions One, Two, and Four, which had already preceded it.

Collingridge rose ponderously and glanced at the red briefing folder already open on the Dispatch Box in front of him. He read in a dull monotone. They'd heard it all before. "I refer the Honorable Member to the reply I gave some moments ago to Questions One, Two, and Four." Since his earlier reply had said no more than that he would spend the day holding meetings with ministerial colleagues and hosting a dinner for the visiting Belgian Prime Minister, no one had yet learned anything of interest about the Prime Minister's activities—but that was not the intention. The gladiatorial courtesies were now over and battle was about to commence. Kendrick rose to his feet from the Opposition benches.

Steve Kendrick was a gambler, a man who had found professional success in an industry that rewarded chutzpah and oversized balls. No one had been more surprised than he had been, apart from perhaps his ex-wife, that he'd decided to

risk the expense account and sports car by fighting a marginal parliamentary seat. Not that he had expected or indeed wanted to win; after all, the Government had been sitting on a pretty reasonable majority, but fighting the seat would help establish his brand name and help him both socially and professionally. He'd spent several weeks on the front pages of the PR trade magazines. "The man with the social conscience" always made good copy in such an aggressively commercial industry.

His majority of seventy-six, after three recounts, had come as an unpleasant shock. It meant a considerably reduced income and a creaking private life put under close scrutiny, and chances were he'd get thrown out at the next election anyway. So what was the point in caution? He had nothing to lose except his anonymity.

Kendrick had spent a fractured night and frustrated morning wrestling with what O'Neill had said. Why cancel a publicity campaign promoting a vote-winning policy? It made no bloody sense unless...Unless it was the policy rather than the publicity campaign that was in trouble. That must surely be it. Wasn't it? What else could it be? Or was he simply too wet behind the ears to understand what was going on? The more he grappled with the puzzle, the more it wriggled. Should he inquire or accuse? Question or condemn? He knew that if he got it wrong, the first and lasting impression he made would be that of the House fool.

Doubts were still buzzing around his mind like hornets as he rose to his feet. His momentary uncertainty caused the general commotion of the House to die away as MPs sensed his indecision. Had the new Member frozen? Kendrick took a deep breath and decided there was no point trying to stand on his dignity. He jumped.

"Will the Prime Minister explain to the House why he has canceled the promised hospital expansion program?"

No criticism. No elaboration. No added phrase or rambling comment that would give time to the Prime Minister to dodge or duck. A murmur went up as the new backbencher resumed his seat. The hospital program? Canceled? The sport had taken an interesting new turn, and the three hundred-odd spectators turned as one to look toward Collingridge. He clambered to his feet, feeling as

he did so that the blood supply to his brain had been left behind. He knew there was nothing in his red briefing folder from which to draw inspiration, no prop, no straw at which he might grasp. It had leaked, been stolen, was ruined, he was fucked. He smiled broadly. It's what you had to do. Only those sitting very close to him could see the whites of his knuckles as he gripped the Dispatch Box.

"I hope that the Honorable Gentleman will be careful to avoid being carried away by the summer silly season, at least before August arrives. As he is a new Member, it's a good opportunity for me to remind him that in the last four years under this Government, the health service has enjoyed a substantial real increase in spending of some six to eight percent." Collingridge knew he was being inexcusably patronizing but he couldn't find the right words. What else could he do? "The health service has benefited more than any other Government service from our success in defeating inflation, which compares..."

From his perch a little higher up on the bank of green leather benches, Kendrick stared. The Prime Minister wasn't looking him in the eye, was casting around. He was lost. "Answer the bloody question," he growled, in a Northern accent that somehow makes such indelicacy acceptable or at least expected. Several other Members echoed the suggestion.

"I shall answer the question in my own way and in my own time," the Prime Minister snapped. "It is a pathetic sham for the Opposition to whine when they know that electors have reached their own conclusions and only recently voted with their feet for this Government. They support us and I can repeat our determination to protect them and their hospital service."

Rude shouts of disapproval from the Opposition benches grew louder. Most of them would go unrecorded by Hansard, whose editors at times had a remarkably deaf ear, but they were clearly audible to the Prime Minister, every syllable. His own backbenchers began to stir uneasily, uncertain as to why Collingridge didn't simply reaffirm the policy and shove it deep down Kendrick's throat.

Collingridge ploughed on against a backdrop of interruptions. "The House will be aware...that it is not the custom of governments...to discuss the specifics of new spending plans in advance...We shall make an announcement about our intentions at the appropriate time."

“You have. You’ve bloody dropped it, haven’t you?” the Honorable and usually disrespectful Member for Newcastle West erupted from his position below the gangway, so loudly that not even Hansard could claim to have missed it.

The faces on the Opposition Front Bench broke into smiles, at last catching up with the game. Their Leader, not six feet from where Collingridge stood, turned to his nearest colleague and gave the loudest of Welsh whispers. “You know I think he’s fluffed it. He’s running away!” He began waving his Order Paper, as did all his colleagues. It seemed like the sails of ancient galleons sailing into battle.

The pain of a thousand encounters in the House welled up inside Collingridge. He was unprepared for this. He couldn’t bring himself to admit the truth yet neither could he lie to the House, and he could find no form of words that would tread that delicate line between honesty and outright deceit. As he observed the smugness on the faces in front of him and listened to their jeers, he remembered all the many lies they had told about him over the years, the cruelty they had shown and the tears they had caused his wife to shed. As he gazed at contorted faces just a few feet in front of him, his patience vanished. He had to bring it to an end, and he no longer cared how. He threw his hands in the air.

“I don’t have to take comments like that from a pack of dogs,” he snarled, and sat down. Like a bear backing out of the baiting ring.

Even before the shout of triumph and rage had a chance to rise from the Opposition benches, Kendrick was back on his feet. “On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Prime Minister’s remarks are an absolute disgrace. I asked a perfectly straightforward question about why the Prime Minister had reneged on his election promise and all I’ve got are insults and evasion. While I understand the Prime Minister’s reluctance to admit that he’s perpetrated a gigantic and disgraceful fraud on the electorate, is there nothing you can do to protect the right of Members of this House so that we get a straight answer to a straight question? I know I’m new in this place but there must be something in the Trade Descriptions Act that covers this.”

Waves of approval washed across the Opposition benches as the Speaker struggled to be heard above the commotion. “The Honorable Member may be

new, but he seems already to have developed a sharp eye for parliamentary procedure, in which case he will know that I am no more responsible for the content or tone of the Prime Minister's replies than I am for the questions which are put to him. Next business!"

As the Speaker tried to move matters on, a red-faced Collingridge rose and strode angrily out of the Chamber, gesticulating for the Chief Whip to follow him. The very unparliamentary taunt of "Coward!" rang after him across the floor. From the Government benches there was nothing but an uncertain silence.

* * *

"How in Christ's name did he know? How did that son-of-a-bitch know?"

The door had barely been slammed upon the Prime Minister's office, which stood just off the rear of the Chamber before the tirade began. The normally suave exterior of Her Majesty's First Minister had been cast aside to reveal a wild Warwickshire ferret. "Francis, it's simply not good enough. It's not bloody good enough I tell you. We get the Chancellor's report in Cabinet Committee yesterday, the full Cabinet discusses it for the first time today, and by this afternoon it's known to every sniveling little shit in the Opposition. Less than two dozen Cabinet ministers knew, only a handful of civil servants were in the loop. Who leaked it, Francis? Who? You're Chief Whip. I want you to find the bastard and I want him hanged from the clock tower by his balls!"

Urquhart breathed a huge sigh of relief. Until the Prime Minister's outburst he'd had no idea if the finger of blame was already pointing at him. He smiled, but only on the inside. "It simply astonishes me, Henry, that one of our Cabinet colleagues would want deliberately to leak something like this," he began, implicitly ruling out the possibility of a civil service leak, narrowing the circle of suspicion to include each and every one of his Cabinet colleagues.

"Whoever is responsible has humiliated me. I want him out, Francis. I want—I insist—that you find the worm. And then I want him fed to the crows."

"Henry, as a friend?"

"Of course!"

"I'm afraid there's been too much bickering among our colleagues since the election. Too many of them want someone else's job."

“They all want my job, I know that, but who would be so—so cretinous, so calculating, such a cock-artist as to deliberately leak something like that?”

“I can’t say”—the smallest of hesitations—“for sure.”

Collingridge picked up on the inflection. “An educated guess, for Chrissake.”

“That would scarcely be fair.”

“Fair? You think what just happened was fair, having my arse used as a letterbox?”

“But...”

“No ‘buts,’ Francis. If it’s happened once it can happen again and almost certainly will. Accuse, imply, whatever you damned well like. There are no minutes being taken here. But I want some names!” Collingridge’s fist came down on his desk so hard it made the reading lamp jump.

“If you insist, I’ll speculate. I know nothing for sure, you understand...let’s work from deduction. Given the timescale involved, it seems more likely to have leaked from yesterday’s Cabinet Committee rather than from today’s full Cabinet. Agreed?”

Collingridge nodded his assent.

“And apart from you and me, who is on that Committee?”

“Chancellor of the Exchequer, Financial Secretary, Health, Education, Environment, Trade, and Industry.” The Prime Minister reeled off those Cabinet ministers who had attended.

Urquhart remained silent, forcing Collingridge to finish off the logic himself. “Well, the two Treasury Ministers were scarcely likely to leak the fact that they’d screwed it up. But Health bitterly opposed it, so Paul McKenzie had a reason to leak it. Harold Earle at Education has always had a loose lip. And Michael Samuel has a habit of enjoying the company of the media rather too much for my liking.”

The suspicions and insecurities that lurk in the darker recesses of a Prime Minister’s mind were being dragged into the light.

“There are other possibilities, Henry, but I think them unlikely,” Urquhart joined in. “As you know Michael is very close to Teddy Williams. They discuss everything together. It could have come out of Party Headquarters. Not from Teddy, I’m sure, he’d never...But one of the officials there might have leaked it.

Some of them spend their lives pissing into paper pots.”

Collingridge pondered for some moments in silence. “Could it really have been Teddy?” he mused. “He was never my greatest supporter—different generations—but I brought him in from the scrap heap, made him one of the team. And he repays me with this?”

“It is only a suspicion, Henry...”

The Prime Minister threw himself into his chair, exhausted, no longer willing to fight the thought. “Perhaps I’ve relied on Teddy too much recently. I thought he had no ax to grind, no ambition left, not in the House of Lords. One of the old guard. Loyal. Was I wrong, Francis?”

“I don’t know. You asked me to speculate.”

“Make sure, Francis. Do whatever you need to do. I want him, whoever he is. I want his balls dragged out through his ears and I want the whole of Westminster to hear the screams.”

Urquhart nodded and lowered his eyes, as a servant might, not wanting the Prime Minister to see the delight dancing within them. Collingridge had announced open season. Urquhart was back on the moors, his feet planted firmly in the heather, waiting for the birds to rise.

Eleven

Christopher Columbus was a huge disappointment. When he set out he had no idea where he was going, and when he'd arrived he had no idea where he was. If you want to screw the natives, much better to stay at home.

Friday, July 16—Thursday, July 22

Life in the House of Commons can be exhilarating, occasionally historic, but that is not the norm. The norm is crap. Long hours, heavy workloads, too much entertaining and too little respite all ensure that the long summer break beckons to Members like an oasis in a desert. And while they wait, patience thins and tempers fray. During the days before the recess, Urquhart moved around the corridors and bars of the House, trying to bolster morale and calm the doubts of many Government backbenchers who were growing uneasy about Collingridge's increasingly scratchy performance. Morale is easier to shatter than to rebuild and some old hands thought Urquhart was trying perhaps a little too hard, his strenuous efforts serving to remind many that the Prime Minister had gotten himself into surprisingly choppy waters, but if it were a fault on the part of the Chief Whip, it was one that was generally recognized as exceptional if occasionally aggressive loyalty. But what did it all matter? The breezes of the South of France beckoned and would soon be washing away many of the parliamentary cares.

August was a safety valve, which was why governments had a knack of trying to bury difficult announcements in the final dog days of the session, often slipping out the details by means of a Written Answer published in Hansard, the voluminous official report of parliamentary proceedings. It meant that the matter

had been placed openly and clearly on the public record, but at a time when most Members were packing up their desks and trying to remember where they had hidden their passports. Even if one or two did spot the detail, there was scarcely time or opportunity to make much of a fuss. It was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—so long as you read the fine print.

Which was why it was unfortunate that a photocopy of a draft Written Answer from the Secretary of State for Defense should have been found a full ten days before it was due to be published, lying under a chair in Annie's Bar, where Members and journalists congregated to gossip. It was an added embarrassment that the Written Answer announced the intention to impose substantial cuts on the Territorial Army on the grounds that the TA was increasingly less relevant to government plans in the nuclear era. What made the matter all the more exquisitely awkward was that the draft was found by the lobby correspondent of the *Independent*. Everybody liked the man, respected him, he knew how to check out a story. So when it became the page one lead item in his newspaper four days later, at what was the start of the final full week before the summer recess, people knew it was reliable. Cock-up soon became chaos.

Retribution arrived from an unusual source. The pay of the Territorial Army wasn't large but its numbers were great and influential. Considerable prestige was involved. In constituency parties up and down the country there were senior members who proudly added the initials "TD" after their names—"Territorial Decoration"—someone who had served in and would defend the Terrors to their last drop of writing ink.

So when the House gathered to wrap up some of the final business of the session with the Leader of the House, the air was heavy not simply with midsummer heat but with accusations of betrayal and emotional appeals for a change of course, almost all of which came from the Government benches. The Opposition scarcely had to break sweat, sitting back like contented Roman lions watching the Christians do all the work for them.

Sir Jasper Grainger, OBE, JP, and very much TD, was on his feet. The old man proudly sported a carefully ironed regimental tie along with a heavy three-piece tweed suit, refusing to compromise his personal standards in spite of the

inadequate air-conditioning. He was a senior backbencher and the elected Chairman of the Backbench Defense Committee. His words carried weight.

“May I return to the point raised by several of my Honorable Friends about these unnecessary and deeply damaging cuts? Will the Leader of the House be in no doubt about the depth of feeling among his own supporters on this matter?” As his anger grew, white flecks of spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth. “Has he any idea of the damage that this will do to the Government over the coming months? Will he even now allow the House time to debate and reverse this decision, because if he doesn’t, he will leave the government defenseless to accusations of bad faith just as he will leave the country defenseless against bad friends?”

Roars of manly support came from all sides, apart from the government Front Bench. The Leader of the House, Simon Lloyd, straightened and readied himself once again to come to the Dispatch Box; he was beginning to feel it should have been constructed with sandbags. He was a sound man, plenty of “bottom,” but it had been a torrid twenty minutes and he had grown tetchy as he found the response he had prepared earlier affording increasingly less protection from the grenades being thrown at him by his own side. He was glad his Prime Minister and the Defense Secretary were sitting beside him on the Front Bench. Why should he suffer on his own? He hopped from foot to foot, as did his argument.

“My Honorable Friend misses the point. The document published in the newspapers was stolen Government property. Stolen! And that’s an issue which rises high above the details of the document itself. If there is to be a debate, it should be about such flagrant breaches of honesty. He’s a man of both honor and experience and frankly I would have expected him to join me in wholeheartedly condemning the theft of important Government documents. He must realize that by going on about its details he’s as good as condoning the activity of common theft.”

It sounded good, for a moment, until Sir Jasper rose to seek permission to pursue the point. It would not normally be granted but these circumstances weren’t normal. Amidst waving of Order Papers throughout the Chamber, the Speaker consented. The old soldier gathered himself up to his full height, back straight, mustache bristling and face flushed with genuine anger.

“It’s my Right Honorable Friend who is missing the point,” he thundered. “Doesn’t he understand that I would rather live alongside a common British thief than a common Russian soldier, which is precisely the fate his policy is threatening us with?”

Uproar followed, which took the Speaker a full minute to quell. During that time the Leader of the House turned and offered a look of sheer desperation to the Prime Minister and the Defense Secretary. They huddled, heads locked, until Collingridge gave a curt nod to the Leader of the House. He rose slowly to his feet once more.

“Mr. Speaker,” he began, and paused to clear his throat, which was by now parched. “Mr. Speaker, my Right Honorable Friends and I have listened carefully to the mood of the House. I have the permission of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defense to say that, in light of the representations put from all sides today, the Government will look once again at this important matter to see...”

What he could see seemed of little interest to others; his words were lost amidst a huge outcry. He had run up the white flag. Colleagues slapped Sir Jasper’s back, the Opposition jeered, the parliamentary correspondents scribbled in their notebooks. Amidst the hubbub and confusion on all sides, the lonely figure of Henry Collingridge sat forlorn and shrunken, staring at his socks.

* * *

“Kebabed, wouldn’t you say? Done to a bloody crisp,” the PA’s Manny Goodchild announced as Mattie pushed her way through the crowd jostling in the lobby outside the Chamber. She didn’t stop. In every corner there was argument: Opposition Members gloating, claiming victory for themselves while Government supporters with considerably less conviction tried to claim victory for common sense. Yet no one was in any doubt that they had witnessed a Prime Minister on the rack.

Mattie pursued her quarry. Above the mêlée she saw the tall figure of Urquhart, stony-faced, moving, avoiding the questions of several agitated backbenchers. He disappeared through a convenient door. Mattie charged after him. She found him striding two steps at a time up the marbled stairs that led to

the upper galleries.

“Mr. Urquhart,” she shouted breathlessly after the fleeing minister. “Please! I need your view.”

“I’m not sure I have one today, Miss Storin.” Urquhart threw his reply over his shoulder; he didn’t stop.

“Oh, surely we’re not back on the ‘Chief Whip refuses to endorse Prime Minister’ game again?”

Suddenly Urquhart stopped and turned, bringing his face to face with the panting Mattie. His eyes burned bright, there was no humor in them. “Yes, Mattie, I suppose you have a right to expect something. Well, what do you think?”

“Skewered. That’s the official view. If Collingridge’s feet were in the fire before this, then the more sensitive parts of his anatomy seem about to follow.”

“Yes, you might say that. It’s not unusual for a prime minister to have to discard his clothes, of course. But to have them stripped off him quite so publicly...”

Mattie waited in vain for Urquhart to finish. He wasn’t about to condemn his Prime Minister, not openly on the stairs. But if there were no condemnation, neither was there any attempt at justification.

“But this is the second major leak in as many weeks. Where are they coming from?”

He stared at her in his hawk-like manner that she found so compelling, and just a little scary. “As Chief Whip I am responsible only for discipline on the Government backbenches. You can scarcely expect me to play headmaster to my own Cabinet colleagues as well.”

Her lips trembled, she gasped. “It’s coming from Cabinet?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Did I say that?”

“But who? And why?”

He drew closer. “Oh, you see right through me, so you do, Miss Mattie Storin.” He was laughing at her now, and so close she could feel the heat of his body. “In answer to your question, I simply don’t know,” he continued, “but doubtless the Prime Minister will instruct me to find out.”

“Formally or informally?”

“I think I’ve probably said enough already,” he said, and continued up the stairs.

But Mattie wasn’t to be thrown off. “Fascinating. Thank you. Lobby terms, of course.”

“But I have told you nothing.”

“The Prime Minister is about to launch an inquiry into which of his own Cabinet colleagues is leaking sensitive information.”

He stopped once more, turned. “Oh, Mattie, I couldn’t possibly comment. But you are so much more sensitive than most of your dull-witted colleagues. It seems to me that your logic rather than my words has led you to your conclusions.”

“I wouldn’t want to get you into any trouble.”

“But, Mattie, I think that’s precisely what you *would* like to do.” He was playing with her, almost flirting.

She stared back at him, her voice little more than a whisper. “You know far more about trouble than I do. You’d find me a willing pupil.”

She wasn’t entirely sure why she had said that. She should have blushed, but didn’t. He should have deflected the innuendo, but held it, savored it with his eyes.

Suddenly, she grasped his sleeve. “If we’re going to be wicked together we have to learn to trust each other, so just let me get one thing perfectly clear. You are not denying that the Prime Minister will order an investigation into his Cabinet members’ conduct. And by not denying it, you are confirming it.”

It was his turn to lower his voice. “You might say that, Mattie. I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“That’s the story I’m going to write. If it’s wrong, I beg you, stop me now.”

Her grip on him had tightened. His hand was on top of hers.

“Stop you, Mattie? Why, we’ve only just started.”

Twelve

A life of extended credit, Indian cooking, and English boys is never likely to keep a man comfortable for long. But of all those three, I would recommend extended credit.

Wickedness. Was that what he was up to? Yes, it probably was, Urquhart decided as he continued up the stairs. He leaned against the wall and laughed out loud, much to the consternation of two passing colleagues who scurried past, shaking their heads. Eventually he found himself at the Strangers' Gallery, where members of the public squeeze themselves into rows of narrow benches to view the proceedings of the House below them. He caught the eye of a small and impeccably dressed Indian gentleman for whom he had obtained a seat in the Gallery, and signaled to him. The man struggled to extract himself from the packed public benches, squeezing past knees, mouthing apologies as he went, until he found himself standing before his host. Urquhart motioned him to silence and led him toward the small hallway behind the Gallery.

“Mr. Urquhart, sir, it has been a most exciting and highly educational ninety minutes. I am deeply indebted to you for assisting me to obtain such a comfortable position.” The man's accent was thick with the subcontinent and his head weaved from side to side in the mannered Indian way as he spoke.

Urquhart knew this was balderdash, that even small Indian gentlemen such as Firdaus Jhabwala found the seating arrangement acutely uncomfortable, but he nodded in gratitude. They chatted politely while Jhabwala secured the release of his black hide attaché case from the attendant's desk. When he had arrived he had firmly refused to hand it over until told that his entry to the Gallery would be

forbidden unless he lodged it with the security desk.

“I am so glad that we British can still trust ordinary working chaps with our possessions,” he stated very seriously, patting the case for comfort.

“Quite,” replied Urquhart, who trusted neither the ordinary working chap nor Jhabwala. Still, he was a constituent who seemed to have various flourishing local businesses and had provided a £500 donation toward his campaign expenses, asking for nothing in return except a personal interview in the House of Commons. “Not in the constituency,” he had explained to Urquhart’s secretary on the phone. “It’s a national rather than local matter.”

At £500 for a cup of tea it seemed a bargain. As Urquhart led the way he gave his guest a short tour—the glorious Pugin mosaics of Central Lobby, the frescoes of St. Stephen’s Chapel, the vaulted oak ceiling of Westminster Hall that soared so high and so dark it was almost lost to view. Those rafters were a thousand years old, the most ancient part of the palace. It was here that Jhabwala asked to stand for a while. “I would be grateful for a silent moment in this spot where King Charles was condemned and Winston Churchill lay in state.”

The Chief Whip arched his brow in surprise.

“Mr. Urquhart, please do not think me pretentious,” the Indian insisted. “My family associations with British institutions go back nearly two hundred and fifty years to the days of the Honorable East India Company and Lord Clive, whom my ancestors advised and to whom they loaned considerable funds. Both before that time and since my family has occupied prestigious positions in the judicial and administrative branches of Indian government.” There was no mistaking the pride, but, even as the words rang out in Jhabwala’s trilling voice, the eyes lowered in sadness. “Yet since Independence, Mr. Urquhart, that once great subcontinent has slowly crumbled into a new dark age. The modern Gandhi dynasty has shown itself to be far more corrupt than any my family ever served in colonial days. I am a Parsee, a cultural minority which has found little comfort under the new Raj. That is why I moved to Great Britain. My dear Mr. Urquhart, please believe me when I tell you that I feel more a part of this country and its culture than ever I could back in modern India. I wake up grateful every day that I can call myself a British citizen and educate my children in British universities.”

“That is...so touching,” responded Urquhart, who had never been particularly keen on foreigners taking up places at British universities and had said so on several public occasions. He hurried his guest on toward the interview rooms beneath the Great Hall, their shoes clipping across the worn flagstones as the sun slanted through the ancient windows and staircases of light reached down to the floor.

“And what precisely is it that you do, Mr. Jhabwala?” asked Urquhart hesitantly, afraid his inquiry might spark another monologue.

“I, sir, am a trader, not an educated man, not like my sons. I left behind any hope of that during the great turmoil of Indian Independence. I have therefore had to find my way not with my brain but by diligence and hard work. I am happy to say that I have been moderately successful.”

“What sort of trade?”

“I have several business interests, Mr. Urquhart. Property. Wholesaling. A little local finance. But I am no narrow-minded capitalist. I am well aware of my duty to the community. It is about that I wished to speak with you.”

They had arrived at the interview room and, at Urquhart’s invitation, Jhabwala seated himself in one of the green chairs, his fingers running with delight over the gold embossed portcullis that embellished the upright leather back.

“So, Mr. Jhabwala, how might I help you?” Urquhart began.

“But no, my dear Mr. Urquhart, it is I who wish to help you.”

A furrow of puzzlement planted itself on Urquhart’s forehead.

“Mr. Urquhart, I was not born in this country. That means that of necessity I am required to work particularly hard to gain respectability in the community. So I try. The local Rotary Club, various charities. And, as you know, I am a most enthusiastic supporter of the Prime Minister.”

“I’m afraid you did not see him to best advantage this afternoon.”

“Then I suspect he needs his friends and supporters more than ever,” Jhabwala declared, slapping the palm of his hand on the hide case that lay on the table in front of him.

The furrows deepened on Urquhart’s brow as he struggled to find the meaning and direction behind his guest’s remarks.

“Mr. Urquhart. You know that I have great admiration for you.”

“Ye-e-e-s,” Urquhart said cautiously.

“I was happy to assist in a modest way with your election appeal and would be happy to do so again. For you, Mr. Urquhart. And our Prime Minister!”

“You wish...to make...a donation?”

The head was wobbling from side to side once more. Urquhart found it disconcerting.

“Election campaigns must be so very expensive, my dear Mr. Urquhart. I wonder, would it be permissible for me to make a small donation? To replenish the coffers?”

When it came to donations from foreign sources, Urquhart was well outside his comfort zone. Time and again such matters had dragged politicians into trouble, sometimes even into jail. “Well, I’m sure that...As you say, such things are costly...I believe we could...” For pity’s sake, Urquhart, pull yourself together! “Mr. Jhabwala, could I ask how much you were thinking of giving?”

In reply Jhabwala twirled the combination lock on his case and flipped the two brass catches. The lid sprang open and he turned the case to face Urquhart.

“Would £50,000 be an acceptable gesture of support?”

Urquhart resisted the ferocious temptation to pick up one of the bundles of notes and start counting. He noticed that all the wads were of used £20 notes and were tied with rubber bands rather than bank wrappers. He had little doubt that none of this money had passed through formal accounts.

“This is...most generous, Mr. Jhabwala. Yes, certainly, as I say, most very generous. But...it is a little unusual, for such a large donation to the Party, to come—in cash.”

“My dear Mr. Urquhart, you will understand that during the civil war in India my family lost everything. Our house and business were destroyed, we only narrowly escaped with our lives. A mob burned my local bank to the ground—with all its deposits and records. The bank’s head office apologized, of course, but without any records they could only provide my father with their regrets rather than the funds he had deposited with them. It may seem a little old fashioned of me, I know, but I still prefer to trust cash rather than cashiers.”

The businessman’s teeth sparkled in reassurance. Urquhart was convinced

this was trouble. He took a deep breath. “May I be blunt, Mr. Jhabwala?”

“But of course.”

“It is sometimes the case with first-time donors that they believe there is something the Party can do for them, when in reality our powers are very limited...”

Jhabwala nodded in understanding even as his head weaved from side to side. “There is nothing I wish to do other than to be a firm supporter of the Prime Minister. And yourself, Mr. Urquhart. You will understand as a local MP that my business interests occasionally bring me into most friendly contact with local authorities on matters such as planning permission or tendering for contracts. I may at some point ask for your advice but I assure you I am looking for no favors. I want nothing in exchange. Absolutely nothing, no, no! Except, perhaps, to request that I and my wife have the honor of meeting with the Prime Minister at some suitable time, particularly if he should ever come to the constituency. Might that be acceptable? It would mean a very great deal to my wife.”

£500 for a cup of tea, £50,000 for a photograph. The man struck a generous bargain.

“I am sure that could be arranged. Perhaps you and your wife would like to attend a reception at Downing Street.”

“It would be an honor, of course, and perhaps to be able to have just a few private words with him, to express my great personal enthusiasm?”

A little more than a mere photograph, then, but that was only to be expected. “You will understand that the Prime Minister himself couldn’t personally accept your donation. It would not be—how should I put it?—delicate for him to be involved with such matters.”

“Of course, of course, Mr. Urquhart. Which is why I want you to accept the money on his behalf.”

“I’m afraid I can only give you a rudimentary receipt. Perhaps it would be better if you delivered the money directly to the Party treasurers.”

Jhabwala threw up his hands in horror. “Mr. Urquhart, sir, I do not require a receipt. Not from you. You are my friend. I have even taken the liberty of engraving your initials on this case. Look, Mr. Urquhart.” He tapped the initials with his fingertip. FU stood out in bold capitals of gold. “It is a small gesture

which I hope you will accept for all your wonderful work in Surrey.”

You crafty, ingratiating little sod, thought Urquhart, all the while returning Jhabwala’s broad smile and wondering how long it would be before he got the first call about planning permission. He should have thrown the Indian out but instead he reached across the table and shook Jhabwala’s hand warmly. An idea was forming in his mind. This man and his money were undoubtedly trouble, of that there was no longer a shred of doubt. The question was, trouble for whom?

Thirteen

Westminster was once a riverside swamp. Then they transformed it, built a palace and a great abbey, piled it high with noble architecture and insatiable ambition.

But deep down it is still a swamp.

Friday, July 23

Praed Street, Paddington. A scruffy newsagent's in a street that was modest by day and, in the view of the local constabulary, far too ambitious by night. A young black woman hesitated on the pavement, took a breath of west London air, and stepped inside. Behind the security grille and dirty windows, the shop was dark and musty. The shopkeeper, an overweight middle-aged Italian in a tight T-shirt with a cigarette hanging from his lip, was bent over a magazine, the sort that had few words. He raised his eyes reluctantly. She asked about the cost of accommodation address facilities that he advertised on a card in the window, explaining that she had a friend who needed a private address for some of his personal mail. The shopkeeper brushed away the cigarette ash he had spilled over the counter.

"This friend of yours, he got a name?"

In reply she pushed across a copy of an old utility bill.

"No credit. I work only in cash," he said.

"So do I," she replied.

He offered her a fleshy smile, leered. "You do discounts?"

She stared at his midriff. "I'd have to charge you double."

He raised a lip, sneered, scribbled a quick note. She paid the fee for the

minimum period of three months, put the receipt she would need for identification in her purse, and left. The shopkeeper stared at the retreating and delicately curved backside before being distracted by the complaints of an old age pensioner about the lack of her morning newspaper. He didn't see the young woman get into the taxi that had been waiting for her outside.

"All right, Pen?" O'Neill asked as she slammed the door behind her and settled into the seat beside him.

"No problem, Rog," his assistant answered. "But why the hell couldn't he do it himself?"

"Look, I told you. He has some delicate personal problems to sort out and needs some privacy for his mail. Dirty magazines for all I know. So no questions, and not a word to anyone. OK?"

O'Neill was irritable, felt uncomfortable. Urquhart had sworn him to secrecy and he suspected the Chief Whip would be furious if he discovered that O'Neill had pushed the envelope and got Penny Guy to do his dirty work. But he knew he could trust Penny. And he resented the way Urquhart seemed to regard him as a dogsbody and made him feel so ridiculously insignificant.

As the taxi pulled away he settled back in the seat while his fingers toyed nervously until they touched the small plastic packet in his pocket. That would soon settle things for him. Make him feel himself once again.

* * *

The day was growing ever hotter by the time the man in the sports jacket and trilby hat ventured into the north London branch of the Union Bank of Turkey on the Seven Sisters Road. He presented himself to the Cypriot counter clerk and inquired about opening an account. His eyes were hidden behind tinted glasses and he spoke with a slight but perceptible regional accent that the clerk couldn't quite place.

It took only a few minutes before the manager became available and the prospective new client was ushered into an inner sanctum. They exchanged pleasantries before the man explained that he lived in Kenya but was visiting the United Kingdom for a few months to develop his holiday and property portfolio. He was interested in investing in a hotel that was being built outside the Turkish

resort of Antalya, on the southern Mediterranean coast.

The manager responded that he did not know Antalya personally but had heard that it was a beautiful spot and, of course, the bank would be delighted to help him in whatever way possible. He offered the prospective customer a simple registration form, requiring details of his name, address, previous banking reference, and other details. The customer apologized for being able to provide a banking reference only from Kenya but explained that this was his first trip to London in nearly twenty years. The manager assured the older man that the bank was very accustomed to dealing with overseas inquiries and a banking reference from Kenya did not pose any particular problem.

The customer smiled. The system operated in its own sweet time. It would take at least four weeks for the reference to be checked and would probably take another four before it would be established that the reference was false. Time enough for what he had in mind.

“And how would you like to open your account, sir?” the manager inquired.

The man pulled open a brown corduroy holdall and placed it on the desk between them. “I would like to make an initial deposit of £50,000—in cash.”

“But, of course...” the manager said, struggling to contain his delight.

Francis Urquhart leaned back in his chair and, without removing his glasses, rubbed his eyes. The spectacles were years old, at least two prescriptions behind his current contacts, and were making his eyes ache. A simple disguise, but one he thought was more than adequate to avoid recognition by any but his closest colleagues. There was, after all, some benefit in being the most faceless senior member of Her Majesty’s Government.

While Urquhart signed the necessary forms with a scrawl, the manager finished counting the money and began filling out a receipt. Banks are like plumbers, Urquhart thought; cash in hand and no questions asked.

“One other thing,” Urquhart said.

“But of course.”

“I don’t want the cash sitting idle in a current account. I’d like you to purchase some shares for me. Can you arrange that?”

The manager was nodding delightedly. More commission.

“I’d like you to purchase twenty thousand ordinary shares in the Renox

Chemical Company PLC. They're currently trading at just over 240p per share, I believe."

The manager consulted his screen and assured his client that the order would be completed by 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, at a cost of £49,288.40 including stamp duties and brokers' fees. It would leave precisely £711.60 in the new account. Urquhart signed yet more forms with a flourish and the same illegible signature.

The manager smiled as he pushed the receipt across the desktop to his new client. "It is a great pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Collingridge."

Monday, July 26—Wednesday, July 28

End of term. The final week before the start of the summer recess. And a heat wave. Many MPs had already abandoned Westminster and those who had stayed at their posts were left distracted and impatient. Surviving eighty degree temperatures inside a building where the idea of air conditioning was to open a window and flap an Order Paper was an ordeal. But it would soon be over. Only seventy-two hours of bickering left.

The Government didn't mind the sense of distraction. The record would show that they, at least, had stuck to their posts, issuing wedges of Written Answers and press releases while others wilted. Ministers from the Department of Health were particularly grateful for the diversion since one of the many Written Answers they issued concerned the postponement of the hospital expansion program. Thanks to the leak it was already old news, but now it was on the record they could at least come out in daylight and not run for the shadows every time anyone asked.

The Department had other issues to deal with, too. Hospital waiting lists. A press release about the latest outbreak of mumps in Wales. And a routine announcement about three new drugs that the Government, on the advice of their Chief Medical Officer and the Committee on the Safety of Medicines, were licensing for general use. One of the drugs was Cybernox, a new medication developed by the Renox Chemical Company PLC that had proved startlingly effective in controlling the craving for nicotine when fed in small doses to addicted rats and beagles. The same excellent results had been obtained during

extensive testing on humans, and now the entire population could get it under doctor's prescription.

The announcement caused a flurry of activity at Renox Chemicals. A press conference was called for the following day. The Marketing Director pressed the button on a pre-planned mail shot to every single general practitioner in the country, and the company's broker informed the Stock Exchange of the new license.

The response was immediate. Shares in the Renox Chemical Company PLC jumped from 244p to 295p. The twenty thousand ordinary shares purchased two days before by the Union Bank of Turkey's brokers were now worth £59,000, give or take a little loose change.

Shortly before noon the following day, a telephone call to the manager of the Union Bank of Turkey instructed him to sell the shares and credit the amount to the appropriate account. The caller also explained that regrettably the hotel venture in Antalya was not proceeding and the account holder was returning to Kenya. Would the bank be kind enough to close the account and expect a visit from the account holder later that afternoon?

It was just before the bank closed at 3:00 p.m. that the same man in the hat and sports jacket and tinted glasses walked into the branch on Seven Sisters Road. He was invited into the manager's office, where tea was waiting, but he declined. He watched as the manager and an assistant placed bundles of £20 notes on his desk to the value of £58,250.00, plus another £92.16 in other denominations, which the customer placed in the bottom of his brown corduroy bag. He eyebrows arched at the £742.00 in charges the bank had levied on his short-lived and simple account but, as the manager had suspected, he chose not to make a fuss. He asked for a closing statement to be sent to him at his address in Paddington and thanked the clerk for his courtesy.

The following morning and less than one week after Firdaus Jhabwala had met with Urquhart, the Chief Whip delivered £50,000 in cash to the Party treasurer. Substantial payments in cash were not unknown and the treasurer expressed delight at discovering a new source of funds. Urquhart suggested that the treasurer's office make the usual arrangements to ensure that the donor and his wife were invited to a charity reception or two at Downing Street, and asked

to be informed when this happened so that he could make a specific arrangement with the Prime Minister's political secretary to ensure that Mr. and Mrs. Jhabwala had ten minutes alone with the Prime Minister beforehand.

The treasurer made a careful note of the donor's address, said that he would write an immediate and suitably cryptic letter of thanks, and locked the money in a safe.

Uniquely among the fellowship of Cabinet ministers, Urquhart left for holiday that evening feeling utterly relaxed.

PART TWO

THE CUT

Fourteen

I once won second prize at school. I got a Bible, bound in leather. A note inside the cover, written in copperplate, said it was a prize for achievement. Achievement? For coming second?

I read that Bible from cover to cover. I noticed that St. Luke said that we should forgive our enemies. I read the rest of his words, and the words of all the saints, truly I did. Nowhere did any of them mention a thing about forgiving our friends.

August

A time of respite, of pushing cares to one side, of summer showers and freshness, of ice cream and strawberries and lollipops and laughter, of remembering all those things that life should be about. Except the newspapers during August were bloody dreadful.

With politicians and the main political correspondents all away, second-string lobby correspondents struggled to fill the vacuum and cement their careers. So they chased every passing whisper. What was on Tuesday only a minor piece of speculation on page five had by Friday sometimes led the paper. The August crowd wanted to make their mark, and the mark they chose all too frequently to make was on the reputation of Henry Collingridge. Backbenchers who had been left to molder and whom time had forgotten suddenly were honored with significant pieces describing them as “senior party figures,” those who were new to the game were called “up and coming,” and they were all given space so long as their views were salacious and spiced. Rumors about the Prime Minister’s distrust of his Cabinet colleagues abounded, as did reports of their dissatisfaction

with him, and since there was no one around to authoritatively deny the rumors the silence was taken as authoritative consent. The speculation fed on itself and ran riot.

Mattie's report sparked rumors about an "official inquisition" into Cabinet leaks. Soon after, they had grown into predictions that there would after all be a reshuffle in the autumn. The word around Westminster had it that Henry Collingridge's temper was getting increasingly erratic, even though he was enjoying a secluded holiday on a private estate many hundreds of miles away near Cannes.

It was during these dog days of August that the Prime Minister's brother also became the subject of a spate of press stories, mostly in the gossip columns. The Downing Street Press Office was repeatedly called upon to comment on suggestions that the Prime Minister was bailing out "dear old Charlie" from the increasingly close attentions of his creditors, including the Inland Revenue. Of course, Downing Street wouldn't offer any comment—it was personal, not official—so the formal "no comment" that was given to the most fanciful of accusations was recorded in the news coverage, usually with a twist and innuendo that left it bathed in the most damaging light.

August tied the Prime Minister ever more closely to his impecunious brother. Not that Charlie was saying anything stupid; he had the common sense to keep well out of the way. But an anonymous telephone call to one of the sensationalist Sunday newspapers helped track him down to a cheap hotel in rural Bordeaux. A reporter was sent to pour enough wine down him to encourage a few vintage "Charlie-isms," but instead succeeded only in making Charlie violently sick over the reporter and his notebook. Then he passed out. The reporter promptly paid £50 to a big-busted girl to lean over the slumbering form while a photographer captured the tender moment for posterity and the newspaper's eleven million readers.

"'I'M BROKE AND BUSTED,' SAYS CHARLIE," the headline screamed while the copy beneath it reported that the Prime Minister's brother was nearly destitute and cracking under the pressure of a failed marriage and a famous brother. In the circumstances Downing Street's "absolutely no comment" seemed even more uncaring than usual.

The next weekend the same photograph was run alongside one of the Prime Minister holidaying in considerable comfort in the South of France—to English eyes a mere stone’s throw from his ailing brother. The implication was clear. Henry couldn’t be bothered to leave his poolside to help. The fact that the same newspaper a week earlier had been reporting how deeply Henry was involved in sorting out Charlie’s financial affairs seemed to have been forgotten—until the Downing Street Press Office called the editor to complain.

“What the hell do you expect?” came the reply. “We always give both sides of the story. We backed him warts and all through the election campaign. Now it’s time to restore the balance a bit.”

Yes, the newspapers during August were dreadful. Truly bloody dreadful.

September–October

It got worse. As the new month of September opened, the Leader of the Opposition announced he was resigning to make way for “a stronger arm with which to hold our banner aloft.” He had always been a little too verbose for his own good, that was one of the reasons why he’d been pushed—that, and losing the election, of course. He was killed off by the younger men around him who had more energy and more ambition, who made their moves quietly, almost without his knowing until it was too late. He announced his intention to resign in an emotional late-night interview from his constituency in the heartland of Wales, but by the weekend almost seemed to have changed his mind under pressure from his still intensely ambitious wife, until he discovered that he could no longer rely on a single vote in his Shadow Cabinet. Yet, once he had gone, they were eloquent in praise of their fallen leader. His death united his party more effectively than anything he had achieved in office.

The arrival of a new political leader electrified the media and gave them raw meat on which to feast. It wasn’t enough to satisfy them, of course. It did nothing but whet their appetite for more. One down, more to follow?

When Mattie received her summons to hurry back to the office she was with her mother in the kitchen of the old stone cottage outside Catterick.

“But you’ve only just got here, love,” her widowed mother protested.

“They can’t do without me,” Mattie replied.

It seemed to mollify her mother. “Your da would be so proud of you,” she said as Mattie scraped charcoal from the slice of toast she had just scorched. “You sure there’s not a young man you’re missing?” she added gaily, teasing.

“It’s work, Mum.”

“But...Is there anyone you’ve found in London, caught your eye, sort of thing?” her mother pressed, eying her daughter with curiosity as she served up a plate of bacon and eggs fresh from the pan. Mattie had been remarkably quiet since she’d arrived a couple of days earlier. Something was going on. “I were so worried for you when you broke up with Whassisname.”

“Tony, Mum. He has a name. Tony.”

“Not since he was silly enough to give up on you.”

“I gave up on *him*, Mum, you know that.” Not a bad sort, Tony, far from it, but no ambition to go South, not even with Mattie.

“So,” her mother muttered, wiping her hands on a tea towel, “is there anyone? In London?”

Mattie didn’t speak. She stared out of the window, ignored the breakfast. It was answer enough for her mother.

“Early days, is it, pet? Well, that’s good. You know, I was so worried when you went down to London. Such a lonely, unfriendly place. But if you’ve found your bit of happiness then that’s all right wi’ me.” She stirred a spoonful of sugar into her mug of tea. “Perhaps it’s not fair for me to say, but you know what your da thought about you. Nothing would’ve given him greater pleasure than to be around to watch you settle down.”

“I know, Mum.”

“Does he have a name?”

Mattie shook her head. “It’s not like that, Mum.”

But her mother knew better, could see it in her face, in the way her daughter’s thoughts had been elsewhere, back in London, ever since she’d arrived. She put her hand on Mattie’s shoulder.

“All in good time. Your da would be ever so proud of you, pet.”

Would he? Mattie doubted that. She’d done no more than touch the sleeve of this man but had spent the weeks since then fixated with him, lying awake, jumping when the phone rang, hoping it was him. Conjuring up thoughts she

should never have about someone who was three years older than her father would have been. No, her dad would never have understood, least of all approved. Mattie didn't understand it, either. So she said nothing and went back to her plate of cooling breakfast.

Fifteen

Party conferences can be such fun. They resemble a nest of cuckoos. Sit back and enjoy watching everyone trying to push the others out.

The Opposition elected its new leader shortly before the Party's annual conference in early October. The process of selecting a replacement front face seemed to galvanize them, gave them new hope, resurrection, and redemption wrapped in a bright red ribbon. The party that gathered together for its conference was unrecognizable as the rabble that had lost the election only a few months before. It celebrated beneath a banner that was as enormous as it was simple: VICTORY.

What took place the following week, as Collingridge's flock was gathered for its own conference, was in complete contrast. The conference center at Bournemouth could be uplifting when filled with four thousand enthusiastic supporters, but something was missing. Spirit. Ambition. Balls. The bare brick walls and chromium-plated fittings served only to emphasize the sullenness of those who gathered.

Which posed a considerable challenge for O'Neill. As Publicity Director he was charged with the task of packaging the conference and raising spirits; instead, he could be seen talking with increasing agitation to individual members of the media scrum, apologizing, justifying, explaining—and blaming. In particular, and when in alcohol, he blamed Lord Williams. The Chairman had cut the budget, delayed decisions, not got a grip on things. Rumors were circulating that he wanted the conference to be low key because he expected that the Prime Minister was likely to get a rough ride. "PARTY DOUBTS

COLLINGRIDGE LEADERSHIP” was the first *Guardian* report to come out of Bournemouth.

In the conference hall, the debates proceeded according to a rigid pre-set schedule. An enormous sign hung above the platform—“FINDING THE RIGHT WAY.” To many eyes it seemed ambivalent. The speeches struggled to obey its command and a distracting buzz took hold in margins of the hall that the stewards were quite incapable of quelling. Journalists and politicians gathered in little huddles in the coffee shops and rest areas, stirring tea and discontent. Everywhere they listened, the men from the media heard criticism. Former MPs who had recently lost their seats voiced their frustration, although most asked not to be quoted for fear of screwing up their chances of being selected for safer seats at the next election. However, their constituency chairmen showed no such caution. They’d not only lost their MPs but also faced several years of the Opposition in control of their local councils, nominating the mayor and committee chairmen, disposing of the fruits of local office.

And, as a previous prime minister had wistfully acknowledged, there were “events, dear, events” to reduce the hardiest of men to tantrums and despair. One of the most compelling events of the week was to be a by-election, due on Thursday. The Member for Dorset East, Sir Anthony Jenkins, had suffered a stroke just four days before the general election. He had been elected while in intensive care and buried on the day he should have been taking the Oath of Allegiance. Dorset East would have to do battle all over again. His seat, just a few miles from those gathering at Bournemouth, had a government majority of nearly twenty thousand, so the Prime Minister had decided to hold the by-election during conference week. There were those who had advised against it but he argued that, on balance, it was worth the risk. The conference publicity would provide a good campaigning background, and there would be a strong sympathy vote for Sir Anthony (not by those who knew the old sod, his agent had muttered). Party workers at the conference could take a few hours off and get in some much-needed canvassing, and, when they had finished their task and success was won, the Prime Minister would enjoy the enormous satisfaction (and cheap publicity) of being able to welcome the victorious candidate during his own conference speech. It was a plan. Of sorts.

Yet the busloads of conference-goers returning from their morning's canvass were bringing back reports of a coolness and complaint on the doorstep. The seat would be held, of course, nobody doubted that, it had been in the Party since the war, but the thumping victory that Collingridge had demanded was beginning to look more distant with every day.

Bugger. It was going to be a difficult week, not quite the victory celebration the Party managers had planned.

Wednesday, October 13

Mattie woke with a pounding headache. She looked out of the window at the sheet of grayness that had been pulled across the sky. A cold wet wind was blowing off the sea, tormenting seagulls and rattling her window. "Another day in paradise," she muttered, throwing back the covers.

She had little cause to be ungrateful. As the representative of a major national newspaper she was one of the few journalists fortunate enough to be offered accommodation in the headquarters hotel. Others fended for themselves in more distant venues and would get a damned good soaking by the time they made it to the conference center. Mattie, however, was one of the chosen few, accommodated in a hotel where she could mix freely with politicians and party officials. That was what accounted for her headache; she'd mixed a little too freely the previous evening. She'd been propositioned twice, once by a colleague and much later that evening by a Cabinet minister, who had gotten over Mattie's rejection by turning his attention to a young woman from a PR company. They had last been seen wandering off in the direction of the car park.

Mattie wasn't prudish about such matters. She and her colleagues deliberately stoked politicians with alcohol and there was a price to pay when the furnace grew overheated. A politician in a bar usually had one of two objectives—sex or slander—and such encounters provided a wonderful opportunity for Mattie to pick up gossip. The biggest problem was how many of the pieces her befuddled mind could pull together in the morning. She stretched her legs, trying to force the blood around her system, and made a tentative start on some calisthenics. Every limb screamed that this was a rotten way to cure a hangover so she opted instead for an open window—a move that she immediately recognized as the

second bad decision of the day. The small hotel was perched high on the cliff tops, ideal for catching the summer sun but exposed on an autumn morning of scudding clouds and sea storms. Her overheated room turned into an icebox in seconds, so Mattie decided she would make no more decisions until after a gentle breakfast.

It was as she wandered out of the shower that she heard a scuffling noise outside in the corridor. A delivery. She pulled a towel around her and crossed to the door. Work, in the form of the morning newspapers, was piled outside on the hallway carpet. She gathered them up and threw them carelessly toward the bed. As they spread chaotically over the ruffled duvet, a sheet of paper fluttered free and fell to the floor. She rubbed her eyes when she picked it up, then rubbed them again. The morning mists were slow to disperse. When they did she read the words emblazoned across the top of the sheet: "Opinion Research Survey No. 40, October 6." Even more prominent, in bold capital letters, was the word: "SECRET."

She sat down on the bed, rubbed her eyes once again to make sure. They've surely not started giving them away with the *Mirror*, she thought. She knew the Party conducted weekly surveys of public opinion but these had a highly restricted distribution, Cabinet ministers and a handful of top Party officials. She'd been shown copies on rare occasions, but only when they contained good news that the Party wanted to spread about a bit; otherwise they were kept under strictest security. Two questions immediately sprang into Mattie's mind, which was quickly recovering its edge. What good news could possibly be found in the latest survey? And why had it been delivered wrapped up like a serving of cod and chips?

As she read, her hand began to tremble in disbelief. The Party had won the election weeks ago with 43 percent of the vote. Now its popularity rating was down to 31 percent, a full 14 percent behind the Opposition. Avalanche and earthquake. Yet there was worse to come. The figures on the Prime Minister's popularity were appalling. He was miles behind the new Leader of the Opposition. About as popular as an intestinal worm. Collingridge was more disliked than any prime minister since Anthony Eden in his mad phase.

Mattie reknotted the towel around her and squatted on her bed. She no longer

needed to ask why she had been sent the information. It was dynamite, and all she had to do was light the touch paper. The damage it would do if it exploded in the middle of the Party conference would be catastrophic. This was a deliberate act of sabotage and a brilliant story—*her* story, so long as she got it in first.

She grabbed for the telephone and dialed.

“What?” a sleepy woman’s voice yawned.

“Hello, Mrs. Preston? It’s Mattie Storin. Sorry, so sorry if I woke you. Is Grev there, please?”

There was some subdued muttering before her editor came on the phone. “Who’s died?” he snapped.

“What?”

“Who’s bloody died? Why else would you call me at such a bloody stupid time?”

“Nobody died. I mean...I’m sorry. I forgot what time it was.”

“Shit.”

“But it doesn’t matter what time it is,” she bit back. “It’s a brilliant story.”

“What is?”

“I found it with my morning newspapers.”

“Well, that’s a relief. We’re now only a day behind the rest.”

“No, Grev. Listen will you? I’ve got hold of the Party’s latest polling figures. They’re sensational!”

“How did you get them?”

“They were left outside my door.”

“Gift wrapped, were they?” The editor never made much attempt to hide his sarcasm, and none at all at this hour of the morning.

“But they’re really unbelievable, Grev.”

“I bet they bloody are. So who left this little present outside the door, Santa Claus?”

“Er, I don’t know.” For the first time a hint of doubt crept into her voice. Her towel had slipped and she was sitting there naked. She felt as if her boss were staring at her. She was waking up very rapidly now.

“Well, I don’t suppose it was Henry Collingridge who left them there. So who do you think wanted to leak them to you?”

Mattie's silence confessed her confusion.

"I don't suppose you were out on the town with any of your colleagues last night, were you?"

"Grev, what the hell's that got to do with it?"

"You've been set up, little girl. They're probably sitting in the bar right now with the hair of the dog pissing themselves with laughter. Which is more than can be said for me."

"But how do you know?"

"I don't bloody know. But the point is, Wonder Woman, neither do you!"

There was another embarrassed silence from Mattie as she tried in vain to retrieve her fallen towel and before she made a last, despairing attempt to persuade her editor. "Don't you even want to know what they say?"

"No. Not if you don't know where they came from. And remember, the more sensational they look, the more certain it is you're being set up. A bloody hoax!"

The sound of the telephone being slammed down exploded in her ear. It would have hurt even had she not been hung over. The page one headlines she had conjured up in her mind dissolved back into the gray morning mists. Her hangover was a million times more malevolent. She needed a cup of black coffee. Badly. She'd made a fool of herself. Not for the first time. But normally she didn't do it stark naked.

Sixteen

What is the point of drawing a line in the sand? The wind blows and before you know it you're right back where you started.

Mattie cursed her editor under her breath as she slipped down the broad stairs of the hotel and found her way into the breakfast room. It was still early, only a handful of enthusiasts yet about. She sat down at a table on her own praying she wouldn't be disturbed. She needed recovery time. She hid herself in an alcove behind a copy of the *Express* and hoped people would conclude she was working rather than fixing a hangover.

The first cup of coffee bounced off her like a pebble skimming water but the second helped, a little. Slowly her depression began to loosen its grip and she began to take some interest in the rest of the world. Her gaze worked its way round the small Victorian room. In a far corner she spotted another political correspondent in a huddle of conversation with a minister. Elsewhere a senior party figure with his wife, a television newscaster, an editor of one of the *Sundays*, two other people she thought she recognized but couldn't yet place. The young man on the next table she definitely didn't know. He sat, rather like Mattie, almost hiding from the rest of the room. He had a pile of papers and folders on the chair next to him and an air of academic scruffiness. A party researcher, she concluded, not because her intellect was yet working but because squeezed onto the table between the tea and toast was a folder with a prominent party logo, and a name. K. J. Spence.

Her professional instincts began gradually to reassert themselves under the steady bombardment of caffeine, and she reached inside her ever-present

shoulder bag for a copy of the Party's internal telephone list that at some point she had begged or stolen—she couldn't remember which.

"Spence. Kevin. Extension 371. Opinion Research."

She rechecked the name on top of the folder, taking things one step at a time. She'd already waded through enough crap. She didn't want to make a fool of herself yet again, not before lunchtime at least. Her editor's sarcasm had undermined her faith in the leaked poll's statistics but it also left her wanting to rescue something from the fiasco. Maybe she could find out what the real figures were. She caught the man's eye.

"Kevin Spence, isn't it? From Party Headquarters? I'm Mattie Storin of the *Chronicle*."

"Oh, I know who you are," he replied, flustered, but also delighted to have been recognized.

"Can I join you for a cup of coffee, Kevin?" she asked, and without waiting for a reply moved across to his table.

Kevin Spence was aged thirty-two but looked older, was unmarried and a life-long creature of the Party machine with a salary of £10,200 (no perks). He was shy, bespectacled, awkward, bobbed up and down, not knowing whether it was the done thing to rise to a young woman at the breakfast table. Mattie shook his hand and smiled, and soon he was explaining with enthusiasm and in detail about the regular reports he'd given during the election to the Prime Minister and the Party's War Committee.

"They spent the entire campaign claiming that they took almost no notice of opinion polls," she prodded, "that the only poll that mattered—"

"—was the one on election day," he interrupted, delighted they were on a wavelength. "Yes, it's a little fiction we have. My job depends on them taking things seriously, although between you and me, Miss Storin—"

"Mattie."

"Some of them might be said to take the polls too seriously."

"How could that be, Kevin?"

"There's always a margin of error. And a rogue poll, just when you don't need it! Those wicked little creatures still sneak their way through from time to time."

“Like the one I’ve just seen,” Mattie remarked with a twinge, still tender from her earlier embarrassment.

“What do you mean?” Spence inquired, suddenly cautious, returning his tea to its saucer.

As Mattie stared at him she saw that the affable official had become formal, his hands clasped together on the tablecloth. A flush was spreading upwards from the collar to the eyes, and the eyes themselves had lost their eagerness. Spence wasn’t a trained politician and had no skill at hiding his feelings. His confusion was flowing through, yet why was he so flustered? Suddenly, Mattie mentally kicked herself. Surely the damned figures couldn’t be right after all? But why not hoist them up the flagpole and see if someone saluted? She’d already jumped several somersaults that morning and made a fool of herself in the process; one more leap could scarcely dent her professional pride any further.

“I understand, Kevin, that your latest figures are quite disappointing. Particularly those about the Prime Minister.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His hands were still clasped together, in prayer, or was it to stop them trembling? Then, in distraction, he made a grab for his cup but succeeded only in spilling it. In despair, he tried to mop up the mess with his napkin.

Meanwhile Mattie had reached once more inside her bag and pulled out the mysterious sheet of paper, which she proceeded to smooth out on the tablecloth. As she did so, she noticed for the first time the initials KJS typed along the bottom. The last dregs of her hangover vanished.

“Aren’t these your latest figures, Kevin?”

Spence tried to push the paper away from him as though it had some deep infestation. “Where on earth did you get that?” He looked around desperately to see whether anyone had noticed the exchange.

Mattie picked up the note and began reading it out loud. “Opinion Research Survey Number Forty—”

“Please, Miss Storin!”

He wasn’t a man used to dissembling, far too transparent to travel in safety, and he knew it. He could see no way of escape from his dilemma and decided

that his only means of survival was to throw himself on the mercy of his breakfast companion. In a hushed voice he pleaded with her. "I'm not supposed to talk to you. It's strictly confidential."

"But Kevin, it's only one piece of paper."

His eyes darted once more around the room. "You don't know what it's like. If these figures get out, and I'm the one thought to have given them to you, I'd be ruined. Shafted. Absolutely stuffed. Everyone's looking for scapegoats. There are so many rumors flooding around. The PM doesn't trust the Chairman, the Chairman doesn't trust us, and nobody's going to take pity on a guy like me. I like my job, Miss Storin. I can't afford to be blamed for leaking confidential figures to you."

"I didn't realize morale was so bad."

Spence looked utterly miserable. "You can't imagine. I've never known it worse. Frankly, all most of us are trying to do is to keep our heads down so that when it hits the fan we get as little of it as possible." He looked at her eye-to-eye for the first time. "Please, Mattie, don't drag me into this."

Sometimes she hated her job, and herself. This was one of those moments. She had to squeeze him until the pips squeaked. "Kevin, you didn't leak this report. You know it, I know it, and I'll confirm that to anyone who wants to know. But if I'm to help you, I shall need a little help myself. This is your latest polling report, right?"

She pushed the paper back across the table. Spence took another anguished look at it and nodded.

"They are prepared by you and circulated on a tightly restricted basis."

Another nod.

"All I need to know from you, Kevin, is who gets them. That can't be a state secret, can it?"

There was no more fight left in the man. He seemed to hold his breath for a long time before replying. "Numbered copies are circulated in double-sealed envelopes solely to Cabinet ministers and five senior headquarters personnel: the Deputy Chairman and four senior directors." He tried to moisten his mouth with another drink of tea but discovered he had already spilled most of it. "How on earth did you get hold of it?" he demanded wretchedly.

“Let’s just say someone got a little careless, shall we?”

“Not my office? Tell me it wasn’t my office!”

“No, Kevin. Do the arithmetic. You’ve just given me the names of more than two dozen people who get to see these figures. Add in their secretaries or assistants and that brings the possible number of sources to well over fifty.” She gave him one of her most reassuring, warm smiles. “Don’t worry, I won’t involve you.”

Relief flooded his face.

“But let’s keep in touch,” she added.

Mattie left the breakfast room with Spence’s gratitude, which made her feel better, and his home phone number, which made her feel better still. Part of her felt elated about the front page story she was now able to write, and the sense of satisfaction she would get when she watched her editor eat his version of humble pie. The news desk would wine out on that for a week. Yet through it all cut another, altogether more powerful consideration. Any one of fifty-odd people could have been the turncoat, setting up Collingridge by leaking this piece of paper. So who the hell was it?

* * *

Room 561 in the hotel could not be described as five-star. It was one of the smallest rooms, far away from the main entrance at the end of the top floor corridor and squeezed under the eaves. This wasn’t where the Party hierarchy stayed, it was definitely a room for the workers.

Penny Guy was taken unawares. She hadn’t heard any sound of approaching steps before the door burst open. She sat bolt upright in bed, startled, exposing two perfectly formed breasts.

“Shit, Roger, don’t you ever bloody knock?” She threw a pillow at the intruder in exasperation more than anger. “And what the hell are you doing up so early? You don’t normally surface until lunchtime.” She didn’t bother covering herself as O’Neill sat down at the end of the bed. There was an ease between them suggesting an absence of any sexual threat, which would have startled most people. O’Neill constantly flirted with her, particularly in public, could be proprietorial when other men came on the scene; yet on the two occasions when

Penny had mistaken the signals and offered more than secretarial service, O'Neill had been very affectionate and warm and muttered about being too exhausted. She guessed it wasn't her, it was his way with all women, that he had a deep streak of sexual insecurity running through him which he hid beneath flattery and innuendo. He'd been married once, way back, a pain that still pursued him through the mists of years, another part of his private life he was keen to cover up. Penny had worked for O'Neill for nearly three years and was devoted to him, longing to ease his insecurities, but he never seemed willing to drop his guard. To those who didn't know him well he was extrovert, amusing, full of charm, ideas, and energy, but Penny had watched him become increasingly erratic. His caution, even paranoia, about relationships had grown worse in recent months as he found the pressures of political life increasingly infatuating, even as he found them steadily more difficult to cope with. Nowadays he rarely came into the office before noon; he had started making many private phone calls, getting agitated, disappearing suddenly. Penny wasn't in any respect naive but she did love him, and her devotion made her blind. She knew he depended on her and, if he didn't need her in his bed, he needed her practically every other moment of his day. The bond between them was strong, and while it wasn't all that she wanted, she was willing to wait.

"You got up this early just to come and woo me, didn't you?" she teased, pouting in her bed.

"Cover yourself up, you little tart. That's not fair. *They're* not fair!" he exclaimed, gesturing at her body.

Playfully, provocatively, she threw back the bedclothes. She was starkly, stunningly naked.

"Oh, Pen, my darling, I wish I had this moment captured forever, in oils and on my wall."

"But not in your bed."

"Pen, please! You know I'm not at my best this early in the morning."

Reluctantly, she reached for her gown. "Yes, it is rather early for you, Rog. You haven't been up all night, have you?"

"Well, there was this incredibly beautiful Brazilian gymnast who's been teaching me a whole series of new exercises. We didn't have any gymnastic

rings, so we used the chandelier. OK?”

“Shut up, Rog,” she said firmly, her mood grown gray like the morning sky.

“What’s going on?”

“So young and yet so cynical?”

“It’s never let me down.”

“Which? Youth or cynicism?”

“Both. Particularly where you are concerned. So tell me the real reason you’re here.”

“OK, OK. I had to make a delivery. In the vicinity. So...I thought I’d come and say good morning.” It was almost the truth, as close as he got nowadays, but not all the truth. He didn’t mention that Mattie Storin had nearly caught him as he was putting the document among her newspapers and needed a place to lie for a while. Oh, he’d scuttled down that corridor as though he were sidestepping his way through the entire English defense toward the try line. What fun! So it would cause the Party Chairman trouble. Brilliant. The cantankerous old sod had been particularly short with him these last few weeks, as Urquhart had pointed out. The paranoia that possessed O’Neill’s mind completely failed to capture the fact that Williams had been short with almost everyone.

“Let’s just say I believe you,” Penny said. “But for pity’s sake, Rog, next time you come to say good morning, try knocking first. And make it after eight-thirty.”

“Don’t give me a hard time. You know I can’t live without you.”

“Enough passion, Rog. What do you want? You have to want something, don’t you, even if not my body?”

His eyes darted, like a guilty secret exposed. “Actually, I did come to ask you something. It’s a bit delicate really...” He gathered together his salesman’s charms and started upon the story that Urquhart had drummed into him the previous evening. “Pen, you remember Patrick Woolton, the Foreign Secretary. You typed a couple of his speeches during the election and he certainly remembers you. He, er, asked after you when I saw him last night. I think he’s rather smitten with you. Anyway, he wondered if you would be interested in dinner with him but he didn’t want to upset or offend you by asking direct, so I sort of offered, you know, to have a quiet word as it might be easier for you to

say no to me rather than to him personally. You see that, don't you, Pen?"

"Oh, Rog." There were tears in her voice.

"What's the matter, Pen?"

"Pimping for him." Her tone was bitter, an accusation.

"No, no at all, Pen, it's only dinner."

"It's never been just dinner. Ever since the age of fourteen it's never been just dinner." She was second-generation immigrant, had been brought up in a crowded tenement off Ladbroke Grove and knew all the compromises required of a young black girl in a white male world. That didn't distress her unduly; it gave her opportunity, but she wouldn't have her dignity stripped away, not like this.

"He's the Foreign Secretary, Pen," O'Neill protested.

"With a reputation as long as the Channel Tunnel."

"But what have you got to lose?"

"My self-esteem."

"Oh, come on, Pen. This is important. You know I wouldn't ask if it weren't."

"What the hell do you think of me?"

"I think you are beautiful, truly I do. I see you every day and you're the one thing that brings laughter into my life. But I'm desperate. Please, Pen, don't ask but...you've got to help me on this. Just dinner, I swear."

They were both in tears, and in love with each other. She knew it hurt him to ask this of her, that for some reason he found himself with no choice. And because she loved him, she didn't want to know why.

"OK. Just dinner," she whispered, lying to herself.

And he threw himself at her and kissed her with joy before he rushed out as breathlessly as he had barged in.

Five minutes later he was back in his own room and on the phone to Urquhart. "Delivery made and dinner fixed, Francis."

"Splendid, Roger. You've been most helpful. I hope the Foreign Secretary will be grateful too."

"But I still don't see how you're going to get him to invite Penny to dinner. What's the point of all this?"

“The point, dear Roger, is that he won’t have to invite her to dinner at all. He is coming to my reception this evening. You will bring Penny, I shall introduce them over a glass of champagne or two, and see what develops. If I know Patrick Woolton—which as Chief Whip I do—it won’t take more than twenty minutes before he’s suggesting that he might help her improve her French etiquette.”

“But I still don’t see where that gets us.”

“Whatever happens, Roger, and that we must leave in the hands of two consenting adults, you and I will know about it.”

“I still don’t see what use that is,” O’Neill protested, still hoping the other man might change his mind.

“Trust me, Roger. You must trust me.”

“I do. I have to. I don’t really get much choice, do I?”

“That’s right, Roger. Now you are beginning to see. Knowledge is power.”

The phone went dead. O’Neill thought he understood but still wasn’t absolutely sure. He was still struggling to figure out whether he was Urquhart’s partner or prisoner. Unable to decide, he rummaged in his bedside cabinet and took out a small carton. He swallowed a couple of sleeping pills and collapsed fully clothed on the bed.

Seventeen

Political office is like life. Your attitude toward it is usually determined by whether you are arriving or departing.

“Patrick. Thanks for the time,” Urquhart greeted as the Foreign Secretary opened the door.

“You sounded serious on the phone. When the Chief Whip says he want an urgent private word with you, it usually means he’s got the photographs under lock and key but unfortunately the *News of the World* has got the negatives!”

Urquhart smiled and slipped through the open door into Woolton’s suite. It was late afternoon, the gale had stopped blowing but the umbrella standing in a puddle in Woolton’s hallway spoke of a tormenting day. Urquhart hadn’t come far, indeed only a few yards from his own suite in a series of luxury bungalows that stood in the hotel grounds. They had been set aside for Cabinet ministers, all of whom had a twenty-four-hour rotation of police guards running up huge bills. The local constabulary had christened it “Overtime Alley.”

“Drink?” the genial Lancastrian offered.

“Thanks, Patrick. Scotch.”

The Right Honorable Patrick Woolton, Her Majesty’s Principal Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and one of Merseyside’s many successful emigrés, busied himself at a small drinks cabinet that bore the signs of already having been put to use that afternoon, while Urquhart placed the ministerial red box he was carrying beside the four belonging to his overworked host, close to the edge of the puddle of rainwater. These brightly colored leather-clad boxes were the mark of any minister, their almost constant companions that guarded

the official papers, speeches, and other confidential items. A Foreign Secretary requires several red boxes; the Chief Whip, with no conference speech to make and no foreign crises to handle, had arrived in Bournemouth with his box filled with three bottles of twelve-year-old malt whiskey. Hotel drink prices are always staggering, he explained to his wife, even when you can find the brand you want.

Now he faced Woolton across a paper-strewn coffee table, and dispensed with the small talk. "Patrick, I need to get your opinion. In the strictest confidence. As far as I am concerned, this has to be one of those meetings which never took place."

"Christ, you do have some bloody photographs!" exclaimed Woolton, now only half joking. His eye for attractive young women had led him down a few perilous paths. Ten years earlier when he was just starting his ministerial career, he had spent several painful hours answering questions from the Louisiana State Police about a weekend he'd just spent in a New Orleans motel with a young American girl who looked twenty, acted as if she were thirty and turned out to be just a few days over sixteen. The incident had been brushed over but Woolton had never forgotten the tiny difference between a glittering political future and a charge of statutory rape.

"Something which could be rather more serious," Urquhart muttered. "I've been picking up some unhealthy vibrations in the last few weeks. About Henry. You've sensed the irritation with him around the Cabinet table, and the media seem to be falling out of love with him in a very big way."

"Well, there was no reason to expect an extended honeymoon after the election, I suppose, but the storm clouds have been remarkably quick to gather."

"Patrick, in confidence, I've been approached by two of the most influential grassroots party members. They say that feeling at local level is getting very bad. We lost two more important local council by-elections last week in what should have been very safe seats, and we're going to lose quite a few more in the weeks ahead."

"Bloody East Dorset by-election tomorrow. We're going to get kicked in the crotch on that one, too, you mark my words. We'd have trouble winning a vote for local dogcatcher at the moment."

"There is a view, Patrick," Urquhart continued in a tone of considerable

discomfort, “that Henry’s personal unpopularity is dragging the whole Party down.”

“It’s a view I share, frankly,” Woolton said, sipping his whiskey.

“The question is, how much time does he have to sort it out?”

“With a majority of only twenty-four, not much.” Woolton was cupping his hands around his glass for comfort. “A few lost by-elections and we’d be facing an early election.” He stared into the peaty liquid, then up at his colleague. “So what’s your view, Francis?”

“As Chief Whip I don’t have a view.”

“You always were a canny bugger, Francis.”

“But as Chief Whip I have been asked by one or two of our senior colleagues to take some gentle soundings about how deep the problem actually goes. In short, Patrick, and you will appreciate this isn’t easy...”

“You haven’t touched your bloody drink.”

“Give me one more moment. I’ve been asked to find out how much trouble colleagues think we are in. Cards on the table. Is Henry any longer the right leader for us?” He raised his glass, stared hard at Woolton, then took a deep draught before settling back in his chair.

The silence settled around the Foreign Secretary, impaling him on the point of the question. “Well, bugger me, it’s come to that already, has it?” A pipe appeared from his pocket, followed by a tobacco pouch and a box of matches. He made an elaborate ceremony of filling the bowl, tamping down the fresh tobacco with his thumb, before taking out a match. The striking of the match seemed very loud in the silence. Smoke began to rise from around Woolton as he drew on the pipe stem until the sweet smelling tobacco was well alight and his face was almost obscured from view by a clinging blue fog. He waved his hand to disperse it, coming out of hiding. “You’ll have to forgive me, Francis. Four years in the Foreign Office hasn’t prepared me particularly well for handling direct questions like that. Maybe I’m not used any more to people coming straight to the point. You’ve knocked me out of my stride.”

This was nonsense, of course. Woolton was renowned for his direct, often combative political style, which had found an uneasy home in the Foreign Office. He was simply playing for time while he collected his thoughts.

“Let’s try to put aside any subjective views”—he blew another enormous cloud of smoke to hide the patent insincerity of the remark—“and analyze the problem like a civil service position paper.”

Urquhart nodded, and smiled inwardly. He knew Woolton’s personal views, he already knew the conclusion their hypothetical civil servant was going to arrive at.

“First, have we got a problem? Yes, and it’s a serious one. My lads back in Lancashire are hopping mad. I think it’s right that you should be taking soundings. Second, is there a painless solution to the problem? Let’s not forget we did win the bloody election. But we didn’t win it like we should’ve. And that’s down to Henry. But”—he waved the stem of his pipe for emphasis—“if there was any move to replace him—which is essentially what we are discussing...”

Urquhart contrived to look pained at Woolton’s bluntness.

“It would raise hell inside the party and those bastards in the Opposition would have a field day. It could get very messy, Francis. There’s no guarantee Henry would go quietly. And it would look like an act of desperation. It would take a new leader at least a year to glue together the cracks. So we shouldn’t fool ourselves that getting rid of Henry represents an easy option. No, sir. But, third, when all is said and done, can Henry find the solution to the problem himself? Well, you know my views on that. I stood against him for the leadership when Margaret went, and I’ve not changed my mind that his selection was a mistake.”

Urquhart lowered his head, stony faced, as though in gratitude for the candor, but in celebration. He had read his man well.

Woolton was refilling their glasses while continuing his analysis. “Margaret managed an extraordinary balance of personal toughness and sense of direction. She was ruthless when she had to be and often when she *didn’t* have to be as well. She always seemed to be in such a bloody hurry to get where she was going that she had no time to take prisoners and didn’t mind trampling on a few friends, either. It didn’t matter so much because she led from in front. You’ve got to give that to the girl. But Henry doesn’t have a sense of direction, only a love of office. And, without that sense of direction, we’re lost. He tries to mimic Margaret but he hasn’t got the balls.” He banged a large glass down in front of

his colleague. “So there we have it. If we try to get rid of him we’re in trouble. But if we keep him, we’re in shit.” He raised his glass. “Confusion to the enemy, Francis.” And he drank.

Urquhart hadn’t spoken for nearly ten minutes. The tip of his middle finger was running slowly around the rim of his glass setting up a discordant wailing. His eyes came up, blue, penetrating. “But who is the enemy, Patrick?”

The stare was returned. “Whoever is most likely to bring us to defeat at the next election. The Leader of the sodding Opposition? Or Henry?”

“And your view? What *precisely* is it you are saying, Patrick?”

Woolton roared with laughter. “I’m sorry, Francis. Too much diplomatic claptrap. You know I can’t even kiss the wife good morning without her wondering what my intentions are. You want a direct answer? OK. Our majority is too small. At the rate we’re going we’ll get wiped out next time around. We can’t go on as we are.”

“So what is the solution? We have to find one.”

“We bide our time, that’s what we should do. A few months. Prepare the public perception, put pressure on Henry to stand down, so that when he does we’ll be seen to be bowing to what the public wants rather than indulging in private squabbles. Perceptions are crucial, Francis, and we’ll need time to get our ducks in a row.”

And you need a little time to prepare your own pitch, thought Urquhart. You old fraud. You want the job just as badly as ever.

He knew Woolton. The man was no fool, not in all things. He would already be planning to spend as many evenings as possible in the corridors and bars of the House of Commons, strengthening established relationships, making new friends, eating rubber chicken on the constituency circuit, chatting up newspaper editors and columnists, building up his credentials. His official diary would get cleared, he would spend less time traveling abroad and much, much more time dashing around Britain making speeches about the challenges facing the country in the next decade.

“That’s your job, Francis, and a damned difficult one it is, too. To help us decide when the time is right. Too early and we’ll all look like assassins. Too late and the Party’ll be in pieces. You will have to keep your ear damned close to

the ground. I assume you're taking soundings elsewhere?"

Urquhart nodded carefully in silent assent. He's nominated me as Cassius, he thought, put the dagger in my hand. Urquhart was exhilarated to discover that he didn't mind the sensation, not one bit.

"Patrick, I'm honored that you've been so frank with me. Deeply grateful for the confidence you've shown in me. The next few months are going to be difficult for all of us, and I will need your continuing counsel. You will always find in me a firm friend."

"I know I will, Francis."

Urquhart rose. "And, of course, not a word of this will pass outside this room."

"My Special Branch team are all going on at me about how walls have ears. I'm glad it's you who's got the bungalow next door!" Woolton exclaimed, thumping Urquhart playfully and a little patronizingly between the shoulder blades as his visitor strode over to retrieve his red box.

"I'm holding my conference reception this evening, Patrick. Everyone will be there, a most useful gathering. You won't forget, will you?"

"Course not. Always enjoy your parties. Be rude of me to refuse your champagne!"

"I'll see you in a few hours then," replied Urquhart, picking up a red box.

As Woolton closed the door behind his visitor, he poured himself another drink. He would skip the afternoon's debates in the conference hall. Instead he'd have a bath and a short sleep to prepare himself for the evening's heavy schedule. As he reflected on the conversation he'd just had he began to wonder whether the whiskey had dulled his senses. He was trying to remember how Urquhart had voiced his own opposition to Collingridge, but couldn't. "Crafty sod. Let me do all the talking." Still, that's what was expected of a Chief Whip, and he could trust Francis Urquhart, couldn't he? As he sat there wondering whether he had been just a little too frank, he failed to notice that Urquhart had walked off with the wrong red box.

* * *

Mattie had been in high spirits ever since sending through her copy shortly after

lunch. Opinion poll shocker. A front page exclusive, at a moment when she was surrounded by every single one of her competitors. She had won bragging rights for this conference, that was for sure. She had spent much of the afternoon wistfully thinking about the new doors that were slowly beginning to open for her. She had just celebrated her first anniversary at the *Chronicle* and her abilities were getting recognition. Another year of this and maybe she'd be ready to make the next step, perhaps as an assistant editor or even as a columnist with room to write serious political analysis and not just daily potboilers. And with friends like Francis Urquhart she'd never be short of an inside story.

There was a price to be paid, of course. Her mother was still under the impression that she had found someone in London, a partner to share her life, but it was a hard and often lonely life, once she had gotten back to her apartment late at night and scrabbled yet again through her laundry bin in the morning. She had needs, not just professional vanity, and they were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Neither could she ignore the urgent message to call her office that she got shortly before five o'clock. She had just finished chatting over tea on the terrace with the Home Secretary—he was keen to get the *Chronicle* to puff his speech the following day and in any event much preferred an hour chatting with a young blond than sitting through another interminable afternoon of his colleagues' speeches—when a receptionist thrust the message into her hand. The hotel lobby was crowded but one of the public telephones was free and she decided to put up with the noise. When she got through, Preston's secretary explained that he was engaged on the phone and connected her with the deputy editor, John Krajewski, a gentle giant of a man she had begun to spend a little time with during the long summer months, spurred on by a shared enjoyment of good wine and the fact that his father, like her grandfather, had been a wartime refugee from Europe. Nothing sexual, not yet, although he'd made it clear he wanted to swap more than office gossip. But his tone was suddenly awkward.

“Hi, Mattie. Look, er...Oh, fuck it, I'm not going to cover this in three yards of bullshit. We're not—he's not—running your story. I'm really sorry.”

There was a stunned silence over the phone as she turned over the words to make sure she had understood correctly. But, whichever way she turned them,

they still came out the same.

“What the hell do you mean you’re not running it?”

“Just what I say, Mattie. It’s not going to happen.” Krajewski was clearly having grave difficulty with the conversation. “Look, I’m sorry I can’t give you all the details because Grev has been dealing with it personally—I haven’t touched it myself, please believe me on that—but apparently it’s such a hot story that our esteemed editor feels he can’t run it without being absolutely sure of our ground. He says we’ve always supported this Government and he’s not about to throw editorial policy out of the window on the basis of an anonymous piece of paper. We have to be absolutely certain before we move, and we can’t be if we don’t know where this information came from.”

“For God’s sake, it doesn’t matter where the bloody paper came from. Whoever sent it to me wouldn’t have done it if he thought his identity was going to be spread all over our newsroom. All that matters is that it’s genuine, and I’ve confirmed that.”

He sighed. “Trust me, I know how you must feel about this, Mattie. I wish I were a million miles away from this one. All I can tell you is that Grev is adamant. It’s not running.”

Mattie wanted to scream long, hard, and very coarsely. Suddenly she regretted making the call from a crowded lobby. “Let me talk to Grev.”

“Sorry. I think he’s busy on the phone.”

“I’ll hold!”

“In fact,” said the deputy editor in a voice heaped with embarrassment, “I know he’s going to be busy for a long time and insisted that I had to be the one to explain it to you. I know he wants to talk to you, Mattie—but tomorrow. There’s no point in trying to beat him into submission tonight.”

“Tomorrow’s no bloody good! Since when do we risk losing an exclusive because Grev’s got his phone stuck up his arse?” Mattie spat out her contempt. “What sort of newspaper are we running, Johnnie?”

She could hear the deputy editor clearing his throat, unable to find suitable words. “Sorry, Mattie,” was the best he could do.

“And screw you, Johnnie!” was all she was able to hiss down the line before slamming the phone back into its cradle. He didn’t deserve it, but neither did

she. She picked up the phone once again to see whether he was still on the end and was going to tell her it was all a stupid prank, but all she got was the disinterested buzzing of the dial tone. “Fuck!” she snapped, slamming the phone down once more. A conference steward on the next phone flashed her a tart look. She glared at him. “Fuck!” she said again, deliberately, just to make sure he’d heard, before stalking across the foyer toward the bar.

The steward was just raising the grille over the counter when Mattie arrived and slapped her bag and a five-pound note down on the bar. “I need a drink!” she declared, still in such a blind rage that she knocked the arm of another patron who was already lined up at the varnished counter and clearly intent on being served with the first drink of the night.

“Sorry,” she apologized huffily without sounding as if she meant it.

The other drinker turned to face her. “Young lady, you say you need a drink. You look as if you need a drink. My doctor tells me there is no such thing as needing a drink, but what does he know? Would you mind if a man old enough to be your father joins you? By the way, the name’s Collingridge, Mr. Charles Collingridge. But please call me Charlie. Everyone calls me Charlie.”

“Well, Charlie, so long as we don’t talk politics, it’ll be my pleasure. Allow my editor to do the first decent thing he’s managed today and buy you a very large one!”

Eighteen

*The world of Westminster is driven by ambition and exhaustion and alcohol.
And lust. Especially lust.*

The room had a low ceiling and was packed with people. Even with the windows wide open, “Overtime Alley” had come to resemble a Third World airport terminal. As a consequence the chilled champagne being dispensed by Urquhart’s constituency secretary was in ever greater demand. The heat and alcohol cut through the formality and the occasion was already on its way to being one of the Chief Whip’s more relaxed conference receptions.

Urquhart, however, was not in a position to circulate and accept his guests’ thanks. He was effectively pinned in one corner by the enormous bulk of Benjamin Landless. The East End newspaper magnate was sweating heavily and he had his jacket off and collar undone, displaying his thick green braces like parachute webbing that were holding up his vast, flowing trousers. Landless refused to take any notice of his discomfort; his full attention was concentrated on his trapped prey.

“But that’s all bloody bollocks, Frankie, and you know it. I put my whole newspaper chain behind you lot at the last election. I’ve moved my entire worldwide headquarters to London. I’ve invested millions in the country. The way I see it, you owe me. But if Henry don’t pull his fingers out the whole bloody circus is going down the drain at the next election. And because I’ve been so good to you, those buggers in the Opposition will crucify me if they get in. So stop prating around, for God’s sake!”

He paused to produce a large silk handkerchief from within the folds of his

trousers and wipe his brow, while Urquhart goaded him on.

“Surely it’s not as bad as that, Ben. All governments go through sticky patches. We’ve been through all this before. We’ll pull out of it.”

“Bollocks! That’s complacent crap and you know it, Frankie. Haven’t you seen your own latest poll? They phoned it through to me earlier this afternoon. Cata-bleedin’-strophic! If you held the election today you’d get thrashed. Bloody annihilated!”

Urquhart felt a rush of comfort as he envisaged the *Chronicle*’s headline in the morning, but couldn’t afford to show it. “Damn. How on earth did you get hold of that? That will really hurt us at the by-election tomorrow.”

“Don’t mess your pants, Frankie. I’ve told Preston to pull it. It’ll leak, of course, eventually, but that’ll be after the by-election.” He stuck a thick finger into his own chest. “I’ve saved your conference from being turned into a bear pit.” He sighed deeply. “It’s more than you bloody deserve.”

“I know Henry will be grateful, Ben,” Urquhart said, feeling sick with disappointment.

“Course he will,” Landless growled, his finger now prodding into Urquhart’s chest, “but the gratitude of the most unpopular Prime Minister since Christ was crucified isn’t something you can put in the bank.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get real, Frankie. Political popularity is cash. While you lot are in, I should be able to get on with my business and do what I do best—make money. That’s why I’ve supported you. But as soon as your boat starts taking in water everybody panics. The Stock Market sinks. People don’t want to invest. Unions get bolshy. I can’t look ahead. And that’s what’s been happening ever since June. The PM couldn’t organize an arse-cracking contest right now. If he kissed a baby he’d be done for common assault. He’s dragging the whole Party down, and my business with it. Unless you do something about it, we’re all going to disappear down a bloody great hole.”

“Do you really feel like that?”

Landless paused, just to let Urquhart know it wasn’t the champagne speaking. “Passionately,” he growled.

“Then it looks as if we have a problem.”

“Damn right.”

“What would you have us do, Ben?”

“Frankie, if my shareholders saw me screwing around like this, I wouldn’t last till lunchtime. I’d be gone.”

“You mean...?”

“Sure. Get rid of him. The Big Bye-Bye!”

Urquhart raised his eyebrows sharply but Landless was the sort of man who, once he mounted a horse and charged, had difficulty in turning the beast. “Life’s too short to spend it propping up losers, Frankie. I haven’t spent the last twenty years working my guts out just to watch your boss piss it all away.”

Urquhart found his arm gripped painfully by his guest’s huge fingers. There was real strength behind the man’s enormous girth and Urquhart began to understand how Landless always seemed to get his way. Those he couldn’t dominate with his wealth or commercial muscle he would trap with his physical strength and whip with his sharp tongue. Urquhart had always hated being called Frankie and this was the only man in the world who insisted on using it. But tonight, of all nights, he wouldn’t object. This was one argument he was going to enjoy losing.

Landless drew nearer, conspiratorial, pinning Urquhart ever more tightly in the corner. “Let me give you an example, in confidence. OK, Frankie?” He glanced around to ensure no one was eavesdropping. “A little bird has told me that very shortly United Newspapers will be up for sale. If it is, I want to buy it. In fact, I’ve already had some serious discussions with them. But the limp-wrist lawyers are telling me that I already own one newspaper group and that the Government isn’t going to allow me to buy another. I said to them, you are telling me that I can’t become the biggest newspaper owner in the country, even if I commit all of the titles to supporting the Government!” Perspiration was slipping freely from his face but he ignored it. “You know what they said, Frankie? You know what those numb-nuts told me? That it’s precisely because I *do* support the Government that I’m in trouble. If I so much as wink at United the Opposition’s going to go apeshit. Kick up the most god-awful stink. And no one would have the guts to stand up and defend me, that’s what they said. The takeover would be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, it’d get

bogged down for months with a herd of expensive lawyers stuck in some bloody committee room, with me having to listen to a bunch of closet queens lecturing me on how to run my own business. And you know what makes me really fucking mad, Frankie?”

Urquhart blinked. Up close the man really was rather frightening. “I have no idea, Ben. Please tell me.”

“What makes me really fucking mad”—the prodding finger again—“is that whatever arguments I use, whatever I say, in the end the Government will refuse to let the deal to go through. Why? Because they don’t have the balls for a fight.” He blew cigar smoke in Urquhart’s face. “And because your Government doesn’t have the balls, my dick’s going to be shoved through the wringer. It’s not enough that you’re bugging up your own business, you’re going to bugger up mine as well!”

Only then did Landless remove his finger from his host’s chest. It had been digging in painfully; Urquhart was sure he would find a bruise in the morning. His words came slowly.

“Ben, you have been a great friend of the Party. I, for one, very much appreciate what you have done. It would be unforgivable if we weren’t able to repay that friendship. I can’t speak for the Prime Minister on this—in fact, I find myself increasingly unable to speak for him on anything nowadays—but I would do everything I can to support you when you need it.”

Landless was nodding. “That’s good to know, Frankie. I like what you say, very much. If only Henry could be so decisive.”

“I fear that’s not his nature. But I know he’ll be enormously grateful.”

“For what?”

“For burying that opinion poll. I can’t imagine what damage it would do to him if it were published. It would turn the entire conference into a bear fight.”

“Yeah. It would, wouldn’t it?”

“Mind you, there are those who believe that progress is never made without a little discomfort.”

The frowns of frustration that had covered the Landless brow now gave way to a smile. His skin was remarkably pink and soft, his grin enormous. “I think I see your point, Frankie.”

“What point was that, Ben?”

“Hah! I think we understand each other, you and me.”

“Yes, Ben, I think we do.”

Landless squeezed the Chief Whip’s arm once more, but gently, in gratitude. Then he looked at his watch. “Tickle my tits, is that the time? I have work to do, Frankie. The first edition is closing in less than thirty minutes. I need to make a telephone call.” He grabbed his jacket and draped it over his arm. “Thanks for the party. It’s been fun. Won’t forget it, Frankie.”

Urquhart watched as the industrialist, damp shirt sticking closely to his broad back, pushed his way across the crowded room and disappeared through the door.

* * *

Across the other side of the crowded room, hidden behind the squash of bodies, Roger O’Neill was huddled on a small sofa with a young and attractive conference-goer. He was in a state of considerable excitement. He fingers fidgeted incessantly, his eyes danced as though scalded, his words rattled out at an alarming pace. The young girl from Rotherham had already been overwhelmed with the names O’Neill had dropped and the secrets he had shared, an innocent bystander in a one-way conversation.

“The Prime Minister’s under constant surveillance by our security men, of course. There’s always a threat. Irish. Arabs. Black Militants. They’re trying to get me, too. Been trying for months. The Special Branch boys insisted on giving me protection throughout the election. Found both our names on a hit list, Henry and me. So they gave me twenty-four-hour cover. Not public knowledge, of course, but all the journos know.” He dragged furiously at a cigarette and started coughing. He took out a soiled handkerchief and blew his nose loudly, inspecting the result before returning it to his pocket.

“But why you, Roger?” his young companion ventured.

“Soft target. Easy access. High publicity hit,” he rattled. “If they can’t get the PM, they’ll go for someone like me.” He looked around nervously, his eyes not settling. “Can you keep a confidence? A real secret?” He took another deep drag. “This morning I found my car had been tampered with. Bomb Squad boys went

over it with a fine tooth comb. They found the wheel nuts on one of the front wheels had been undone. Straight home on the motorway, the wheel comes off at eighty and—more work for the road sweepers! They think it was deliberate. The Murder Squad are on their way over to interview me right now.”

“Roger, that’s awful,” she gasped.

“Mustn’t tell anyone. The SB don’t want to frighten them off if there’s a chance of catching them unawares.”

“I hadn’t realized you were so close to the Prime Minister,” she said with growing awe. “What a terrible time for...” She suddenly gasped. “Are you all right, Roger? You’re looking very upset. Your, your eyes...” she stammered.

O’Neill’s eyes were rotating wildly, sucking still further lurid hallucinations into his brain. His attention seemed to have strayed elsewhere; he was no longer with the young woman but in some other world, with some other conversation. His eyes wavered back to her but they were gone again in an instant. They were bloodshot and watering, had no focus, his nose was dribbling like an old man’s in winter; he gave it a cursory and unsuccessful wipe with the back of his hand. As she watched, his face turned to an ashen gray, his body twitched and he stood up sharply. He appeared terrified, as if the walls were falling in on him.

She looked on helplessly, unsure what he needed, too embarrassed to make a public scene. She moved to take his arm and support him, but as she did so he turned on her and lost his balance. He grabbed at her to steady himself, caught her blouse, and a couple of buttons popped.

“Get out of my way, get out of my way,” he snarled.

He thrust her violently backwards and she fell into a table laden with glasses before sprawling back onto the sofa. The crash of glass onto the floor stopped all conversation as everyone in the room turned to see what was going on. More buttons had gone and her left breast stood exposed.

There was absolute silence as O’Neill stumbled toward the door, pushing still more people out of the way before he tumbled into the night, leaving behind a room of shocked faces and a young girl clutching at her tattered clothing and fighting back tears of humiliation. An elderly female guest began helping her rearrange herself and shepherding her toward the bathroom. As the bathroom door shut behind them, the room instantly flooded with speculation that quickly

grew into a broad sea of gossip that would keep them engaged and entertained all evening.

Penny Guy did not join in the gossip. A moment before, she had been laughing merrily, thoroughly enjoying the engaging wit and Merseyside charm of Patrick Woolton. Urquhart had introduced them more than an hour earlier and had ensured that the champagne flowed as easily as their conversation. But the moment of magic had dissolved in the uproar and Penny's bright smile withered into an expression of abject misery. She fought a losing battle to control the tears, which spilled down her cheeks and seemed unstoppable despite the encouragement and large white handkerchief that Woolton had provided. Her pain was all too real.

"He's really a kind man, brilliant at what he does," she explained. "But sometimes it all seems to get too much for him and he goes a little crazy. It's so out of character." As she pleaded for him the tears flowed still faster.

"Penny. I'm so sorry, love. Look, you need to get out of this bloody place. My bungalow's next door. What say you we go and dry you off there, OK?"

She knew what would happen. But it no longer seemed to matter very much. She nodded in gratitude and the couple squeezed their way through the crowd. No one seemed to notice as they eased their way out of the room, except Urquhart. His eyes followed them through the door where Landless and O'Neill had gone before. He felt deeply content. This was turning out to be a party to remember.

Nineteen

Most by-election candidates are little more than legal necessities, required to make the victor feel he has done something worthwhile. Which he rarely has.

Thursday, October 14

“You’re not going to make a bloody habit of getting me out of bed every morning, are you?” Even down the telephone line, Preston made it clear that he saw this as an instruction rather than a question.

Mattie was feeling even worse than she had managed the previous morning after several hours of alcoholic flagellation with Charles Collingridge. She was having considerable difficulty grasping the finer points of what was going on.

“Hell, Grev. I go to bed thinking I want to kill you because you won’t run the opinion poll story. Then I wake up this morning and find a bastardized version of it all over the front page with a byline by someone called ‘Our Political Staff.’ I’m not *thinking* I want to kill you any more, I *know* I want to kill you. But first I want to find out why you’re screwing around with my story. Why did you change your mind? Who’s rewritten my copy? And who the hell is ‘Our Political Staff’ if it’s not me?”

“Steady on, Mattie. Take a breath before you pop your corsets.”

“I don’t do corsets, Grev!”

“And you weren’t doing much last night, were you? What were you up to, flashing your eyes at some eligible peer or burning your bra at some feminist coven? But *nada*. I tried to call. No bloody answer. If only you’d hung around, you’d have heard all about it.”

Mattie began to recall the events of last night. It was a considerable effort, through a haze. Her distraction gave Preston time to continue.

“As I think Krajewski told you, last night some of the editorial staff here didn’t believe there was enough substantiation on your piece for it to run today.”

He heard Mattie snort with indignation.

“Frankly, I liked the piece, right from the start,” he added, trying to sound as if he meant it. “I wanted to make it work, but we needed more corroboration before we tore the country’s Prime Minister apart on the day of an important by-election. A single anonymous piece of paper wasn’t enough.”

“*I* didn’t tear the Prime Minister apart, *you* did!” Mattie wanted to interject but Preston was already ahead of her.

“So I had a chat with some of my senior contacts in the Party, and late last night we got the backing we needed. Just before our deadline.”

“But my copy—”

“The copy needed to be adapted, the story was moving on. I tried to reach you but since I couldn’t, I rewrote it myself. Didn’t want anyone else touching it, the story’s too good. So ‘Our Political Staff’ in this instance is me.”

“I wrote a piece about an opinion poll. You’ve turned it into the crucifixion of Collingridge. These quotes from ‘leading party sources,’ these criticisms and condemnations. Who else do you have working in Bournemouth apart from me?”

“My sources are my own business, Mattie, you should know that.”

“Bullshit, Grev. I’m supposed to be your political correspondent at this bloody conference. You can’t keep me in the dark like this. The paper’s done a complete somersault over my story and another somersault over Collingridge. A few weeks ago the sun shone out of his backside as far as you were concerned and now he’s—what does it say?—‘a catastrophe threatening to engulf the Government at any moment.’ I shall be about as popular as a witch’s armpit around here this morning. You’ve got to tell me what’s going on!”

Preston had tried. He’d offered an explanation. It wasn’t the truth, but so what? Now he decided it was time to pull a little rank. “I’ll tell you what’s going on. A brilliant bloody exclusive, that’s what’s going on. And it may have passed your notice, Mattie, but I’m editor of this newspaper, which means I don’t have

to spend my day justifying myself to every cub reporter stuck out in the provinces. You do as you're told, I do as I'm told, and we both get on with the job. All right?"

"So who the hell tells you what to do, Grev?" Mattie demanded. But all she got in return was a dial tone. The phone had gone dead. She pounded the arm of her chair in frustration. She couldn't—wouldn't—take much more of this. She'd thought new doors were opening up to her; instead, her editor kept slamming them shut on her fingers. It made no sense to her.

It still made no sense a good thirty minutes later as she was trying to clear her thoughts with yet another cup of coffee in the breakfast room. She was relieved there was no sign of Kevin Spence. A pile of the morning's newspapers lay on the floor at her feet and she had to admit that Preston was right—it was a fine exclusive, the best front page of the lot. Great figures, great quotes. Too good for Greville Preston to have done it on a phone from London. As she scratched away at the puzzle she felt a shadow stretching across the room and looked up to see the vast bulk of Benjamin Landless lumbering across to a window table for a chat with Lord Peterson, the Party Treasurer. The proprietor settled his girth into a completely inadequate chair and leaned across as far as his belly would allow him. He smiled at Peterson, shook his hand, ignored Mattie completely. Suddenly she thought things were beginning to make a little more sense.

* * *

The Prime Minister's political secretary winced. For the third time the press secretary had thrust the morning newspaper across the table at him, and for the third time he had tried to thrust it back. He knew how St. Peter must have felt.

"For God's sake, Grahame," the press secretary snapped, raising his voice, "we can't hide every damned copy of the *Chronicle* in Bournemouth. He's got to know, and you've got to show it to him. Now!"

"Why did it have to be today?" the political secretary groaned. "A by-election just down the road and we've been up all night finishing his speech for tomorrow. Now he'll want to rewrite the entire bloody thing, and where are we going to find the time? He'll blow a gasket." He slammed his briefcase shut in uncharacteristic frustration. "All the pressure of the last few weeks, and now

this. There just doesn't seem to be any break, does there?"

His companion chose not to answer, preferring to study the view out of the hotel window across the bay. It was raining again.

The political secretary picked up the newspaper, rolled it up tight and threw it across the room. It landed with a crash in the waste bin, overturning it and strewing the contents across the carpet. The discarded pages of speech draft mixed with cigarette ash and several empty cans of beer and tomato juice. "He deserves his bloody breakfast, for pity's sake. I'll tell him after that," he said.

It was not to be his best decision.

* * *

Henry Collingridge was enjoying his eggs. He had finished his conference speech in the early hours of the morning and had left his staff to tidy it up and have it typed while he went to bed. He had slept soundly if briefly; it seemed for the first time in weeks.

The end-of-conference speech always hung over his head like a dark cloud. He disliked conferences and the small talk, the week away from home, the over-indulgence around the dinner tables—and the speech. Most of all the speech. Long hours of anguished discussion in a smoke-filled hotel room, breaking off just when progress seemed in sight in order to attend some ball-breaking function or reception, resuming a considerable time later and trying to pick up where they had left off, only more tired and less inspired. If the speech went well, it was only what they expected and required. If it was poor, they would still applaud but go away muttering about how the strain of office was beginning to show. Sod's Law.

Still, almost over, bar the delivery. The Prime Minister was relaxed enough to have suggested a stroll along the promenade with his wife before breakfast, blow the cobwebs away, to hell with the patchy rain. His Special Branch detectives followed a few paces behind. As they strolled, Collingridge was discussing the merits of a winter holiday in Antigua or Sri Lanka. "I think Sri Lanka this year," he said. "You can stay on the beach if you want, Sarah, but I'd rather like to take a couple of trips into the mountains. They've got some ancient Buddhist monasteries there, and the wildlife reserves are supposed to be quite spectacular.

The Sri Lankan President was telling me about them last year and they sounded really...Darling, you're not listening!"

"Sorry, Henry. I was...just looking at that gentleman's newspaper." She nodded at a man, another conference-goer, who was struggling to hold his newspaper in the sea breeze.

"More interesting than me, is it?"

Yet his light-heartedness died on the wind as he began to feel ill at ease, remembering that no one had yet given him his daily press cuttings. Someone would surely have told him had there been anything that important, but... He'd made a mistake, a few months back, when his staff had persuaded him that he didn't need to spend his time reading the daily newspapers, that an edited summary would be more efficient. But civil servants had their own narrow views on what was important for a Prime Minister's day and he'd found increasingly that their summaries had holes in them, particularly when it came to political matters, even more so when there was bad news. They were trying to protect him, of course, but he'd always feared the cocoon they spun around him would eventually stifle him.

He remembered the first time he'd stepped inside 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister after the drive back from the Palace. He had left the crowds and the television crews outside and, as the great black door closed behind him, he had discovered an extraordinary sight. On one side of the large hallway leading away from the door had gathered some two hundred civil servants, who were applauding him loudly—just as they had done Thatcher, Callaghan, Wilson, and Heath, and just as they would his successor. On the other side of the hallway facing the host of civil servants stood his political staff, the team of loyal supporters he had hurriedly assembled around him as his campaign to succeed Margaret Thatcher had begun to take off, and whom he had invited to Downing Street to enjoy this historic moment. There were just seven of them, dwarfed in their new surroundings. An impossibly unequal struggle. He'd scarcely seen his party advisers for the next six months as they were effectively squeezed out by the official machine, and none of the original band was still left. No, it wasn't a good idea to rely so completely on officials, he'd decided. He had also decided to do away with the press summaries and go back to reading real news, but he

hadn't yet got round to it. Next week, for sure.

His attention returned to the newspaper being shaken back into shape by its owner. It was several yards away and at such a distance he had great difficulty in bringing it fully into focus. He tried hard not to stare too hard. Slowly the words came into some form of focus.

"POLL CRISIS HITS GOVERNMENT," it screamed.

He walked the five paces and snatched the newspaper from the startled man.

"PM'S FUTURE IN DOUBT AS PERSONAL SLUMP HITS PARTY," he read. "BY-ELECTION DISASTER FEARED."

"Henry!" his wife shouted in alarm.

"What the bloody—" the man spluttered before his words froze as he recognized his assailant.

"Are you all right, Prime Minister?" one of the detectives asked, putting his body protectively between them.

Collingridge's head sank. "Forgive me, I didn't mean...I'm so sorry," he muttered in apology.

"No, Prime Minister, I'm the one who's sorry," the man said, recovering his wits. "You deserve better than this."

"I do, don't I?" Collingridge muttered before turning and striding back to the hotel.

* * *

It did nothing to improve the Prime Minister's temper when he had to retrieve the copy of the *Chronicle* from among the cigarette ash in the waste bin.

"From a complete bloody stranger, Grahame. May I, just occasionally, not be the last to know?"

"I am sorry, Prime Minister. We were going to show it to you just as soon as you'd finished breakfast," came the meek response.

"You think I have any appetite left after this? Look at this rubbish! It's not good enough, Grahame, it's just not bloody—"

He stopped. He had arrived at the point in the *Chronicle's* report when the hard news had been superseded by speculation and hype.

The latest slump revealed in the Party's private polls is bound to put intense pressure on the Prime Minister. He makes his conference speech tomorrow in Bournemouth, and it will be seen as of still greater importance, perhaps even decisive. Rumblings about the style and effectiveness of Collingridge's leadership have grown since the election, when his performance disappointed many of his colleagues. These doubts are certain to be fueled by the latest poll, which gives him the lowest personal rating any Prime Minister has achieved since these polls began nearly forty years ago.

"Oh, shit," Collingridge mouthed silently as he read on.

Last night, a leading Minister commented, "There is a lack of grip around the Cabinet table and in the House of Commons. The Party is restive. Our basically excellent position is being undermined by the leader's lack of appeal." Harsher views were being expressed in some Government quarters. Senior party sources were speculating that the Party was fast coming to a crossroad. "We have to decide between making a new start or sliding gently into decline and defeat," one senior source said. "We have had too many unnecessary setbacks since the election. We cannot afford any more." A less sanguine view was that Collingridge is "like a catastrophe threatening to engulf the Government at any moment."

"Shit!" Collingridge exclaimed out loud, no longer bothering to whisper.

Today's parliamentary by-election in Dorset East, reckoned to be a safe Government seat, is now being seen as crucial to the Prime Minister's future.

* * *

A man can spend half a lifetime at the top of the political ladder learning how to cope with his fear of heights, but sometimes he grows dizzy and it can all get too much for him.

"Find the sewer scum behind this, Grahame!" Collingridge snarled, throttling the newspaper in two hands like a Christmas chicken. "I want to know who wrote it. Who spoke to them. Who leaked the poll. And for breakfast tomorrow I

want their balls on toast!”

“Shall I give Lord Williams a call?” the political secretary offered.

“Williams!” Collingridge exploded. “It’s his fucking poll that’s leaked! I don’t want apologies, I want answers. Get me the Chief Whip. Find him, and whatever he is doing get him here. Right now.”

The secretary summoned up his courage for the next hurdle. “Before he arrives, Prime Minister, could I suggest that we have another look at your speech? There may be various things you want to change—as a result of the morning press—and we don’t have too much time...”

“The speech stays, just as it is. Every word. I’m not ripping up a perfectly good speech just because those half-wits of the press have gone out shit spreading. So find Urquhart. And find him now!”

* * *

When the phone rang for Urquhart, who was sitting in his bungalow, it wasn’t the Prime Minister but the Foreign Secretary on the end of the line. Much to Urquhart’s relief, Woolton was chuckling.

“Francis, you’re a damned fool!”

“My dear Patrick, I can’t—”

“I’m going to have to put more water in your whiskey next time. You walked off with one of my boxes yesterday and left yours behind. I’ve got your sandwiches and you’ve got a copy of the latest secret plans to invade Papua New Guinea or whatever damn fool nonsense they’re trying to get me to sign up to this week. I suggest we swap before I get myself arrested for losing confidential Government property. I’ll be round in twenty seconds.”

Soon Urquhart was smiling his way through an apology to his Ministerial colleague but Woolton brushed it aside.

“No matter, Francis. Truth is, I wouldn’t have gotten round to reading the bloody stuff, not last night. Fact is, I’ve got to thank you. Turned out to be an exceptionally stimulating evening.”

“I’m so glad, Patrick. These conferences can be such fun.”

Yet as soon as Woolton had left, still chuckling, Urquhart’s mood changed. He became serious, his brow furrowed with concern as he locked the door from

the inside, testing the handle to make absolutely certain it was closed. He wasted no time in pulling the blinds down over the windows and, only when he was certain that there was no chance of his being observed, did he place the red box gingerly on the desk. He examined the box carefully for any signs of tampering, then selected a key from the large bunch he produced from his pocket, sliding it carefully into the lock. As the lid came up, it exposed neither papers nor sandwiches but a thick slab of polystyrene packing that entirely filled the box. He extracted the polystyrene and laid it to one side before turning the box on its end. Delicately he eased up the corner of the red leather, peeling a strip of it back until it revealed a small hole that had been carved right through the wall of the box. The recess measured no more than two inches square, and snuggling neatly in its middle was a radio transmitter complete with its own miniaturized mercury power pack, compliments of its Japanese manufacturer.

The manager of the security shop just off the Tottenham Court Road he had visited two weeks earlier had displayed a mask of utter indifference as Urquhart had explained his need to check up on a dishonest employee. "Happens," was all he said. He'd shown considerably more enthusiasm in describing the full capabilities of the equipment he could supply. This was one of the simplest yet most sensitive transmitters on the market, he'd explained, which was guaranteed to pick up almost any unobstructed sound within a distance of fifty meters and relay it back to the custom-built receiver and voice-activated tape recorder. "Just make sure the microphone is pointing generally toward the source of the sound, and I guarantee it'll sound like a Mahler symphony."

Urquhart went over to his wardrobe and pulled out yet another ministerial red box. Inside, nestling in another protective wrapping of polystyrene, sat a modified FM portable radio with built-in cassette recorder that was tuned to the wavelength of the transmitter. Urquhart noticed with satisfaction that the long-playing tape he had installed was all but exhausted. Plenty of noise to activate the recorder, then.

"I trust it's not simply because you snore, Patrick," Urquhart joked with himself. As he did so, the equipment clicked once more into action, ran for ten seconds, and stopped.

He pressed the rewind button and was watching the twin reels spin round

when the telephone rang again, summoning him to the Prime Minister. Urgently.
Another plumbing lesson.

“Never mind,” he said, running his fingers over both red leather boxes,
“you’ll wait.”

He was laughing as he went out the door.

Twenty

Some politicians think of high office like a sailor thinks of the sea, as a great adventure, full of unpredictability and excitement. They see it as the way to their destiny. I see it as something they will probably drown in.

Saturday, October 16

It wasn't just the *Chronicle* that, the day after the Prime Minister's speech, declared it to be a disaster. Almost all the other newspapers joined in, as did several Government backbenchers and the Leader of the Opposition.

The loss of the Dorset East by-election, when the news had burst upon the conference in the early hours of Friday morning, had at first numbed the Party faithful, but the feeling had worn off by breakfast. Over their muesli or full English they began to vent their frustration, and there could be only one target. Henry Collingridge.

By lunchtime, correspondents in Bournemouth seemed to have been inundated with nameless senior Party officials, each of whom claimed to have warned the Prime Minister not to hold the by-election in conference week and who were now absolving themselves of responsibility for defeat. In turn, and in desperation, the Prime Minister's office retaliated—off the record, of course. They said the blame was down to Party Headquarters for which, of course, Lord Williams was responsible. The explanation, however, fell largely on deaf ears. The pack instinct had taken hold.

As one traditionally pro-government newspaper put it:

The Prime Minister failed yet again yesterday. He should have used his

speech to quell growing doubts about his leadership, yet one Cabinet colleague described the speech as “inept and inappropriate.” Following the disastrous opinion poll and the humiliating by-election defeat in one of its safest seats, the party was looking for a realistic analysis and reassurance. Instead, in the words of one representative, “we got a stale rehash of an old election speech.”

The criticism of Collingridge has become more open. Peter Bearstead, MP for marginal seat of Leicester North, said last night: “The electorate gave us a warning slap across the knuckles at the election. It’s not going to be satisfied with clichés and suffocating complacency. It may be time for the Prime Minister to think about handing over.”

In an office tower on the South Bank of the Thames, the editor of *Weekend Watch*, the leading current affairs program, studied the newspapers and called a hurried conference of his staff. Twenty minutes later, the program planned for the following day on racketeering landlords had been shelved and the entire sixty-minute slot had been recast. Bearstead was invited to participate, as were several opinion pollsters and pundits. The new program was entitled “Time To Go?”

From his home in the leafy suburbs near Epsom, the senior manager of market makers Barclays de Zoete Wedd telephoned two colleagues. They agreed to be in the office particularly early on Monday. “All this political bollocks is going to upset the markets. Time to shift a little stock before the other bastards start selling.”

The defeated candidate in the East Dorset by-election was contacted by the *Mail on Sunday*. The paper had deliberately waited until after he’d finished a lunch spent drowning his sorrows. The candidate’s animus about his party leader was intense. “HE COST ME MY SEAT. CAN HE FEEL SAFE IN HIS?” Great headline.

In his magnificent Palladian country home in the New Forest of Hampshire, Urquhart was telephoned by several Cabinet colleagues and senior backbenchers expressing their concerns. The chairman of the Party’s grassroots executive committee also called him from Yorkshire reporting similar worries. “You know

I'd normally pass these on to the Party Chairman, Francis," the bluff Yorkshireman explained, "but it looks like open warfare between Party Headquarters and Downing Street. Damned if I'm going to get caught in the middle of that."

Meanwhile, at Chequers, the Prime Minister's official country residence set amidst rolling lawns and massive security in rural Buckinghamshire, Collingridge just sat, ignoring his official papers and devoid of inspiration. The rock had begun to roll downhill, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to stop it.

* * *

The next blow, when it fell later that afternoon, caught almost everyone by surprise. Even Urquhart. He'd expected the *Observer* to take at least a couple more weeks checking the bundle of papers and photostats he had sent them, entirely anonymously. A bit of due diligence with the lawyers was the least he'd expected but it seemed the *Observer* feared that a competitor might also be on the trail. "Damned if we don't publish, damned if we do. So let's go!" the editor had shouted at his newsroom.

Urquhart was in his garage where he kept his 1933 Rover Speed Pilot when the call came. The Rover was a car he used for hurtling carelessly through the lanes of the New Forest "like a pink-skinned version of Mr. Toad," as his wife would say, safe in the knowledge that no policeman was going to be petty enough to book such a beautiful British classic, and in any event the chief constable was a member of the same golf club. Urquhart was adjusting the triple carburetors when Mortima called from inside the house. "Francis! Chequers on the phone!" He picked up the extension on the garage wall, wiping his hands carefully on a greasy rag. "Francis Urquhart here."

"Chief Whip, please hold. I have the Prime Minister for you," a female voice instructed.

The voice that stumbled down the phone was almost unrecognizable. It was faded, uncertain, drained. "Francis, I am afraid I've had some bad news. The *Observer* has been in touch. Bastards. They say they're running a story tomorrow. Can't explain it, but they say my brother Charles has been buying shares in companies with inside information—government information. Making

a killing on them. They say they've got documentary evidence—bank statements, brokers' receipts, the lot. He bought nearly £50,000 worth of Renox, they say, a couple of days before we approved a new drug of theirs. Sold them a day later for a substantial profit. Did it all from a false address in Paddington, they say. It's going to be the lead story." There was an exhausted pause, as if he no longer had the energy to continue. "Francis, everyone's going to assume he got the information from me. What on earth do I do?"

Urquhart settled himself comfortably in the old leather seat of the car before replying. It was a seat from which he was used to taking risks. "Have you said anything to the *Observer*, Henry?"

"No. I don't think they were expecting a comment from me. They were really trying to find Charlie."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to ground, I hope. I managed to get hold of him. He...was drunk. I just told him to take the phone off the hook and not to answer the door."

Urquhart gripped the steering wheel, staring ahead. He felt strangely detached. He had set in motion a machine that was far more powerful than his ability to control it. He could no longer be certain what lay around the next bend, only that he was speeding much faster than could ever be considered safe. He couldn't stop, didn't want to. It was already too late for second thoughts.

"Where is Charlie?"

"At home in London."

"You must get someone down there to take care of him. He can't be trusted on his own, Henry. Look, I know it must be painful but there's a drying-out clinic outside Dover which the Whips' Office has used for the occasional backbencher. Very confidential, very kind. Dr. Christian, the head of the clinic, is excellent. I'll give him a call and get him to come to Charlie. I'm afraid you'll have to arrange for someone else from the family to be there, too, in case Charlie cuts up rough. Who do you think? Your wife, perhaps? We've got to move fast, Henry, because in a few hours the *Observer* will hit the streets and your brother's home is going to be under siege. We have to beat those bastards to the punch. With Charlie in his present state there's no knowing what he might say or do."

“But what do we do then? I can’t hide Charlie forever. He’s got to face up to it sooner or later, hasn’t he?”

“Forgive me for asking, Henry, but did he do it? The shares?”

The sigh that came down the phone was like old air escaping from a long-buried coffin. “I don’t know. I simply don’t know. But...” The hesitation stank of doubt and defeat. “Apparently we did license a new Renox drug. Anyone holding any of their shares would have made a handsome profit. But Charlie hasn’t got any money to pay his basic bills, let alone to splash around on shares. And how would he know about Renox?”

Urquhart came back in a tone that brooked no argument. “We worry about that when we’ve taken care of him. He needs help, whether he wants it or not, and we’ve got to get him some breathing space. You and I, Henry, we’ve got to take care of him. And you in particular will have to be very careful, Henry.” There was a short pause for the words to sink in. “You can’t afford to get this one wrong.”

Collingridge’s wearied assent was mumbled down the phone. He had neither the will nor the capacity to argue, and he was glad for his Chief Whip’s authoritativeness, even if it stripped away both his family pride and the dignity of his office.

“What else do I do, Francis?”

“Nothing. Not once we’ve got Charlie away. We keep our powder dry. Let’s see precisely what the *Observer* says, then we can come out to do battle. In the meantime, we say nothing.”

“Thank you, Francis. Please, call your Dr. Christian, ask if he will help. Sarah can be at my brother’s home in just under two hours if she leaves right now. Take care of things. Oh...damn.”

Urquhart could hear the emotion ripping through the Prime Minister’s voice.

“Don’t worry, Henry. Everything will work out,” he encouraged. “Trust me.”

* * *

Charles Collingridge didn’t object at first when his sister-in-law let herself into the flat with the spare key. She found him snoring in an armchair, the clutter of an afternoon’s heavy indulgence spread around him. She spent five frustrating

minutes trying to shake him awake, to little effect, until she resorted to ice wrapped in a tea towel. That was when he started to object. His protests grew louder when he began to understand what Sarah was saying, persuading him to “come away for a few days,” but the dialogue became totally incoherent when she began to question him about shares. She could get no sense out of him, and neither could she persuade him to move.

It took the arrival of Dr. Christian and a junior Whip almost an hour later before the situation made progress. An overnight bag was packed and the three of them bundled the still-protesting brother into the back of Dr. Christian’s car, which was parked out of sight at the back of the building.

It was fortunate for them that Charlie had lost the physical coordination to offer much resistance. Unfortunately, however, the whole matter had taken time, too much time, so that when the doctor’s black Ford Granada swept out from behind the building into the high street with Sarah and Charles in the back, the whole scene was witnessed by an ITN camera crew that had just arrived on the scene.

The videotape of a fleeing Charles cowering in the back seat of the car, accompanied by the Prime Minister’s distressed wife, was the lead item of the late evening news.

Twenty-One

Loyalty may be good news, but it is rarely good advice.

Sunday, October 17

The scenes of the fugitive Charles Collingridge were still the lead news item as *Weekend Watch* came on the air. The program had been thrown together in frantic haste and there were many untidy ends. The control room reeked of sweat and stale tobacco, there had been no time for a proper run-through and the autocue script for the later parts was still being typed as the presenter welcomed his viewers.

They hadn't been able to persuade a single minister to appear; the harder they'd tried, the more belligerent the refusals had been. One of the tame pundits had still not arrived at the studio. The sound man was desperately searching for fresh batteries even as the studio manager counted down with his fingers and the studio went live. An overnight opinion poll had been commissioned through Gallup and the polling company's chief executive, Gordon Heald, was presenting the results himself. He'd been kicking his computer all morning and was looking slightly flushed. It wasn't just the lights, it was what his polling agents had found. Another fall in the Prime Minister's popularity. Yes, a significant fall, Heald admitted. No, there was no example of a previous prime minister who'd ever won an election after being so unpopular.

The gloomy prognostications were supported by two senior newspaper analysts and made all the more Stygian by an economist who predicted turmoil in the financial markets in the days ahead. He was cut off mid-ramble as the presenter switched his attention to Peter Bearstead. Normally the East Midlands

MP would have been videotaped beforehand but there had been no time for recording, so he went live. He was scheduled on the director's log for no more than two minutes fifty seconds but that took no account of the fact that, once started, the Honorable, garrulous, and diminutive Member for Leicester North was more difficult to put down than a bad-tempered badger.

"Well, Mr. Bearstead, how much trouble do you think the Party is in?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On how long we have to struggle on with the present Prime Minister."

"So you're standing by your comment of earlier in the week that perhaps the Prime Minister should be considering his position?"

"No, not exactly. I'm saying he should resign. He's destroying our Party and now he's got himself wrapped up in what looks like a family scandal. It can't go on. It just can't!"

"But do you think the Prime Minister is likely to resign? After all, we've only just had an election. It might be almost five years before the next. That must leave enormous scope for recovering lost ground."

"We will not—not, I tell you—survive another five years with this Prime Minister!" The MP was agitated, passionate, rocking back and forth in his studio chair. "It is time for clear heads, not faint hearts, and I'm determined that the Party must come to a decision on the matter. If he doesn't resign, then we'll have to make him."

"But how?"

"Force a leadership contest."

"Against who?"

"Well, I'll bloomin' stand if no one else will."

"You're going to challenge Henry Collingridge for the Party leadership?" the presenter spluttered in surprise. "But surely you can't win?"

"Course I can't win," Bearstead responded, almost contemptuous. "But it'll focus the minds of the big beasts in our jungle. They're all griping about the PM but none of them has the guts to do anything. So, if they won't, then I will. Flush it all into the open."

The presenter's lower lip was wobbling as he tried to decide the right place to

intervene. “I don’t want to interrupt but I do want to be clear about this, Mr. Bearstead. You are saying that the Prime Minister must resign, or else you will stand against him for leadership of the Party?”

“There has to be a leadership election no later than Christmas: it’s Party rules after an election. I know it’s normally nothing but a formality, but this time around it’s going to be a real contest. My colleagues are going to have to make up their minds.”

An expression of pain seemed to have taken hold of the presenter’s features. He was holding his earpiece, listening to a shouting match underway in the gallery. The director was demanding that the dramatic interview should continue and to hell with the schedule; the editor was shouting that they should get away from it before the bloody fool changed his mind and ruined a sensational story. An ashtray crashed to the floor, someone cursed very crudely.

“We’re going for a short commercial break,” the presenter declared.

Twenty-Two

*Politics. The word is taken from the Ancient Greek. “Poly” means “many.”
And ticks are tiny, bloodsucking insects.*

Monday, October 18—Friday, October 22

Sterling began to be marked down heavily as soon as the Tokyo financial markets opened. It was shortly before midnight in London. By 9:00 a.m. and with all the Monday newspapers screaming about the challenge to Collingridge, the *FT* All Share Index was down 63 points. It fell a further 44 points by lunchtime. The money men don't like surprises.

The Prime Minister wasn't feeling on top form, either. He hadn't slept and had scarcely talked since Saturday evening, gripped by a strong depression. Rather than allow him to return to Downing Street that morning, Sarah kept him at Chequers and called the doctor. Dr. Wynne-Jones, Collingridge's loyal and highly experienced physician, prescribed a sedative and rest. The sedative gave some immediate release; Collingridge had his first lengthy spell of sleep since the start of the Party conference a week earlier, but his wife could still detect the tension fluttering behind his closed eyelids. Even as he slept, his fingers remained firmly clamped onto the bedclothes.

Late on Monday afternoon, after he had emerged from his drugged sleep, he instructed the besieged Downing Street Press Office to make it known that, of course, he would be contesting the leadership election and was confident of victory, that he was too busy getting on with Government business to give any interviews but would have something to say later in the week. Charlie wasn't giving any interviews, either. He still wasn't making a word of sense about the

shares, and the resulting official “No comment” was never going to be enough to steady the family boat.

Over at Party Headquarters Lord Williams ordered some more polling, and in a hurry. He wanted to know what the country really thought. The rest of the Party machinery moved less quickly. The rules for a contested leadership election were dusted off and found to be less than straightforward. The process was under the control of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Party’s Backbench Committee, Sir Humphrey Newlands, while the choice of timing was left in the hands of the Party Leader. The confusion only grew when it emerged that Sir Humphrey, displaying an acutely poor sense of timing, had left the previous weekend for a holiday on a private island in the West Indies and was proving extraordinarily difficult to contact. This resulted in a flurry of speculation among the scribblers that he was deliberately keeping his head low, playing for time while the awesome powers of the Party hierarchy were mobilized to persuade “the Lion of Leicester,” as Bearstead had been dubbed, to withdraw. By Wednesday, however, the *Sun* had discovered Sir Humphrey on a silver stretch of beach somewhere near St. Lucia along with several friends, including at least three scantily clad young women who were obviously nearly half a century younger than he. It was announced that he would be returning to London as soon as flights could be arranged. Like Charlie Collingridge, his wife was offering no public comment.

In such a stormy sea Henry Collingridge began to find himself drifting, cut off from the advice of his wise and wily Party Chairman. He had no specific reason to distrust Williams, of course, but the constant media prattle of a growing gulf between the two began to make a reality of what previously had been little more than irresponsible gossip. Distrust is a matter of mind, not fact. The proud and aging Party Chairman felt he couldn’t offer advice without being asked, while Collingridge took his silence as evidence of disloyalty.

Sarah went to visit Charlie and came back late and very depressed. “He looks awful, Henry. I never realized quite how ill he was making himself. So much alcohol. The doctors say he was close to killing himself.”

“I blame myself,” Henry muttered. “I could have stopped him. If only I hadn’t been so preoccupied...Did he say anything about the shares?”

“He’s scarcely coherent; he just kept saying ‘£50,000? What £50,000?’ He swore he’d never been anywhere near a Turkish bank.”

“Bugger!”

“Darling...” She was biting her lip, struggling with the words. “Is it possible...?”

“That he’s guilty? I simply don’t know. But what choice do I have? He has to be innocent because if he did buy those shares, then who but a total fool is going to believe that I didn’t tell him to do so. If Charlie is guilty, I’m going down, too.”

She gripped his arm in alarm. “Couldn’t you say that Charlie was ill, didn’t know what he was doing, that he somehow...found the information without your knowing...” Her excuse faded away. Even she couldn’t believe it.

He took her in his arms, surrounding her, reassuring her with his body in a way that his words could not. He kissed her forehead and felt the warmth of tears on his chest. He knew he was close to tears, too, and felt no shame in it.

“Sarah, I’m not going to be the one to finish off Charlie. God knows he’s been trying hard enough to do that himself, but I am still his brother. Will always be that. On this one we’ll either survive, or sink if we must. But, whatever happens, we’ll do it as a family. Together.”

* * *

The party conference season had been six weeks of sleep deprivation and sweat, and it had been Mattie’s intention to take a little time off to recover. A long weekend had been enough. No matter how much exotic Chilean wine she drank or how many old films she watched, her thoughts kept straying back to her job. And Collingridge. And Urquhart. And Preston. Particularly Preston. She picked up several sheets of sandpaper and began rubbing down the woodwork of her Victorian apartment, but it didn’t help, no matter how much she attacked the old paint. She was still mad as hell with her editor.

The following morning at 9:30 she found herself back in the office, rooted to the leather armchair in front of Preston’s desk, laying siege. He wasn’t going to put the phone down on her this time. But it didn’t help.

She’d been there nearly an hour when his secretary peered apologetically

round the door. “Sorry, Matts, the Big Man’s just called to say he’s got an outside appointment and won’t be in until after lunch.”

The world was conspiring against Mattie, spreading sauce on her shirt. She wanted to scream and was building up to do so. It wasn’t brilliant timing, therefore, when John Krajewski chose that moment to come looking for his editor.

“I didn’t know you were in, Mattie.”

“I’m not. At least, not for much longer.” She stood up to go.

Krajewski stood ill at ease; he often was in her company, liked her just a shade too much for comfort. “Look, Mattie, I’ve picked up the phone a dozen times to call you since last week, but...”

“But what?” she snapped.

“I guess I couldn’t be bothered getting my head bitten off.”

“Then you were...” She hesitated, about to snap and suggest he was correct in his assumption, but she bit it back. It wasn’t his fault. “You were wise,” she said, her voice softening.

Since his wife had died in a traffic accident two years earlier, Krajewski had lost much of his self-confidence, both about women and about his professional abilities. He was able, had survived, but the protective shell he had built around himself was only slowly cracking. Several women had tried, attracted by his tall, slightly gangly frame and sad eyes, but he wanted more than their sympathy and a mercy fuck. He wanted something—someone—to shake him up and kick-start his life once again. He wanted Mattie.

“You want to talk about it, Mattie? Over dinner, maybe? Away from all this?” He made an irritated gesture in the direction of the editor’s desk.

“Are you putting the squeeze on me?” The slightest trace of a smile began to appear at the corners of her mouth.

“A gentle tickle, perhaps.”

She grabbed her bag and swung it over her shoulder. “Eight o’clock. The Ganges,” she instructed, trying in vain to look severe as she walked past him and out of the office.

“I’ll be there,” he shouted after her. “I must be a masochist, but I’ll be there.”

And he was. In fact he got there ten minutes early in order to get a beer down

him before she arrived, five minutes late. He knew he would need a little artificial courage. The Ganges, just around the corner from Mattie's flat in Notting Hill, was a tiny Bangladeshi restaurant with a big clay oven and a proprietor who ran an excellent kitchen during the time he allowed himself away from trying to overthrow the Government back home. When Mattie arrived she ordered a beer and kept pace with Krajewski until the last of the tikka had been scraped from the plate. She pushed it away from her, as though clearing space.

"I think I've made a terrible mistake, Johnnie."

"Too much garlic in the naan?"

"I want to be a journalist. A good journalist. Deep down I think I have the makings of a great journalist. But it's not going to happen with an arsehole as an editor, is it?"

"Grev does have his less attractive side, I suppose."

"I gave up a lot to come down to London."

"Funny, we blokes from Essex always think of it as coming *up* to London."

"I've decided. Made up my mind. I'm not taking any more of Greville Preston's crap. I'm quitting."

He looked deep into her eyes, saw the turmoil. He reached out and took her hand. "Don't rush it, Mattie. The political world is falling apart, you need a job, a ringside seat, to be part of the action. Don't jump before you're ready."

"Johnnie, you surprise me. That's not the impassioned plea to stay on as part of the team that I was expecting from my deputy editor."

"I'm not speaking as the deputy editor, Mattie." He squeezed her hand. "Anyway, you're right. Grev is a shit. His only redeeming factor is that he's totally uncomplicated about being a shit. Never lets you down. You know, the other night..."

"Tell me before I rip your balls off."

The waiter arrived with yet another round of beers. He took the head off his before he replied.

"OK, newsroom shortly before the first edition deadline. A quiet night, not much late breaking news. Grev's holding forth, spinning us some yarn about how he'd been drinking with Denis Thatcher the night of the Brighton bomb. No one believed it; DT wouldn't be seen dead with Grev Preston, let alone drinking

with him, and Lorraine in Features swears she was shagging him in Hove at the time. Anyway, he's halfway through his pitch when his secretary shouts at him. A phone call. So he disappears into his office to take it. Ten minutes later he's back in the newsroom and very flustered. Someone's lit a fire under him. 'Hold everything,' he shouts. 'We're going to change the front page.' We all think, Jesus, they must have shot the President, because he's in a real state, nervous. Then he asks for your story to be put up on one of the screens and announces that we're going to lead with it. But we're going to have to beef it up."

"It doesn't make sense. The reason he spiked it in the first place was because he said it was too strong!" she protested.

"Shut up and listen. It gets better. So there he is, looking over the shoulder of one of our general reporters who's sitting at the screen, dictating changes directly to him. Twisting it, hyping it, turning everything into a personal attack on Collingridge. 'We've got to make the bastard squirm,' he says. And you remember the quotes from senior Cabinet sources on which the whole rewrite was based? I think he made them up, on the spot. Every single one of them. Didn't have notes, just dictated them straight onto the screen. Fiction from beginning to end. Mattie, believe me, you should be over the bloody moon your name wasn't on it."

"But why? Why on earth invent a story like that? What made him change his mind in such a hurry? *Who* made him change? Who was he talking to on the phone? Who was this so-called source in Bournemouth?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, but I think I do," she whispered. "It has to be. Could only be. Benjamin Bloody Landless."

"We don't work for a newspaper anymore; it's little more than a lynch mob run for the personal amusement of our proprietor."

They both went back to their beers for a moment as they tried to drown their miseries.

"Oh, but it's not just Landless, is it?" Mattie said, as though the beer had refreshed her mind.

"Isn't it?" Krajewski had taken the opportunity of diving into his drink to run his eye yet again across Mattie. He was growing distracted, while she was

growing more intent.

“Look, Grev couldn’t have concocted that article without my copy, and I couldn’t have written it without the leaked opinion poll. Believe in coincidence if you want, but there’s somebody else, someone on the inside of the Party who’s leaking polls and pulling strings.”

“What, leaking all that other material since the election, too?”

“Of course!” She finished the rest of her beer in triumph. The adrenalin was pouring into her veins. This was going to make the best story of all. It was what she had come south for.

“Johnnie, you’re right!”

“Am I?” he said, bewildered. He’d lost track of this one a couple of beers ago.

“This is definitely not the time to throw in the towel and resign. I’m going to get to the bottom of this even if I have to kill someone. Will you help me?”

“If that’s what you want—of course.”

“Don’t sound so bloody despondent.”

“It’s just that...” Oh, to hell with hesitation. “You remember you said you’d rip my balls off if I didn’t tell you everything.”

“But you have.”

“Could you do it all the same?”

“You mean...” Yes, he did, she could see it in his eyes. “Johnnie, I don’t do office romances.”

“Romance? Who’s talking romance? We’ve both had far too much beer for that. I’d be quite happy with a good old fashioned shag for now.”

She laughed.

“I think we both deserve it,” he insisted.

She was still laughing as they left the restaurant hand in hand.

* * *

The Downing Street statement—or briefing, in fact, because it wasn’t issued in the form of a press release but through the words of the press secretary, Freddie Redfern—was simple. “The Prime Minister has never provided his brother with any form of commercially sensitive Government information. He has never

discussed any aspect of Renox Chemicals with him. The Prime Minister's brother is extremely ill and is currently under medical supervision. His doctors have stated that he is not in a fit state to give interviews or answer questions. However, I can assure you that he categorically denies purchasing any Renox shares, having a false address in Paddington, or being involved in this matter in any way whatsoever. That's all I can tell you at the moment. And that's all you're getting on the record."

"Come on, Freddie," one of the assembled correspondents carped, "you can't get away with just that. How on earth do you explain the *Observer* story if the Collingridges are innocent?"

"I can't. Mistaken identity, getting confused with another Charles Collingridge, how do I know? But I've known Henry Collingridge for many years, just as you've known me, and I know he's incapable of stooping to such sordid depths. My man is innocent. You have my word on that!"

He spoke with the vehemence of a professional placing his own reputation on the line along with that of his boss, and the lobby's respect for one of their former colleagues swung the day for Collingridge—just.

"WE'RE INNOCENT!" bawled the front page of the *Daily Mail* the following day. Since no one had been able to unearth any fresh incriminating evidence, most of the other newspapers followed a similar line. For the moment.

* * *

"Francis, you're the only smiling face I see at the moment."

"Henry, it will improve. I promise. The hounds will scatter once they lose the scent."

They were sitting together in the Cabinet Room, newspapers scattered across the brown cloth.

"Thank you for your loyalty, Francis. It means a great deal to me right now."

"The storm clouds are passing."

But the Prime Minister was shaking his head. "I wish that were so, but you and I know this is only a breathing space." He sighed. "I don't know how much firm support I still have among colleagues."

Urquhart didn't contest the point.

“I can’t afford to run away. I have to give them something to hold onto, show I’ve nothing to hide. It’s time to take the initiative once again.”

“What do you intend to do?”

The Prime Minister sat quietly at his place, chewing the end of his pen. He glanced up at the towering oil painting of Robert Walpole, his longest-serving predecessor, that stood above the marble fireplace. “How many scandals and crises did he survive, Francis?”

“More than you will ever have to.”

“Or be able to,” Collingridge whispered, searching the dark, too clever eyes for inspiration. Suddenly he was distracted as the sun burst through the gray autumn skies, flooding the room with light. It seemed to give him hope. Life would go on.

“I’ve had an invitation from those bastards at *Weekend Watch*. They want me to appear this Sunday and put my own case—to restore the balance.”

“I trust them like I do a nest of adders.”

“Nevertheless, I think I must do it—and do it damned well! They’ve promised no more than ten minutes on the *Observer* nonsense, the rest on broad policy and our ambitions for the fourth term. Raising sights, lifting the argument out of the gutter. What do you think?”

“Me, think, Prime Minister? But I’m the Chief Whip, you don’t pay me to think.”

“I know I disappointed you, Francis, but right now I couldn’t ask for a better man than you at my side. After this is over, I promise—you’ll get what you want.”

Urquhart nodded his head slowly in gratitude.

“Would you do it? If you were standing in my shoes?” Collingridge pressed. “Freddie Redfern says it’s too dangerous.”

“There are also dangers in doing nothing.”

“So?”

“At times like these, with so much at stake, I believe a man must follow his heart.”

“Excellent!” Collingridge exclaimed, clapping his hands. “I’m glad you think that way. Because I’ve already accepted.”

Urquhart nodded in approval, yet suddenly the Prime Minister swore. He was staring at his hands. The pen had leaked. His hands were filthy, he was covered in ink.

* * *

Penny Guy had been expecting a call from Patrick Woolton. Somehow he'd found the direct line number and had been using it, trying to invite her out once again. He'd been persistent but she had been adamant. It was a party conference thing, nothing more, although she had to admit that he had been fun and remarkably athletic for his age. A mistake, but a memory that hadn't hurt anyone. Yet the call, when it came, was from Urquhart wanting to speak to her boss. She put the call through and a few seconds later the door to his office was carefully closed.

It was some minutes later that Penny heard the sound of O'Neill's raised voice, although she couldn't decipher what he was shouting about. And when the light on the extension phone flashed off to indicate the call was finished, there was no sound of any kind from O'Neill's office. She hesitated for another few minutes but, pressed on by a mixture of curiosity and concern, she knocked gently on his door and opened it cautiously.

O'Neill was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, propped up by the angle of two walls. His head was in his hands.

"Rog...?"

He looked up, startled, his eyes full of chaos and pain. His voice croaked and his speech was disjointed.

"He...threatened me, Pen. Fucking...threatened me. Said if I don't he would...I've got to alter the file..."

She knelt down beside him, his head on her breast. She had never seen him like this. "What file, Rog? What have you got to do?"

He tried to shake his head, wouldn't answer.

"Let me help you, Rog. Please."

His head jerked up, his expression wild. "No one can help me!"

"Let me take you home," she said, trying to lift him.

He shoved her away. "Get away from me!" he snarled. "Don't touch me!"

Then he saw the look of pain in her eyes and some of the fire inside him seemed to die. He collapsed in the corner, like a little boy, hiding his head in shame. “I’m fucked, you see. Totally fucked. Nothing you can do. Anyone can do. Go away.”

“No, Rog—”

But he pushed her away again, so savagely that she fell over backwards. “Fuck off, you little slut! Just...leave.”

In tearful confusion she climbed to her feet. He was hiding his head from her again, wouldn’t talk. She left. She heard the door slam behind her and the sound of it being locked from the inside.

Twenty-Three

The dust of exploded ambition makes for a fine sunset. And I love walking out in the evening.

Sunday, October 24

Weekend Watch. An entire nation watching. Lions and Christians—or one Christian, at least. Collingridge was beginning to relax as the program unfolded. He had rehearsed hard for the previous two days and the questions were much as expected, giving him an opportunity to talk with genuine vigor about the next few years. He had insisted that the questions about Charlie and the *Observer* allegations be kept until the end—he didn't want those whores in the production gallery welching on their promise to keep that to ten minutes. Anyway, he wanted to be well into his stride. After forty-five minutes discussing the national interest and its bright future, surely any fair-minded man would find the questions simply mean and irrelevant?

Sarah was smiling encouragingly from a seat at the edge of the studio floor as they went into the final commercial break. He blew a kiss at her as the floor manager waved his arms to let them know they were about to go back on air.

“Prime Minister, for the final few minutes of our program, I'd like to turn to the allegations printed in the *Observer* last week about your brother, Charles, and the implication of possible improper share dealing.”

Collingridge nodded, his face serious, unflinching.

“I understand that earlier this week Downing Street issued a statement denying that your family had any connection with the matter, and suggesting that there may have been a case of mistaken identity. Is that correct?”

“No connection, no. Not at all. There may have been some confusion with another Charles Collingridge for all I know, but I’m really not in a position to explain the extraordinary *Observer* story. All I can tell you is that none of my family has had anything whatsoever to do with Renox shares. You have my word of honor on that.” He spoke the words slowly, leaning forward, looking directly at the presenter.

“I understand that your brother denies ever having opened an accommodation address in a Paddington tobacconist’s.”

“Absolutely,” Collingridge confirmed. “It’s well known he’s not in the best of shape right now but—”

“Forgive me for interrupting, Prime Minister, our time is very short. Earlier this week one of our reporters addressed an envelope to himself, care of Charles Collingridge, at the same address in Paddington used to open the bank account. It was a vivid red envelope to make sure it stood out clearly. Then yesterday he went to reclaim it. We filmed him. I’d like you to look at the monitor. I apologize for the poor quality but I’m afraid we had to use a concealed camera because the proprietor of the shop seemed very reluctant to cooperate.”

The presenter swiveled his chair so that he, along with the audience, could see the grainy but still discernible video that was being shown on the large screen behind him. Collingridge flashed a look of concern at Sarah before cautiously turning his own chair. He watched as the reporter approached the counter, pulled out various pieces of plastic and paper from his wallet to identify himself, and explained to the shopkeeper that a letter was waiting for him in the care of Charles Collingridge who used this address for his own post. The shopkeeper, the same overweight and habitually offensive man who had served Penny several months before, explained that he wasn’t going to release letters except to someone who could produce a proper receipt. “Lots of important letters come here,” he sniffed. “Can’t go handing them out to just anyone.”

“But look, it’s there. The red envelope. I can see it from here.”

With a scratch at his belly and a frown of uncertainty, the shopkeeper turned and extracted the envelopes from a numbered pigeonhole behind him. There were three of them. He placed the red envelope on the counter in front of the reporter, with the other two envelopes to one side. He was trying to confirm that

the name on the envelope, c/o Charles Collingridge, matched that of the reporter's identity cards, when the camera zoomed in on the other envelopes. It took a few seconds to focus before the markings on the envelopes came clearly into view. Both were addressed to Charles Collingridge. One bore the imprint of the Union Bank of Turkey. The other had been sent from the Party's Sales and Literature Office at Smith Square.

The presenter turned once more to his adversary. The Christian had been cornered.

"The first envelope from the Union Bank of Turkey seems to confirm that this address was used to buy and sell shares in the Renox Chemical Company. But we were puzzled about the letter from your own Party Headquarters. So we called your Sales and Literature Office, pretending to be a supplier with an order for Charles Collingridge but with an indecipherable address."

Collingridge knew what he must do. He must stop this rape of his brother's reputation and denounce the immoral and underhand methods used by the program, but his mouth had turned to desert sand and, while he struggled to find the words, the studio filled to the recorded sound of the telephone call.

"...so could you just confirm what address we should have for Mr. Collingridge and then we can get the goods off to him straight away."

"Just one minute, please," an eager young voice said. "I'll call it up on the screen."

There was the sound of a keyboard being tapped.

"Ah, here it is. Charles Collingridge, 216 Praed Street, Paddington, London W2."

"Thank you. Very much indeed. You have been most helpful."

The presenter turned once again to Collingridge. "Do you want to comment, Prime Minister?"

The Prime Minister stared, silent, wondering if this was the moment he should walk out from the studio.

"Of course, we took seriously your explanation that it might be a case of mistaken identity, of confusion with another Charles Collingridge."

Collingridge wanted to shout that it wasn't *his* explanation, that it was nothing more than an off-hand remark made without prejudice by his press

secretary, but already the presenter was continuing, cutting off any route of escape.

“Do you know how many other Charles Collingridges there are listed in the London telephone directory, Prime Minister?”

Collingridge offered no response, but sat looking grim and ashen faced.

“I wonder if you’d be interested to know that there are no other Charles Collingridges listed in the London telephone directory. In fact, sources at British Telecom tell us that there is only one Charles Collingridge listed throughout the United Kingdom. And that’s your brother, Prime Minister.”

Again a pause, inviting a response, but none was offered.

“Since this appears to be an abuse of insider information, we asked both the Renox Chemical Company and the Department of Health if they had a Mr. Charles Collingridge working for them. Renox tells us that neither they, nor their subsidiaries, have any Collingridge among their employees. The Department of Health’s Press Office was rather more cagey, promising to get back to us but they never did. However, their trade union office was much more cooperative. They, too, confirmed that there is no Collingridge listed as working at any of the Department’s 508 offices throughout the country.” The presenter shuffled his notes. “Apparently they did have a Minnie Collingridge who worked at their Coventry office until two years ago, but she went back to Jamaica.” The lion smiled as he closed his jaws.

At the side of the stage Collingridge could see Sarah. Tears were running down her cheeks.

“Prime Minister, we’ve almost come to the end of our program. Is there anything you wish to say?”

Collingridge sat staring at Sarah, wanting to run to her and embrace her and lie to her that there was no need for tears, that everything would be all right. He was still sitting motionless in his chair as the eerie silence that had settled in the studio was broken by the program’s theme music.

It was the end.

* * *

On his return to Downing Street Collingridge went straight to the Cabinet Room.

He entered stiffly, looking slowly and with an exhausted eye around the room. He walked slowly around the Cabinet table, so eloquently shaped like a coffin, trailing his fingers on the brown baize cloth, stopping at its far end, where he had first sat as the Cabinet's most junior member. It seemed so much longer than ten years ago, almost another lifetime.

When he reached his own chair, in the middle of the room, beneath the gaze of that great survivor Walpole, he reached for the single telephone that stood beside his blotter. The Downing Street switchboard was a legendary institution, simply known as "Switch," its female operators seeming to be endowed with powers of witchcraft that enabled them to reach anyone at any time. "Get me the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Please."

It took less than a minute before the Chancellor was on the line.

"Colin, did you see it? How badly will the markets react?"

The Chancellor gave an embarrassed but honest opinion.

"Bloody, eh? Well, we'll see. I'll be in touch."

Collingridge then spoke to the Foreign Secretary. "What damage, Patrick?"

"What's *not* damaged, Henry? We've been trying to stuff our brothers in Brussels for years. Now they're laughing at us."

"Is it recoverable?"

Collingridge got a prolonged silence in answer.

"Bad as that, eh?"

"Sorry, Henry."

And, for a fleeting moment, Collingridge thought the other man meant it.

Next it was the turn of the Party Chairman. Williams was ancient, filled with experience, had seen sad times before. He knew such occasions were best dressed in formality rather than friendship. "Prime Minister," he began, because he was speaking to the office rather than the man, "within the last hour I have had calls from seven of our eleven regional chairmen. Without exception, I am sorry to say, they believe the situation is quite disastrous for the Party. They feel that we are beyond the point of no return."

"No, Teddy," Collingridge contradicted wearily, "they feel that *I* am beyond the point of no return. There's a difference."

He made one more phone call. It was to his private secretary asking him to

seek an appointment at the Palace around lunchtime the following day. The secretary rang back four minutes later to say Her Majesty would be available to see him at one o'clock.

And with that it was done.

He was supposed to feel relieved, a great burden lifted from his shoulders, but every muscle in his body hurt, as though he'd been kicked for hours by soccer thugs. He gazed up into the stern features of Walpole. "Oh, yes, you'd have fought the bastards, to the very end. You'd probably have won. But this office has already ruined my brother and now it is ruining me. I won't let it ruin Sarah's happiness, too," he whispered. "Better let her know."

A little while later he left the room in search of his wife, after he had dried his face.

PART THREE

THE DEAL

Twenty-Four

The time for change is when it can no longer be resisted. In other words, when you have a man by the balls and are pulling hard, he will invariably follow in your footsteps.

Monday, October 25

The day after the disastrous outing on *Weekend Watch*, and shortly before ten o'clock, the members of the Cabinet assembled around the baize-covered table. They had been called individually to Downing Street rather than as a formal Cabinet, which was normally held on a Thursday, and most had been surprised to discover their colleagues also gathered. There was an air of tension. They dragged with them the contents of the newspapers and their explosive editorials, and the conversation around the table was unusually muffled while they waited for their Prime Minister.

As the tones of Big Ben striking the hour seeped into the room, the door opened and Collingridge walked in.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” His voice was unusually soft. “I’m grateful to see you all here. I won’t detain you long.”

He took his seat, the only chair in the room with arms, and extracted a single sheet of paper from the leather bound file he was carrying. He laid it carefully on the table in front of him and then looked slowly around at his colleagues. His eyes were raw, sleepless. There wasn’t a sound to be heard in the room.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to inform you that this morning’s meeting was to be one of the full Cabinet. I wanted to ensure that you could all be assembled without creating undue attention and speculation.” He looked around the table to

see if he could read anything in their faces, in search of Barabbas. “I’m going to read to you a short statement that I’ll be issuing later today. At one o’clock I shall be going to the Palace to convey the contents formally to Her Majesty. I must ask all of you, on your oaths of office, not to divulge the contents of this message to anyone before it’s released officially. I must ensure Her Majesty hears it from me and not through the press. It’s a matter of courtesy to the Sovereign. I would also ask it of each one of you as a personal favor to me.”

He picked up the sheet of paper and began to read in a slow, matter-of-fact voice. “Recently there has been a spate of allegations in the media about the business affairs of both me and my family. These allegations show no sign of abating. I have consistently stated, and repeat today, that I have done nothing of which I should be ashamed. I have adhered strictly to the rules and conventions relating to the conduct of the Prime Minister.”

He ran his tongue around dried lips. The paper he was holding trembled.

“The implied allegation made against me is one of the most serious kind for any holder of public office, that I have used my office to enrich my family. I cannot explain the extraordinary circumstances referred to by the media that have given rise to these allegations, so I have asked the Cabinet Secretary to undertake a formal independent investigation into them. I am confident that the official investigation by the Cabinet Secretary will eventually establish the full facts of the matter and my complete exoneration.”

He blinked, rubbed an exhausted eye.

“This investigation will inevitably take some time to complete. In the meantime the doubts and insinuations are doing real harm to the normal business of Government, and to my Party, and also to those I love. The time and attention of the Government should be devoted to implementing the program on which we were so recently re-elected, but this is not proving possible. The integrity of the office of Prime Minister has been brought into question, and it is my first duty to protect that office.”

He cleared his throat, a sound of feathered thunder.

“Therefore, to re-establish and preserve that unquestioned integrity, I have today asked the permission of Her Majesty the Queen to relinquish the office of Prime Minister as soon as a successor can be chosen.”

The silence was profound. Hearts had momentarily stopped beating.

“I have devoted my entire adult life to the pursuit of my political ideals,” he continued, “and it goes against every bone in my body to leave office in this fashion. I am not running away from the allegations but rather ensuring that they can be cleared up as quickly and expeditiously as possible. I also want to bring a little peace back to my family. I believe history will show that I have made the right judgment.”

Collingridge replaced the piece of paper in his folder. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you,” he said curtly, and, before anyone could sigh, let alone respond, he strode out of the door and was gone.

Twenty-Five

*All members of a Cabinet are referred to as Right Honorable Gentlemen.
There are only three things wrong with such a title...*

Urquhart sat at the end of the Cabinet table transfixed. As the murmuring and gasps of surprise broke out around him he would not, could not, join in. He gazed for a long time at the Prime Minister's empty chair.

He had done this. Alone. Had destroyed the most powerful man in the country. While the others around the table erupted in a babble of confusion, his mind turned to a memory forty years old, when as a raw military recruit he had prepared to make his first parachute jump 2,500 feet above the fields of Lincolnshire. Sitting in the open hatchway of a twin engine Islander, his feet dangling in the slipstream, gazing down at the landscape a million miles below. Jumping was an act of faith, of trust in one's destiny, showing contempt for acts that terrified others. But the view from up there had been worth the danger. As he and the others had jumped the wind had picked up, knocking them aside; one had broken a leg, another a shoulder, but Urquhart had wanted to go straight back up and do it all over again.

Now, as he gazed at the empty chair, he felt just the same. He gave an inner cry of joy while contriving outwardly to look as shocked as those around him.

* * *

While others lingered, milling around in confusion, Urquhart walked the few yards back to the Chief Whip's office in 12 Downing Street. He locked himself in his private room and by 10:20 a.m. he had made two phone calls.

Ten minutes later Roger O'Neill called a meeting of the entire Press Office at Party Headquarters. "You guys are going to have to cancel all your lunch arrangements today. I've had word that shortly after one o'clock this afternoon we can expect a very important statement from Downing Street. It's absolutely confidential, I can't tell you what it's about, but we have to be ready to handle it. Push everything else aside."

Within the hour five lobby correspondents had been contacted with apologies to cancel lunch. Two of them were sworn to secrecy and told that "something big was going on in Downing Street." It didn't take a *Brain of Britain* winner to conclude that it was likely to have something to do with "the Collingridge Affair."

One of those facing the prospect of a canceled lunch was the PA's Manny Goodchild. Instead of twiddling his thumbs, he used the formidable range of contacts and favors he had built up over the years to ascertain that every single member of the Cabinet had canceled engagements in order to be at Downing Street that morning, although the Number Ten Press Office refused to confirm it. He was a wise and experienced old hound and he smelled blood, so on a hunch he phoned the Buckingham Palace Press Office. That, too, like Downing Street, had nothing to say—at least officially. But the deputy press secretary had worked with Goodchild many years before on the *Manchester Evening News* and confirmed, entirely off the record and totally unattributably, that Collingridge had asked for an audience at 1:00 p.m.

By 11:25 a.m. the PA tape was carrying the story of the secret Cabinet meeting and the unscheduled audience expected to take place at the Palace. It was an entirely factual report. By midday IRN was feeding local radio with a sensationalized lead item that the Prime Minister "will soon be on his way for a secret meeting with Her Majesty the Queen. Speculation has exploded in Westminster during the last hour that either he's going to sack several of his leading Ministers and inform the Queen of a major Cabinet reshuffle, or he's going to admit his guilt to recent charges of insider trading with his brother. There are even rumors that she has been advised to exercise her constitutional prerogative and sack him."

Downing Street filled with the press pack, jostling, eager. The far side of the

street from the famous black door became obscured by a forest of cameras and hastily erected television lights. At 12:45 Collingridge walked out onto the doorstep of Number Ten. He knew the presence of the crowd denoted treachery. Someone had betrayed him, again. He felt as though nails had been driven through his feet. He ignored the screams of the press corps, didn't look up, wouldn't give them the satisfaction. He drove off into Whitehall, pursued by camera cars. Overhead he could hear a helicopter hovering, pursuing. Another crowd of photographers was waiting outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. His attempt at a dignified resignation had turned into a public crucifixion.

* * *

The Prime Minister had asked not to be disturbed unless it was absolutely necessary. After returning from the Palace he had retired to the private apartment above Downing Street, wanting to be alone with his wife for a few hours, yet once again his wishes counted for nothing.

"I'm terribly sorry, Prime Minister," his private secretary apologized, "but it's Dr. Christian. He says it's important."

The phone buzzed gently as the call was put through.

"Dr. Christian. How can I help you? And how is Charlie?"

"I'm afraid we have a problem," the doctor began, his tone apologetic. "You know we try to keep him isolated, away from the newspapers so that he won't be disturbed by all these allegations that are being thrown around. Normally we switch his television off and find something to divert him during news programs but...The fact is, we weren't expecting the unscheduled reports about your resignation. I'm so deeply sorry you've had to resign, Prime Minister, but Charles is my priority. I have to put his interests first, you understand."

"I do understand, Dr. Christian, and you have your priorities absolutely right."

"This morning he's heard everything. All these allegations about shares. And your resignation. He's deeply upset, it's come as a great shock. He believes he's to blame for all that's happened and I'm sorry to tell you but he's talking about doing harm to himself. I'd hoped we were on the verge of making real progress with him, but now I fear we're on the brink of a real crisis. I don't wish to alarm

you unduly but he needs your help. Very badly.”

Sarah saw the look of anguish that had stretched across her husband’s face. She sat beside him and held his hand. It was trembling.

“Doctor, what can I do? I’ll do anything, anything you want.”

“We need to find some way of reassuring him. He’s desperately confused.”

“May I talk to him, doctor? Now? Before this thing goes any further.”

There was a wait of several minutes as his brother was brought to the telephone. Collingridge could hear the sound of protest and gentle confusion down the line.

“Charlie, how are you old boy?” Henry said softly.

“Hal, what have I done?”

“Nothing, Charlie, absolutely nothing.”

“I’ve ruined you, destroyed everything!” The voice sounded strangely old, hoarse with panic.

“Charlie, it’s not you who’s hurt me.”

“But I’ve seen it on the television. You going off to the Queen to resign. They said it was because of me and some shares. I don’t understand it, Hal, I’ve screwed everything up. I don’t deserve to be your brother. There’s no point in anything anymore.” There was a huge, gulping sob on the end of the phone.

“Charlie, I want you to listen to me very carefully. Are you listening?”

Another sob filled with mucus and tears and grief.

“You have no need to ask my pardon. I’m the one who should be down on my knees begging for forgiveness. From you, Charlie.”

“Don’t be stupid—”

“No, you listen, Charlie! We’ve always got through our problems together, as family. Remember when I was running the business—the year we nearly went bust? We were going down, Charlie, and it was my fault. Too tied up in my politics. And who brought in that new client, that order which saved us? Oh, I know it wasn’t the biggest order we’d ever had but it couldn’t have come at a more vital time. You saved the company, Charlie, and you saved me. Just like you did when I was a bloody fool and got caught drink-driving that Christmas.”

“I didn’t do anything really...”

“The local police sergeant, the one who was a golfing friend of yours,

somehow you persuaded him to fix the breath test at the station. If I'd lost my license I'd never have been selected for my constituency. I'd never have set foot in Downing Street. Don't you see, you silly bugger, far from ruining it for me you made it all possible. You and me, we've always faced things together. And that's just how it's going to stay."

"I don't deserve—"

"No, you don't deserve, Charlie, not a brother like me. You were always around when I needed help but what did I do in return? I got too busy for you. When Mary left, I knew how much you were hurting. I should've been there, of course I should. You needed me but there always seemed other things to do. I was always going to come and see you tomorrow. Always tomorrow, Charlie, always tomorrow." The emotion was cracking Collingridge's voice. "I've had my moment of glory, I've done the things that I wanted to do. While I watched you become an alcoholic and practically kill yourself."

It was the first time that either of them had spoken that truth. Charles had always been under the weather, or overtired, or suffering from nerves—never uncontrollably, alcoholically drunk. There were no secrets any longer, no going back.

"You know something, Charlie? I'll walk out of Downing Street and be able to say bloody good riddance, screw the lot of them—if only I know I still have my brother. I'm just terrified that it's too late, that I've neglected you too badly to be able to ask for your forgiveness—that you've been alone so long you don't see the point in getting better."

There were tears of exquisite anguish at both ends of the phone. Sarah was hugging her husband as though he were about to be swept overboard by the storm.

"Charlie, unless you can forgive me, what's been the bloody point? It will all have been for nothing."

There was silence.

"Say something, Charlie!" he said in desperation.

"Bloody idiot, you are," Charlie blurted. "You're the best bruv any man could have."

"I'll come and see you tomorrow. Promise. We'll both have a lot more time

for each other now, eh?”

“Sorry about all the fuss.”

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t felt this good in years.”

Twenty-Six

The shadows of infidelity should always lurk at the door; otherwise, a marriage grows stale.

“Mattie, I’m surprised,” Urquhart said as he opened his front door to find her standing beneath the lamp. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“You know that’s not true, Mr. Urquhart. It’s you who’s been avoiding me. You practically ran away from me every time I tried to get near you at the conference.”

“Well, they were a hectic few days in Bournemouth. And you are from the *Chronicle*. I have to admit that it wouldn’t have been”—he searched for a word—“*proper* for me to have been seen talking to one of their journalists, particularly one who is—how can I put this?—as blond as you.”

His eyes were dancing in merriment and yet again she hesitated, as she had done so many times when she’d picked up the phone to call him but held back. She wasn’t entirely sure why. This man was dangerous, she knew that, made her feel things she shouldn’t, yet when she was with him she tingled with excitement right down to her toes.

“People might have misunderstood, seeing you and me huddled in some dark corner, Mattie,” he continued, more serious now. “And that front page of yours did mortal damage to my Prime Minister.”

“Whoever leaked the poll did the damage, not me.”

“Well, timing is everything. And now you’re here once again. To ask me questions.”

“It’s what I do, Mr. Urquhart.”

“And there’s an early chill for the time of year, I think.” He gazed along the street as though to check the weather, and who might be watching. “Why don’t you come in?”

He took her coat, sat her down in a large leather chair in his study, found them both whiskey.

“I hope this isn’t improper, too,” she ventured.

“Unlike Bournemouth there are no prying eyes.”

“Mrs. Urquhart...”

“Is at the opera with a friend. Won’t be back for some time. If at all.”

And in a few words he had thrown a cloak of conspiracy around them that she found nestled so comfortably on her shoulders.

“It’s been quite a day,” she said, sipping.

“It isn’t every day that a comet appears in the sky and burns so spectacularly.”

“Can I talk to you frankly, Mr. Urquhart, not even on lobby terms?”

“Then you’d better call me Francis.”

“I’ll try—Francis. It’s just that...My father was a strong character. Clear blue eyes, clear mind. In some ways you remind me of him.”

“Of your father?” he said, a little startled.

“I need your advice. To understand things.”

“As a father?”

“No. Not even as a Chief Whip. As a...friend?”

He smiled.

“Is it all coincidence?”

“Is what coincidence?”

“These leaks. The opinion poll. It was put under my door, you know.”

“Extraordinary.”

“Then the Renox shares. I can’t help feeling that someone’s behind it all.”

“A plot to get rid of Henry Collingridge? But, Mattie, how could that be?”

“Sounds silly, perhaps, but...”

“Leaks are a part of the trade, Mattie. There are some politicians who can’t pass the doors of the *Guardian* without going inside and turning on the taps.”

“You don’t destroy a prime minister by accident.”

“Mattie, Henry Collingridge wasn’t destroyed by his opponents but by his brother’s apparent fiddling of the Renox shares. Cock-up, not conspiracy.”

“But, Francis, I’ve met Charlie Collingridge. Spent several hours with him at the Party conference. He struck me as being a pleasant and straightforward drunk who didn’t look as if he had two hundred pounds to put together, let alone being able to raise tens of thousands to start speculating in shares.”

“He’s an alcoholic.”

“Would he have jeopardized his brother’s career for a few thousand pounds’ profit on the Stock Market?”

“Alcoholics are rarely responsible.”

“But Henry Collingridge isn’t an alcoholic. Do you really think he’d stoop to feeding his brother insider share tips to finance his boozing?”

“I take your point. But is it any more credible to believe there’s some form of high-level plot involving senior party figures to cause total chaos?”

She pursed her lips and a frown crept across her brow. “I don’t know,” she conceded. “It’s possible,” she added stubbornly.

“You may be right. I’ll bear that in mind.” He finished his drink, the moment was over. He found her coat, escorted her to the door. He had his hand on the lock but didn’t open it. They were close together. “Look, Mattie, it’s possible your fears are correct.”

“I don’t fear it, Francis,” she corrected him.

“In any event the next few weeks are going to be tumultuous. Can we do this again, discuss these ideas, whatever twists and turns we discover—just you and me? Entirely privately?”

She smiled. “You know, I was going to ask you much the same.”

“Mrs. Urquhart doesn’t spend the entire week in London. She’s often away or involved with her other activities. Tuesday and Wednesday nights I’m usually here on my own. Please feel free to drop round.”

His gaze was steady, penetrating, left her stirred and with a sense of danger.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I will.”

He opened the door. She was down the step when she turned. “Are you going to stand, Francis?”

“Me? But I’m the Chief Whip, not even a full member of the Cabinet.”

“You’re strong, you understand power. And you’re a little bit dangerous.”

“That’s kind of you—I think. But, no, I won’t be standing.”

“I think you should.”

She took another step but he called after her.

“Did you get on with your father, Mattie?”

“I loved him,” she said before finally slipping into the night.

* * *

He settled himself back in his chair with a fresh whiskey, his mind alive with the events of the day, and of the hour just past. Mattie Storin was exceptionally bright and beautiful, and had made it clear she was available. But for what, precisely? The possibilities seemed as endless as they were attractive. He was musing contentedly on the matter when the phone rang.

“Frankie?”

“Ben, excellent to hear from you, even at this late hour.”

Landless ignored the sarcasm. “Interesting times, Frankie, interesting times. Isn’t that what they say in China?”

“I believe it’s a curse.”

“I guess old Harry Collingridge would agree!”

“I was sitting here thinking much the same.”

“Frankie, you haven’t got time to sit on your backside. Game on. You up for it?”

“Up for what, Ben?”

“Don’t be so—what’s the word?”

“Obtuse?”

“Yeah, up your arse. I need you to be right out in the open with me, Frankie.”

“About what?”

“Do you want to stand?” Landless pressed impatiently.

“For the leadership? I’m merely the Chief Whip. I don’t appear on stage, I sit in the wings and prompt the players.”

“Sure, sure, but do you want it? Because if you do, old son, I can be very helpful to you.”

“Me? Prime Minister?”

“Frankie, we’re playing a new game now, bigger balls. And your balls are almost as big as mine. I like what you do and the way you do it. You understand how to use power. So do you want to play?”

Urquhart didn’t immediately reply. His eye went to an oil that hung on his wall in an ornate gilded frame, of a stag at bay surrounded by baying hounds. Did he have the stomach for it? The words came slowly. They took him by surprise. “I would like to play very, very much.”

It was the first time he had confessed his ambition to anyone other than himself, yet with a man like Landless who exposed his naked desires with every chime of the clock, he felt no embarrassment.

“That’s good, Frankie. That’s great! So let’s start from there. I’m going to tell you what the *Chronicle*’s running tomorrow. It’s an analysis piece by our political correspondent, Mattie Storin. Pretty blond girl with long legs and great tits—you know who I mean?”

“I think so.”

“She’s going to say it’s an open race, everybody’s hand dipped in Collingridge’s blood, lots more chaos to come.”

“I believe she is right.”

“Chaos. I like chaos. Sells newspapers. So who is your money on?”

“Well, let’s see...These things normally only last a couple of weeks. So the slick Willies, the flashy television performers, they’re the ones who will gain the best start. The tide is everything; if it’s with you it will sweep you home.”

“Which slick Willy in particular?”

“Try Michael Samuel.”

“Mmm, young, impressive, principled, seems intelligent—not at all to my liking. He wants to interfere all the time, rebuild the world. Too much conscience, not enough experience.”

“So what do you suggest, Ben?”

“Frankie, tides turn. One minute you’re swimming for the shore, the next you’re by an outfall pipe just after I’ve flushed my toilet.”

Urquhart heard the other man swilling drink around a goblet and taking a huge draught before he continued.

“Frankie, I’m going to tell you something. This afternoon I instructed a small

and extremely confidential team at the *Chronicle* to start contacting as many of your party's MPs as they can get hold of to ask which way they're going to vote. Wednesday we're going to publish—which I confidently predict will show young Mickey Samuel with a small but clear lead over the rest of the field.”

“What? How do you know this? The poll hasn't even been finished yet.” A sigh of understanding. “Oh, Ben, I'm being naive, aren't I?”

“Ring-a-ding-ding, Frankie. You're on the ball. That's why I like you. I know what the fucking poll is going to say because I'm the fucking publisher.”

“You mean you've fixed it. But why are you pushing Samuel?”

“First one to get to the sewage pipe. Oh, you'll be there somewhere, Frankie, toward the back of the field but not in bad shape for a Chief Whip. But young Mickey will be out in front, so everyone else has a target, the man they most want to beat. I reckon in a couple of weeks' time he's going to be amazed at the number of bad friends he's got.”

“So where do I fit into this great plan?”

“You come from behind, as the actress said to the archbishop. The compromise candidate. While all those other bastards are drowning each other, you slip quietly through as the man they all hate least.”

“When all the other trees have been blown down, even a bush can stand tall.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Can I trust you?”

“Trust me?” He sounded horrified. “I'm a newspaperman, Francis.”

Urquhart burst into dark laughter. It was the first time the proprietor had called him by his proper name. Landless was serious.

“So aren't you going to ask me what I want out of all this?” the proprietor asked.

“I think I already know, Ben.”

“And what's that?”

“A friend. A friend in Downing Street. A very good friend. A friend just like me.”

Twenty-Seven

A politician should never spend too much time thinking. It distracts attention from guarding his back.

Tuesday, October 26

The Prime Minister's private office, his inner sanctum. Urquhart found him at his desk signing a thick pile of letters. He was wearing reading glasses, something he rarely did with others around. Even more unusual, there wasn't a single newspaper in sight.

"Henry, I haven't had a chance to speak with you since yesterday. I can't tell you how shocked—devastated I was."

"No sympathy, Francis, no sackcloth and ashes. I feel strangely content with the situation. A burden lifted. And all those other clichés."

"As I listened to you I felt as if I were...falling out of the sky, quite literally."

"Happy landings." The Prime Minister cast his spectacles aside and rose from his desk, leading Urquhart over to two well-stuffed armchairs overlooking the park. "Anyhow I don't have time for self-pity. Humphrey Newlands is on his way over so we can get the leadership election under way. Then I'm off to spend the rest of the day with Charlie. It's marvelous to have time for such things."

Urquhart was astonished to see he meant every word of it.

"You wanted a private chat, Francis?"

"Yes, Henry. Look, I know you're not going to support any particular candidate in the election, not publicly at least..."

"It would be most improper."

"Yes, but that doesn't stop you taking a keen academic interest. We both

know you've been badly let down by some of your colleagues recently."

"The term 'ungrateful bastards' does somehow spring to mind."

"You have a right—I would argue you even have a duty—to make sure you leave the Party in safe hands. Now as Chief Whip I'm not going to stand myself, of course. Entirely neutral. But that wouldn't stop me keeping you informed of what's going on."

They both knew that a prime minister in his last days still had influence—political followers and personal friends, as well as the not inconsiderable matter of his nominations for the Resignation Honors List with its peerages and knighthoods that every retiring prime minister was allowed. For many senior members of the Party this would be their last chance to rise above the mob and achieve the social status their wives had so long aspired to.

Collingridge scratched his chin. "You're right, Francis. I haven't worked all these years simply to watch someone throw everything away. So tell me, how do things look?"

"Early days, difficult to tell. I think most of the press is right to suggest it's an open race. But I'd expect things to develop quickly once they get going."

"No front runners, then?"

"Well..." Urquhart wobbled his head from side to side, just as Jhabwala had done.

"Come on, Francis. Your gut feeling is good enough for me."

"My nose tells me Michael Samuel has something of a head start."

"Michael? Why so?"

"In a short and furious race there's no time for developing solid arguments. It's all about image. Michael's good on television."

"A media man."

"And inevitably he'll have the subtle support of Teddy and Party Headquarters."

Collingridge's face clouded. "Yes, I see what you mean." He drummed his fingers loudly on the arm of his chair, weighing his words carefully. "Francis, it's not my intention to interfere but neither can I play the innocent. If the Party is to have a free and fair contest, we can't have Party Headquarters messing about with things. Not after their recent performance; the wretched election, all

those leaks, not to mention that bloody opinion poll.” He spat out the last words. For all his protestations of contentment there was still a tempest raging inside. “And one thing above all the others I won’t forgive. You know, someone leaked the news of my visit to the Palace yesterday. I’m told that came out of the back door at Smith Square. How dare they? How did I become the clown in a media circus!” His fist smacked down on the arm of his chair.

“You were owed a little dignity, Henry.”

“It’s not just me; it’s Sarah, too. She doesn’t deserve that.” He was breathing more strenuously, in anger. “No, I won’t bloody-well stand for it. I will not have Teddy’s merry men interfering in this fucking election!” He leaned toward Urquhart. “I don’t suppose you have much love for Teddy, either, not after he did such a hatchet job on your reshuffle proposals. I’m sure you guessed that at the time.”

Urquhart nodded, glad to have his suspicions confirmed.

“What can I do, Francis? How can I make sure this election is run properly?”

“My interests are like yours, I simply want to ensure fair play. People need time to think, not to be swept along in a rush to judgment.”

“So?”

“So give them a little longer to make their choice. Slow the pace down. Enjoy your last few weeks in office. I’ve got nothing against Michael but you should make sure you hand over to a successor chosen by the Party, not the media.”

“And least of all by that old goat Teddy.”

“You might say that, as Prime Minister, but as Chief Whip I couldn’t possibly comment.”

Collingridge chuckled. “I don’t want to extend the period of uncertainty any longer than necessary but I suppose an extra week or so couldn’t do any great harm.”

“Under the rules, the timing is entirely in your hands, Henry.”

Collingridge glanced at his watch. “Look, Humphrey will be outside. Better not keep him waiting any longer. He’ll offer his advice and I shall listen to it most attentively, although I suspect his expertise is more in the area of beach resorts than leadership races. I’ll stew on it overnight, let you know in the morning what I decide. You’ll be the first to know, Francis.” He led the Chief

Whip toward the door. "I'm so grateful to you. I can't tell you how comforting it is to have someone like you around, someone with no ax to grind."

* * *

They had come back to her apartment, kicked the door closed, laughed as they had ripped off their clothes, stumbled across the floor, hadn't even made it as far as the bedroom. Now Mattie and Krajewski lay in a cat's cradle of limbs. He thought he had never been happier, tangled together on her sofa; her mind was already elsewhere.

"Collingridge?" he muttered, removing his hand from her unblemished breast.

She didn't seem to notice the edge of disappointment. "I've been thinking, Johnnie. About Charlie Collingridge."

"I lie sweating between your thighs and you're thinking of another man," he protested, half joking.

"I know he's an alcoholic and everything," she continued, oblivious, "and they're often not responsible for their actions."

"I'm not sure *I* am when I'm with you."

"But it's all too simple."

"Does life have to be complicated?" he begged, pressing himself into the small of her back.

"I just can't believe Charlie Collingridge was capable of it, let alone had the means."

"There's only one man who knows," Krajewski muttered, "and he's locked away in some clinic or other."

She turned to face him. "Where?"

He sighed as he felt his passion subside. "I think it's supposed to be a closely guarded family secret."

"I want to find him."

"And how does our Reporter of the Year propose to do that?"

She pushed herself away from him, wrapped herself in a blanket and disappeared into the kitchen. He went in search of his boxer shorts, found them behind the television, and reluctantly slipped into them as she returned with two

glasses of wine. They arranged themselves on the rug in front of the empty fireplace.

“When was the last time anyone saw Charles Collingridge?” she asked.

“Why, er...When he was driven away from his home over a week ago.”

“Who was he with?”

“Sarah Collingridge.”

“And...?”

“A driver.”

“Exactly. So who was the driver, Johnnie?”

“Damned if I know.”

“But it’s a place to start.” Once again she prised herself away from him and crawled over to her television, which was surrounded by a scattering of videotapes. “It’s here somewhere,” she said, making the mess still worse. She found the tape she was looking for and soon the TV screen was a blizzard of images as she fast-forwarded through a compilation of news programs. She was so engrossed that she failed to notice the blanket had slipped from her shoulders. Krajewski sat, lost in nipple awe and stretching excitement. He was considering picking up the television and throwing it out of the window when, through the blizzard, Charles Collingridge appeared, huddled in the back of the fleeing car, and the blanket was back around her shoulders.

“Look, Johnnie!”

He moaned as she pressed yet another button to run the program back to the start. And there, for less than a second, as the car swept out into the main road, they could see the face of the driver through the windscreen. She pressed the pause button and they found themselves staring at a balding and bespectacled face.

“And who the hell is he?” Krajewski muttered.

“Let’s figure out who he’s not,” Mattie said. “He’s not a Government driver—it’s not a Government car and the drivers’ pool is very gossipy, so we would have heard something. He’s not a political figure or we would have recognized him...” She turned from the screen and faced him, failing to recognize his scowl of disgust. “Johnnie, where were they going?”

He felt himself torn between his own journalistic curiosity and his desire to

throw himself at her. Damn, grow up, Krajewski, he scolded himself. “OK, not to Downing Street. And not to some hotel or other public place.” He pondered the options. “To the clinic, I suppose.”

“Precisely! That man is from the clinic. If we can find out who he is, we’ll know where they’ve taken Charlie!”

“I suppose I could get a hard copy of the face off the video tape and show it around. We could try Freddie, our old staff photographer. He’s got an excellent memory for faces and he’s also an alcoholic who dried out a couple of years ago. Still goes every week to Alcoholics Anonymous. Might be able to put us on the right track. There aren’t that many treatment centers. We should be able to make some progress.”

“You’re the best, Johnnie.”

And for the first time that evening, he felt she meant it.

“I’m a mercenary bastard. I require payment,” he ventured. “Mattie, can I stay the night?”

Her eyes filled with regret, she shook her head. “Johnnie, remember our ground rules.”

“No romance. Right. Well, if you’ve got what you want from me I suppose I’d better be going,” he snapped, eaten away with what he called “nipple rage.” He sprang to his feet and dressed hurriedly, but as he was halfway toward the door his shoulders sagged in defeat. “Sorry, Mattie,” he said. “It’s just that... you’re someone very special for me. I live in hope.”

He was at the door. He turned. “Is there anyone else, Mattie?”

“No, Johnnie, of course there isn’t,” she said. “That’s not what this is about.”

But as he closed the door behind him, she wondered if she was being honest with him. How could she be? She wasn’t sure she was being honest with herself. It wasn’t the sort of conversation nice girls had.

Twenty-Eight

Some political campaigns hit the ground running. Others simply hit the ground.

Wednesday, October 27

Daily Chronicle. Page 1: Samuel Ahead. Takes Shock Lead.

• • •

Michael Samuel, the youthful Environment Secretary, was last night emerging as the front runner in the race to become Prime Minister.

In an exclusive poll conducted during the last two days by the Chronicle among almost two-thirds of Government MPs, 24 percent nominated him as their first choice, well ahead of other potential candidates.

Samuel is expected to announce his candidacy within days. In a bitter blow to his rivals, he is expected to get the backing of influential party figures such as Lord Williams, the Party Chairman. Sources predict such support could be crucial.

No other name attracted more than 16 percent. Five potential candidates obtained between 10 percent and 16 percent. These were Patrick Woolton (Foreign Secretary), Arnold Dollis (Home Secretary), Harold Earle (Education), Paul McKenzie (Health), and Francis Urquhart, the Chief Whip.

Urquhart's inclusion in the list at 12 percent caused surprise at Westminster. He is not even a full member of the Cabinet but as Chief Whip

has a strong base in the Parliamentary party. Observers say he could prove a strong outside candidate. However, sources close to Urquhart last night emphasized he had made no decision to enter the contest, and is expected to clarify his position sometime today...

* * *

The Prime Minister had changed his mind. He read all the newspapers that morning. The commentaries which a week before had been ripping his flesh off in strips were now, in their fickle and inconstant fashion, praising his self-sacrifice that would enable the Government to make a fresh start—"although he must still resolve many outstanding personal and family issues to the public's satisfaction," thundered *The Times*. As always, the press had no shame in sleeping on both sides of the bed, like tarts.

He read the *Chronicle* particularly carefully, as clearly had others. A consensus seemed to be emerging: it was an open race but Samuel was the front runner. Collingridge cast the paper into a corner, where it flapped like a dying swan, and summoned his political secretary.

"Grahame. An instruction to Lord Williams, copy to Humphrey Newlands. He is to issue a press release at twelve-thirty this afternoon for the lunchtime news. Nominations for leadership election will close in three weeks' time on Thursday, November 18, with the first ballot to take place on the following Tuesday, November 23. If a second ballot is required it will be held as prescribed by the Party's rules on the following Tuesday, November 30, with any final run-off ballot two days later. Have you got that?"

"Yes, Prime Minister." The secretary nodded but hid his eyes. It was the first time since his resignation announcement that they had been alone and able to talk.

"You know what that means, Grahame? In exactly six weeks and one day, you and I will be out of a job. I haven't always found time to thank you properly these past years, but I want you to know how bloody grateful I am."

The aide shuffled with embarrassment.

"You must start thinking about your own future. There will be my Resignation Honors List. You'll be on it. As will several newly knighted

gentlemen in the City who will be happy to make you a generous offer. I'll make sure of it. Think about what you want, let me know. I still have a few favors to cash in."

The secretary raised eyes filled with regret and gratitude.

"By the way, Grahame, it's possible Teddy Williams might want to get hold of me and encourage me to shorten the election process. I will not be available. You are to make it clear to him that these are instructions, not terms for negotiation, and they are to be issued without fail by twelve-thirty."

There was a short pause.

"Otherwise, tell him, I shall be forced to leak them myself."

* * *

The tide waits for no man and it was already ebbing for Michael Samuel. Almost as soon as Collingridge had announced his resignation he had consulted his mentor, Teddy Williams.

"Patience, Michael," the elder statesman had advised. "You will almost certainly be the youngest candidate. They'll try to say you are too callow, too inexperienced, and too ambitious. So don't look too much as if you want the job. Show a little restraint and let them come to you."

Which was to prove excellent advice but entirely irrelevant to the circumstances. No sooner had the *Chronicle* hit the streets promoting Samuel's name than Urquhart appeared in front of television cameras to confirm that he had no intention of standing. "I'm flattered, of course, that my name should even be mentioned but I feel it would be in the Party's best interests if I, as Chief Whip, remain entirely impartial in this contest," he said, adding a self-deprecatory nod before disappearing, pursued by the shouted but unanswered questions of the mob.

The search was on for Samuel, and the release later that morning of the detailed election timetable added fuel to the fervor. By the time the breathless inquisitors of the mob had tracked him down to the Intercontinental Hotel off Hyde Park, just before an early lunch meeting, they were in no mood to accept conditional answers. Samuel couldn't say no, they wouldn't accept maybe, not when they discovered that he had already appointed the nucleus of a

campaigning team. So, after considerable harassment, he was forced into making an announcement on the steps of the hotel, surrounded by a chaos of baggage and raised umbrellas, that he would indeed be running.

The one o'clock news offered a clear contrast between Urquhart, the dignified and elder statesman declining to run, and the apparently eager Samuel holding an impromptu press conference on the street and launching himself as the first official candidate nearly a month before the first ballot was to be held.

Urquhart was watching the proceedings with considerable satisfaction when the telephone rang. He heard the sound of a toilet flushing, which faded into the unmistakable sound of Ben Landless laughing before the line went dead.

Twenty-Nine

Some political careers are like a book that has been misfiled in the British Library. It's a small mistake, as mistakes go, but the result is perpetual oblivion.

Friday, October 29—Saturday, October 30

“This what you want?”

Krajewski's tone still carried the hurt of their last encounter. He'd been avoiding Mattie in the newsroom since then but now he was leaning over her shoulder, careful not to get too close, clutching a large manila envelope in his hand. He let it drop in front of her, and from it she withdrew a 10x12 color photograph. The face of the driver stared at her, grainy and distorted but with reasonable clarity.

“Freddie came up trumps,” Krajewski continued. “He took this along to his AA meeting last night and the group leader recognized it immediately. The name is Dr. Robert Christian, who's a well-known authority on the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. Runs a treatment center in a large private house near the south coast in Kent. Find Dr. Christian, and my bet is you've found your Charlie.”

“Johnnie, I don't know how to thank you,” she said excitedly.

But already he had gone.

* * *

The following day, Saturday, wasn't a working one for Mattie. Immediately after

an early lunch she climbed into her old BMW, filled it with petrol, and pointed it in the direction of Dover. The traffic was heavy as she barged her way through the shopping crowds of Greenwich before she emerged onto the A2, the old Roman road which pointed the way from London into the heart of Kent. It took her past the cathedral town of Canterbury and a few miles beyond she turned off at the picturesque village of Barham. Her road map wasn't particularly helpful in finding the even smaller village of Norbington nearby but with the help of several locals she found herself some while later outside a large Victorian house, bearing a subdued sign in the shrubbery that declared itself to be the Fellowship Treatment Center.

There were several cars in the leafy driveway and the front door was open. She was surprised to see people wandering around with apparent freedom, and no sign of the formidable white-coated nurses she had expected to find patrolling the grounds for potential escapees. She parked her car on the road and, sucking a mint for courage, walked cautiously up the drive.

A large, tweed-suited gentleman with a white military mustache approached and her heart sank. This was surely the security patrol in pursuit of intruders.

"Excuse me, my dear," he said in a clipped accent as he intercepted her by the front door. "Have you seen any member of staff about? They like to keep out of the way on family visiting days, but you ought to be able to find one when you need them."

Mattie offered her apologies and smiled in relief. Fortune had followed her and she had struck the best possible day to avoid awkward questions. The place had the atmosphere of a fashionable country retreat rather than an institution; no straitjackets, no restraints, no locks on the doors, no institutional smells. She found a fire safety map on the wall of the hallway with a detailed plan of the house, which Mattie used to guide herself around the premises in search of her quarry. She found him outside on a garden bench, staring out across the valley in the last of the October sun. Her discovery gave her no joy. She had come to deceive.

"Why, Charlie!" she exclaimed, sitting herself down beside him. "What a surprise to find you here."

He looked at her with a total lack of comprehension. He seemed worn down,

his reactions slow, as though his mind was in some faraway place. “I...I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I don’t recognize...”

“Mattie Storin. You remember, of course you do. We spent a thoroughly enjoyable evening together in Bournemouth a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Miss Storin. I don’t remember. You see, I’m an alcoholic, that’s why I’m here, and I’m afraid I was in no condition a few weeks ago to remember very much at all.”

She was taken aback by his frankness while he smiled serenely.

“Please don’t be embarrassed, my dear,” he said, patting her hand like an elderly uncle. “I’m an addict. Trying to cure myself. Had a million ways of hiding it from everyone but only managed to fool myself. Want to get better. That’s what this treatment center is all about.”

Mattie blushed deeply. She had intruded into the private world of a sick man and felt ashamed.

“Charlie, if you don’t remember who I am, then you won’t remember I’m a journalist.”

The hand was withdrawn, the smile disappeared, replaced by a look of resignation. “Bugger. And you look such a nice girl. Suppose it had to happen sometime, although Henry was hoping I could be left alone here quietly...”

“Charlie, please believe me, I haven’t come here to make life difficult for you. I want to help.”

“They all say that, don’t they?”

“Don’t say anything for the moment, just let me talk a little.”

“Oh, all right. Not as if I’m going anywhere.”

“Your brother, the Prime Minister, has been forced to resign because of allegations that he helped you buy and sell shares to make a quick profit.”

He started waving his hand to bring her to a halt but she brushed his protest aside.

“Charlie, none of this makes any sense to me. It just doesn’t add up. I think someone was deliberately trying to undermine your brother by accusing you.”

“Really?” His old oyster eyes began to wobble with interest. “Who would do that?”

“I don’t know. I only have suspicions. I came to see if you could point me

toward something more solid.”

“Miss Storin—Mattie, may I call you that? You said we were old friends... I’m a drunk. I can’t even remember meeting you. So how can I be of help? My word carries no weight whatsoever.”

“I’m neither a judge nor a prosecutor, Charlie. I’m just trying to piece together a puzzle from a thousand scattered shards.”

His weary eyes searched beyond the hills toward Dover and the Channel, as though a different world lay out there. “Mattie, I’ve tried so hard to remember, believe me. The thought that I have disgraced Henry and forced him to resign is almost more than I can bear. But I don’t know what the truth is. I can’t help you. Can’t even help myself.”

“Wouldn’t you remember something about buying so many shares?”

“I’ve been very sick. And very drunk. There are many things I have absolutely no recollection of.”

“Wouldn’t you have remembered where you got the money from, or what you did with the proceeds?”

“It does seem unlikely I would have had a small fortune lying around without my remembering it or, more likely, spending it on alcohol. And I’ve no idea where the money could have gone. Even *I* can’t drink away £50,000 in just a few weeks.”

“What about the false address in Paddington?”

“Yes, they mentioned something about that. A complete mystery. I don’t even know where Praed Street in Paddington is when I’m sober, so it is preposterous to suppose I would have found my way there drunk. It’s the other side of London from where I live.”

“But you used it—so they say—for your bank and subscription to the Party’s literature service.”

Charles Collingridge suddenly roared with laughter, so violently that tears began gathering at the corners of his eyes. “Mattie, my dear, you’re beginning to restore my faith in myself. No matter how drunk I was, I could never have shown any interest in political propaganda. I object when the stuff is pushed through my letterbox at election time; having to pay for it every month would be an insult!”

“No literature?”

“Never!”

Autumn leaves scuttled across the lawn. The sun was settling lower and a warm, red glow filled the sky, lighting up his face. He seemed to be visibly returning to health, and to be content.

“I can’t prove a thing. But on my word as a gentleman, I don’t believe I am guilty of the things they say I have done.” He took her hand once more and squeezed it. “Mattie, it would mean a lot to me if you believed that, too.”

“I do, Charlie, very much. And I’m going to try to prove it for you.” She rose to leave.

“I’ve enjoyed your visit, Mattie. Now that we are such old friends, please come again.”

“I shall. But in the meantime, I’ve got a bit of digging to do.”

* * *

It was late by the time she got back to London that evening. The first editions of the Sunday newspapers were already on the streets. She bought a heavy pile of them and, with magazines and inserts slipping from her laden arms, threw them on the back seat of her car. It was then she noticed the *Sunday Times* headline.

The Education Secretary, Harold Earle, not a noted Greenpeace lover, had just announced his intention to stand for the leadership and launched his campaign with a speech entitled “Clean Up Our Country.”

“We have talked endlessly about the problems of our inner cities, yet they continue to decline, and the impoverished state of our inner cities has been matched by the degeneration of our countryside,” the *Sunday Times* reported him as saying. “For too long we have neglected such issues. Recycled expressions of concern are no substitute for positive action. It’s time we backed our fine words with fine deeds. The opinion polls show that the environment is an issue on which the voters say we have failed. After more than twelve years in office, they are right to say that this is unacceptable, and we must wake up to these concerns.”

“Now why is the Education Secretary making such a fuss about environmental matters?” she asked herself as she came to the end of his

thunderous speech. “Silly me. I’m getting slow in my old age. Can’t decipher the code. Which Cabinet Minister is supposed to be responsible for environmental matters, and therefore responsible for this mess?”

The public fight to eliminate Michael Samuel had begun.

Thirty

There is no form of wickedness in which a politician can't indulge and a journalist won't inflate. Hysterical exaggeration is the hallmark of them both.

Wednesday, November 3

Mattie tried many times during the following week to get hold of Kevin Spence. Despite the repeated assurances of his gushingly polite secretary, he never returned her calls, so she waited until well beyond the time that secretaries usually have left for home before she called again. The night security guard put her straight through.

“Miss Storin, no, of course I haven't been avoiding you,” Spence lied. “I've been very busy. These are distracting times.”

“Kevin, I need your help again.”

There was a pause. He was braver and more focused when he wasn't looking into her eyes. “I remember the last time I gave you my help. You said you were going to write a piece on opinion polls. Instead you wrote a story slandering the Prime Minister. Now he's gone.” He spoke with a quiet sadness. “He was always very decent to me, very kind. I think you and the rest of the press have been unspeakably cruel.”

“Kevin, that wasn't my story, I give you my word. My copy was hijacked, my byline wasn't on it. I was even more furious than you must have been.”

“I'm afraid I have been very naive. Good night, Miss Storin.”

He was about to put the phone down.

“Kevin, give me just a moment. Please! There's something strange about Mr.

Collingridge's resignation."

And he was still there.

"Personally I don't believe what's being said about him and his brother. I'd like to be able to clear his name."

"I can't see how I could assist you," Spence said in a distrusting tone. "Anyway, nobody outside the Press Office is allowed to have contact with the media during the leadership campaign. Chairman's strictest orders."

"Kevin, there's a lot at stake here. Not just the leadership of the Party and whether you are going to win the next election. There's something much more personal, about whether history is going to regard Henry Collingridge as a crook or whether he's going to get a chance to put the record straight. Don't we owe him that?"

Another cautious pause, then: "If I could help, what would you want?"

"Something very simple. Do you understand the computer system at Party Headquarters?"

"Yes, of course. I use it all the time."

"I think your computer system has been tampered with."

"Tampered with? That's impossible. We have the highest security. Nobody from outside can access it."

"Not outside, Kevin. Inside."

The silence from the other end of the phone was more prolonged this time.

"Think about it, Kevin. Your opinion poll was leaked from the inside. Only explanation. Dropped you right in it."

She heard Spence whisper a mild curse as he battled with his doubts.

"Look, I'm working at the House of Commons. I can be with you in less than ten minutes and I guess the building is very quiet at this time of night. No one will notice, Kevin. I'm on my way over."

"Come in through the car park," he muttered. "For God's sake don't use the main reception."

She was with him less than seven minutes later.

They sat in his small garret office, penned in by the mountains of files that tumbled over every available flat surface and onto the floor. A glowing green screen dominated his desk and they were sitting close beside each other in front

of it. She had unfastened a button on her blouse; he had noticed. Mattie decided she would scold herself later.

“Kevin, Charles Collingridge ordered material from the Party’s sales and literature service and asked them to be delivered to an address in Paddington. Right?”

“Correct. I checked it as soon as I heard, but it’s there all right. Look.”

He tapped a few characters on the keyboard, and up came the incriminating evidence on the screen. “Chas Collingridge Esq 216 Praed St. Paddington London W2—001A/ 01.0091.”

“What do these other hieroglyphics mean?”

“The first set simply means that he subscribes to our comprehensive literature service. The second shows when his subscription expires. It’s our way of knowing what he wants—everything, or just the main publications, or if he was a member of our specialist book club, that sort of thing. Each one of our marketing programs has a different set of reference numbers. It also shows how he pays, if he’s up-to-date or behind on subscription.”

“And Charles?”

“Was fully paid up from the beginning of the year.”

“Even though he’s an alcoholic with no money who can’t even read when closing time has come.”

Spence shifted uneasily in his chair.

“This information, can you bring it up on all the monitors in the building?”

“Yes. It’s not information we regard as particularly confidential.”

“So tell me this, Kevin.” She leaned forward a little, breathed deep; men were pathetic, it worked all the time. “If you felt like bending the rules a little, wanted to make me a subscriber to your comprehensive literature service, could you do that? Enter my details from this terminal?”

“Why...yes.” Spence was beginning to follow her line of inquiry. “You think that Charles Collingridge’s details were hacked or invented. It could be done. Look.”

His fingers flew like a concert pianist’s and within a few seconds the screen was showing a comprehensive literature subscription in the name of “M Mouse Esq, 99 Disneyland Miami.”

“But that’s not enough, Mattie. You couldn’t get away with backdating it to the beginning of the year because...What a fool I am! Of course!” he exploded and started thrashing away once more at the keyboard. “If you really know what you’re doing, which very few people in this building do, you can tap into the main frame subdirectory...”

His words were almost drowned in the clattering of the keys.

“You see, that gives access to the financial data. So I can check the exact date when the account was paid, whether it was paid by check or credit card, when the subscription was first started...”

The monitor screen started glowing.

“You can only do it if you’ve got the right password and—oh, my giddy aunt!” He pushed himself away from the screen as if it had insulted him. Then he stared once more.

“Mattie, you’re not going to believe this...”

“Whatever it is, I think I just might.”

“According to the accounting record, Charles Collingridge has never paid for the literature service, this month or any month. His details only appear on the distribution file, not the payment file.”

“Kevin, can you tell me when his name first appeared on the distribution file?” she asked, very softly.

A few more keystrokes, this time cautious, deliberate affairs.

“Jesus. Exactly two weeks ago today.”

“Let me make sure I understand, Kevin. I want to be clear. Someone in this building, not the accounts staff or anyone who understood computers very well, altered the file to include Charles Collingridge’s name for the first time two weeks ago.”

He nodded. His face had gone white.

“Can you tell me who altered the file, or from which terminal it was altered?”

“No. It could have been done from any terminal in this building. The computer program trusts us...” He shook his head as if he had failed the most crucial test of his life.

“Don’t worry, Kevin, you’ve been brilliant.” She turned from the screen to face him, leaned toward him. “We’re on the trail. But it’s very important you

don't utter a word of this to anyone. I want to catch whoever did this and if he knows we're looking he will cover his trail. Please, will you help me, keep this quiet until we've something more to go on?"

His eyes met hers. "Who on earth would believe me, anyway?" he murmured.

Thirty-One

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Truth lies in the hands of its editor.

Monday, November 8—Friday, November 12

The weekend newspapers hadn't even tried to hide their irritation. Samuel and Earle, and the Cabinet ministers who were expected to run, had all behaved themselves, no outright personal attacks on their rivals, so the press did it for them.

The *Observer* declared that it had been “a disappointing and uninspiring campaign so far, still waiting for one of the candidates to breathe life back into the Party.” The *Sunday Mirror* dismissed it as “irrelevant and irritating” while the *News of the World*, not to be outdone, described it in characteristic style as “flatulent, a passing breeze in the night.” “Samuel and Earle?” the People said. “If that's the answer, it was a damned fool question.”

These criticisms kicked the campaign to life early on Monday morning. Encouraged by the media view that the right contender still hadn't emerged, two further Cabinet Ministers threw their hats into the ring—Patrick Woolton, and Paul McKenzie, the Secretary of State for Health. Both were reckoned to have a reasonable chance of success. McKenzie had made a name for himself selling the popular hospital scheme and had managed to duck the blame for its postponement by pointing the finger at the Treasury and Downing Street. “I'm in!” he announced.

Ever since his conversation with Urquhart at the Party conference, Woolton had been running hard behind the scenes. He had lunched almost every editor in Fleet Street, taken drinks with leading backbenchers and slept with no one but

his wife. He also thought he had an advantage, or at least a uniqueness, in his Northern roots, which he hoped would establish him as the “One Nation” candidate in contrast to the avocado and olive oil backgrounds of most of the other major contenders. Not that this was likely to impress the Scots, of course, who tended to view the whole affair as if it were an entirely foreign escapade. Woolton had been hoping to delay his formal entry into the race, wanting to see how his rivals’ campaigns developed, but the weekend press had been like a call to arms and he decided he should delay no longer. He summoned a press conference at Manchester Airport to make the announcement on what he termed his “home ground,” trusting that no one would notice he had flown up from London in order to be there.

The press criticism incited everyone to sharpen their edges. Earle repeated his environmentalist criticisms but this time chose to attack the record of Michael Samuel by name; no more coded messages. Samuel retorted that Earle’s conduct was reprehensible and incompatible with his status as a Cabinet colleague, as well as being a rotten example for an Education Secretary to set for young people. Meanwhile, Woolton’s loose language at Manchester concerning the need to “restore English values with an English candidate” was vigorously attacked by McKenzie, who was desperately trying to rediscover his lost Gaelic roots and claiming it was an insult to five million Scots. The *Sun* went further, interpreting Woolton’s words as a vicious anti-Semitic attack on Samuel; Jewish activists swamped the air waves and letter columns with complaints while a rabbi in Samuel’s home town called on the Race Relations Board to investigate what he called “the most atrocious outburst by a senior political figure since Mosley.” Woolton wasn’t entirely unhappy with this overreaction, declaring, but only in private, that “for the next two weeks everyone will be looking at the shape of Samuel’s ears rather than listening to what he’s saying.”

By Wednesday afternoon Urquhart felt the situation had developed sufficiently well for him to issue a public call for “a return to the good manners and standards of personal conduct for which our Party is renowned.” It was echoed loudly in the editorial columns, even as the front pages of the same newspapers were splashing the latest outburst of bad behavior.

When, therefore, on Friday afternoon Mattie walked into Preston’s office

telling him she had more, he shook his head in weariness. “It had better be different,” he said, throwing Earle’s latest press release into a corner.

“This is different,” she warned.

He appeared to take little interest.

“Front page different,” she said.

“So make my knees tremble.”

She closed the door behind her, making sure they couldn’t be overheard. “Collingridge resigned because of allegations that he or his brother had been fiddling share deals through a Paddington tobacconist and a Turkish secondary bank. I think we can prove that he was almost certainly set up every step of the way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He was framed.”

“Can you prove it?”

“I think so.”

His secretary put her head round the door but was brusquely waved away.

“Here’s what we have, Grev.” Patiently she explained that she had checked the computer files at Party Headquarters which revealed that the distribution file had been tampered with.

“Why would anyone do that?”

“So that the false address in Paddington could be tied directly to Charles Collingridge.”

“Why do you think it was false?”

“Anyone could have opened that accommodation address. I don’t believe Charles Collingridge ever went anywhere near Paddington. Somebody else did it in his name.”

The door opened yet again; another interruption. “Fuck off!” Preston growled and the intruder scuttled away.

“So why would anyone open a false address in Charlie Collingridge’s name?”

“Because they were trying to frame him. And his brother.”

“Too complicated,” Preston remarked, but was still listening.

“I went to Paddington myself this morning. I opened up an accommodation address at the same tobacconist shop in an entirely fictional name. I then got a

taxi to Seven Sisters Road and the Union Bank of Turkey, where I opened up an account in the same fictional name—not with £50,000 but with just £100. The whole thing took less than three hours start to finish.”

“Jesus...”

“So I can now start ordering pornographic magazines, paid for out of the new bank account and delivered to the Paddington address, which could do a hell of a lot of damage to the reputation of one completely innocent politician.”

“Who?”

In response she placed a bank book and the tobacconist’s receipt onto the editor’s desk. He looked at them eagerly, then exploded.

“The Leader of the Opposition!” he shouted in alarm. “What the fuck have you done?”

“Nothing,” she said with a smile suggesting victory. “Except to show that Charles Collingridge was almost certainly framed; that he probably never went near the tobacconist shop or the Union Bank of Turkey, and therefore he couldn’t have bought those shares.”

Preston was holding the documents at arm’s length as if they might catch fire.

“Which means Henry Collingridge didn’t tell his brother about Renox Chemicals...” Her inflexion suggested there was more.

“And? And?” Preston demanded.

“He’s innocent. Didn’t have to resign.”

Preston sagged back in his chair. A bead of perspiration had begun to gather on his brow. He felt as if he were being torn in two. With one eye he could detect the makings of a superb story, yet that was the problem, for with his other eye he couldn’t fail to see the enormous impact that such a story would make on the world of Westminster. It would turn everything upside down, perhaps even save Collingridge. Is that what they wanted? Landless had just instructed him that he had fresh fish to fry and that all major pieces affecting the leadership race were to be cleared with him before publication. Hard news was little more than a commodity for Landless. What he yearned for was influence, power. Preston didn’t know which way his boss would jump, he needed to play for time.

“You’ve been very busy, young lady.”

“It’s a tremendous story, Grev.”

“I don’t recall you running this by me or asking permission to spend my money opening accommodation addresses.”

His reticence took her by surprise. “It’s called initiative, Grev.”

“I don’t deny you’ve done well...” His mind was charging through his Thesaurus of flannel, trying not to commit himself. It was a well-thumbed volume. Then he knew what he had to do and the book closed shut with a snap. “But what have we got here, Mattie? You’ve shown it’s possible to go charging round London opening accounts in Collingridge’s name, but that’s not enough. You haven’t proved it wasn’t Charlie Collingridge himself. That’s still the easiest explanation to accept.”

“But the computer file, Grev. It was tampered with.”

“Haven’t you considered the possibility that the computer file was altered, not to incriminate Collingridge, but *by* him, or one of his friends, to provide him with an alibi. A hook to catch a little fish like you.”

“You’re kidding...”

“For all we know it wasn’t the distribution file but the accounts file which was altered. Might have happened only minutes before you saw it.”

“But only a handful of people have access to the accounts file,” Mattie protested. “And how could Charlie Collingridge have done that when he’s drying out in a treatment center?”

“His brother.”

Mattie was incredulous. “You can’t seriously believe that the Prime Minister took the incredible risk of ordering the Party Headquarters’ computer file to be altered just to falsify the evidence—after he had already announced his resignation.”

“Mattie, think back. Or are you too wet behind the ears to remember? Watergate. Files were burned and tapes erased—by the President. During the Irangate scandal, a secretary smuggled incriminating material out of the White House in her knickers.”

“This isn’t the Wild West...”

“OK, Jeremy Thorpe. Leader of the Liberal Party. Put on trial at the Old Bailey for attempted murder. John Stonehouse went to jail after faking his own suicide. Lloyd George sold peerages out of the back door of Downing Street

while he was screwing his secretary on the Cabinet table. It's what happens in politics, Mattie, all the time." Preston was warming to his theme now. "Power is a drug, like a candle to a moth. They are drawn toward it, take no heed of the dangers. They'd rather risk everything, marriages, careers, reputations, even their lives. So it's still easier to believe the Collingridges got caught with their hands in the till and were trying to cover it up."

"You can't tell me you won't run it!" she accused sharply.

"Calm down, for God's sake. What I'm saying is you haven't got enough for the story to stand up. There's a lot of shit here and you need a much bigger shovel. You need to do more work on it."

If he had meant it as a dismissal and a return to a quiet life, he was going to be disappointed. Her hands thumped onto his desk, and she was leaning across it to look him in his shifty eyes.

"Grev. I know I'm a stupid bloody woman but just explain it to me so I can understand. Either somebody set the Collingridges up, or the Prime Minister is guilty by falsifying evidence. One way or the other, it's a huge story and we have enough to lead the paper for a week."

"But which is it? We have to be sure. Particularly in the middle of a leadership contest."

"It's because there's a leadership contest that we have to do it! What's the bloody point of waiting until after it's over and the damage has been done?"

Preston had struggled hard but had run out of logic. He took badly to being lectured by one of his most junior members of staff, particularly a woman. He had had enough.

"Look, get your tits off my table and your tanks off my lawn. You burst into my office with a story so fantastic but without a shred of concrete evidence. You haven't written a word of copy. How the devil can I tell whether you've got a great story or simply had a good lunch?"

Much to her own surprise, she didn't scream at him but lowered her voice, like a threat. "Fine, Grev. If that's what you want you'll have your copy in thirty minutes." She turned and walked out, barely able to resist the temptation to slam the door off its hinges.

It was nearer forty minutes when she walked back in, without knocking, six

pages of double-spaced copy clutched in her hand. Without comment she dropped them on the desk, standing directly in front of Preston to make it clear she wouldn't budge until she had her answer.

He left her standing as he read slowly through the pages, trying to look as if he were struggling with an important decision. But it was a sham. The decision had already been made in a phone call he'd made moments after Mattie had left his office.

"She's determined, Ben. She knows she's got the makings of a great story and she won't take no for an answer."

"Who cares? We don't run it," Landless had told him. "That's not my agenda right now."

"What the hell do you want me to do?"

"Act like an editor, Grev. Persuade her she's wrong. Put her on the cookery page. Send her on holiday. Promote her. But keep her quiet!"

"It's not that simple. She's not only stubborn as hell, she's also one of the best political brains we've got."

"I'm really surprised I have to remind you but you've already got the best political brains in the business. Mine!"

"I didn't mean—"

"Look, we've only got a couple of weeks before this bloody leadership race is over. There are big things at stake here, not just the future of the country but my business—and your job. Do you understand me?"

He was about to say of course he understood him but already the phone had been slammed down. Now she was back in his office, the cause of all his woes. He continued to shuffle the pages of her copy, no longer reading them, concentrating instead on what he was about to say, unsure how he should handle her. Finally he put Mattie's story down and stretched back in his chair.

"We can't run it. Too risky. I'm not willing to blow the leadership contest apart on the basis of speculation."

It was what she had expected. She replied in a whisper that hit Preston like a boxing glove.

"I will not take no for an answer."

Dammit. Why didn't she just accept it, shrug it off, put it down to experience

or just burst into tears like the others? The quiet insolence behind her words made him all the more determined.

“I’m not running your story. I’m your editor, that’s my decision. You will accept it or...”

“Or what, Grev?”

“Or realize that you have no future on our political staff.”

“You’re firing me?” This did surprise her. How could he afford to let her go, particularly in the middle of the leadership contest?

“No, I’m moving you to women’s features, starting right now. Frankly, I don’t think you’ve developed the judgment for our political columns, not yet, maybe in a couple—”

She flew straight across him. “Who’s nobbled you, Grev?”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“You normally have trouble making up your mind whether you wear Y-fronts or boxers. Deciding to fire me from this story is somebody else’s decision, isn’t it?”

“I’m not firing you! You’re being transferred...”

He was beginning to lose much of his carefully maintained control. His complexion looked as if he had been holding his breath.

“You’re not firing me?”

“No!”

“Then I quit.”

His cheeks looked like a cherry farm. He had to keep her at the *Chronicle*, at least for a while; it was the only way to control her. But what the hell was he to do? He forced a smile and spread his hands wide in an attempt to imitate a gesture of generosity. “Look, Mattie, let’s not be hasty. You’re among friends here.”

Her nostrils flared in contempt.

“I want you to get wider experience on the paper. You’ve got talent, no denying that, even if I think you haven’t quite fitted in on the political side. We want to keep you here, so spend the weekend thinking over what other part of the paper you might like to work on.”

He saw her eyes and knew it wasn’t working.

“But if you really feel you must go, don’t rush into anything. Sort out what you want to do, let me know, we’ll try to support you and give you six months’ salary to help you on your way. I don’t want any hard feelings. Think about it.”

“I’ve thought about it. And if you are not printing my story, I’m resigning. Here and now.”

The soft words turned to steel. “In which case I remind you that you have a contract of employment, and that stipulates you have to give me three months’ notice. It also stipulates that until that time has elapsed we retain exclusive rights over all your journalistic work. If you insist, we shall rigidly enforce that provision, in the courts if necessary, which would ruin your career once and for all. Face it, Mattie, your copy isn’t going to get printed here or anywhere else. Wise up, accept the offer. It’s the best one you are going to get.”

Suddenly she saw the face of her grandfather, smiling down at her as she curled up at his feet in front of a winter fire. “You are a pest, my little Mattie, always asking questions, questions, questions.”

“But I want to know, *Farfar*.”

So her granddad had told her about how he had set out from his fishing village on the Norwegian fjord, on his dash for freedom, leaving everything behind, knowing that once he started he could never turn back. “I knew what was waiting out there for me,” he said. “Terrifying things. There were German patrol boats, mine fields, and nearly a thousand miles of stormy seas.”

“So why did you do it?”

“Because also waiting for me was the most terrifying and wonderful thing of all. The future.” And he had laughed and kissed her curls.

Now she gathered up the papers on Preston’s desk, sorted them into a neat pile, then ripped them slowly in half before letting them flutter back into his lap.

“You can keep the words, Grev. But you don’t own the truth. I’m not sure you would even recognize it.”

This time she slammed the door.

Thirty-Two

Politicians are much like aging authors and older women. The dangerous phase in their lives is when they are no longer content with the respect of friends but demand the adulation of an audience.

Sunday, November 14—Monday, November 15

In the immediate aftermath of the *Chronicle's* devastating opinion poll and Collingridge's resignation, Urquhart had written to all his parliamentary colleagues in his capacity as Chief Whip.

During the course of the leadership election, you will undoubtedly be approached by newspapers and pollsters trying to obtain your view about which candidate you are likely to support. I would encourage you not to respond. At best these surveys can only serve to disrupt the proper conduct of what is supposed to be a confidential ballot. At worst they will be used to make mischief. We can do without lurid headlines and outlandish comment. The best interests of the Party are best served by refusing to cooperate with such activity.

The majority was more than happy to accept his advice, but at least a third of MPs are generally reckoned to be constitutionally incapable of keeping anything quiet, even state secrets. As a result, less than 40 percent of the 337 Government MPs with votes in the ballot responded to the pollsters' pestering telephone calls on behalf of two Sunday newspapers. It left the impression that the Parliamentary Party was still a long way from making up its collective mind.

Moreover, the views of those who did respond weren't much help, either. Samuel was ahead, but only narrowly and to a degree that the pollsters emphasized was "not statistically significant." Woolton, McKenzie, and Earle followed in close order, with four other candidates who had put their heads above the parapet considerably further behind.

The conclusions to be drawn from such evidence, just four days before the close of nominations, were flimsy, but that didn't seem to bother those who wrote the headlines.

"SAMUEL SLIPPING—EARLY LEAD LOST," roared the *Mail* on Sunday, while the *Observer* was scarcely less restrained in declaring "PARTY IN TURMOIL AS POLL REVEALS UNCERTAINTY."

The inevitable consequence was a flurry of editorials criticizing both the quality of the candidates and their campaigns. "This country has a right to expect more of the governing Party than this ferrets-in-a-sack routine," the *Sunday Express* intoned. "We may be witnessing a governing Party which is finally running out of ideas and leadership after too long in power."

The following morning's edition of the *Chronicle* was intended to resolve all that. Just three days before the close of nominations, it put aside convention and for the first time in its history ran its editorial on the front page. Its print run was increased and a copy was hand delivered to the London addresses of all Government MPs. No punches were pulled in its determination to make its views heard throughout the corridors of Westminster.

This paper has consistently supported the Government, not through blind prejudice but because we felt they served the interests of the nation better than the alternatives. Throughout the Thatcher years our convictions were well supported by the progress which was made, but in recent months we began to feel that Henry Collingridge was not the best leader to write the next chapter. That was why we supported his decision to resign.

But the lack of judgment being shown by the present contenders for his job threatens a return to the bad old ways of weakness and indecisiveness which we hoped had been left behind for good.

Instead of the steady hand which we need to consolidate the economic

and social advances of recent years, we have been offered a choice between youthful inexperience, environmental upheaval, and injudicious outbursts bordering on racial intolerance. This choice isn't good enough. We need a leader who has maturity, a sense of discretion, and a proven capacity for working with all his colleagues.

There is at least one senior figure in the Party who enjoys all of these attributes and who in recent weeks has been almost unique in upholding the dignity of Government, showing himself capable of putting aside his own personal ambition for the wider interests of his Party.

He has announced that it is not his intention to seek election as Leader of the Party, but he still has time to reconsider before nominations close on Thursday. We believe it would be in the best interests of the Party if the Chief Whip, Francis Urquhart, were to stand. We believe it would be in the wider interests of the entire country if he were to be elected.

Such an endorsement was like a lifeboat cutting through troubled seas. By the time Urquhart emerged from his home in Cambridge Street at 8:10 that morning, there was wriggling media scrum waiting to greet him. He had been waiting inside to ensure that the timing of his exit enabled BBC radio's *Today* program and all breakfast television channels to take it live. Attracted by the scramble of newsmen, a host of passers-by and commuters from nearby Victoria Station had gathered to discover the cause for the commotion and the television images suggested a crowd of ordinary folk, "real people" as one commentator described them, who were showing considerable interest in the man who now emerged onto the doorstep.

The journalists shouted; he waved a hand to quiet them. The hand also contained a copy of that morning's *Chronicle*. He smiled, an expression that contained both intrigue and assurance.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, as Chief Whip I would like to think you had gathered here because of your interest in the details of the Government's forthcoming legislative program. But I suspect you have other things on your mind."

A gentle quip, an appreciative chuckle from the journalists; Urquhart was

now firmly in control.

“I have read with considerable surprise and obvious interest this morning’s edition of the *Chronicle*.” He held it up again so that the cameras could get a clear shot. “I’m honored they should hold such a high opinion of my capabilities—one which goes far beyond my own judgment of the matter, I can assure you. As you know, I had made it clear that I had no intention of standing, that I thought it was in the Party’s best interest that the Chief Whip should stand above this particular contest.”

He cleared his throat; they waited, in silence, pencils poised, microphones thrust still further forward, straining at the leash.

“And generally that’s still my view. However, the *Chronicle* raises important points which should be considered carefully. I know you’ll forgive me if I don’t come to an instant or snap judgment out here on the pavement, not even for you, ladies and gentlemen. I want to spend a little time consulting a few colleagues, weighing their opinions. I also intend to have a long and serious discussion with my wife, whose views will be most important of all. I shall then sleep upon it all and let you know tomorrow what decision I have reached. Nothing more till then, I’m afraid. Tomorrow!”

With one final wave of his hand, still clutching the newspaper and held for many seconds to satisfy the screaming photographers, Urquhart withdrew into his house and shut the door firmly behind him.

* * *

Mattie was beginning to wonder whether she had been hasty in storming out of Preston’s office. She had spent a lonely weekend trying to identify newspapers for which she would like to work, but as she did so she quickly realized that none of them had any obvious gaps in their political reporting teams. She had made many telephone calls but they had led to few appointments. She also began to discover that a rumor was spreading a story that she had stormed out in tears after Preston had questioned her judgment, and sensitive feminine outbursts don’t generally commend themselves to the alpha males of the newspaper club. It didn’t help her mood when the Bank of England pushed up interest rates to protect sterling from speculators during the period of uncertainty. Mortgage rates

followed within hours. Mattie had a mortgage, a hefty one. Paying for it was difficult enough even with a salary. Without one, the hyenas would be soon at her door.

That afternoon she went to the Commons in search of Urquhart. His name was everywhere, the main dish of the day, but he proved elusive and he wasn't returning her calls. It was by chance that she almost bumped into him as she was walking down one of the finely carved circular staircases off the Central Lobby. He was striding up the marble steps with the vigor of a far younger man and she was caught so by surprise that she almost slipped. He reached out, grabbed her arm, steadied her, pulled her to one side.

"Why, Mattie, what a delight."

"I've been trying to get hold of you."

"I know. I've been avoiding you." He laughed at his own appalling honesty. "Don't be offended, I'm hiding from everyone. Keeping a low profile. For the moment."

"But will you stand? I think you ought to."

"I really couldn't possibly comment, Mattie, you know that, not even to you."

"Tonight? Can I come round?"

Their eyes met. They both knew the request wasn't entirely professional. Only at that point did he let go of her arm.

"Mrs. Urquhart will be there. I will need to spend some time with her."

"Of course."

"And I suspect you'll find dozens of photographers waiting to photograph every little coming and going."

"Sorry, silly of me."

"I'd better go, Mattie."

"I hope..." She bit her tongue.

"Yes, what do you hope, Mattie?"

"I hope you win."

"But I'm not even a candidate yet."

"You will be, Francis."

"How can you possibly tell?"

"Let's call it feminine intuition."

That long, penetrating look again, the one that wasn't entirely professional.
"I'm a great admirer of such qualities, Mattie."

She held his stare.

"But I must rush. I look forward to our next encounter."

And he was gone.

* * *

The tide was coming in at a rush and the wooden platform that formed part of Charing Cross pier bobbed in the current. It was early evening but already densely dark, with a chill breeze that had started its journey somewhere out in the North Sea beyond the estuary coming off the water and wrapping itself around her ankles. Mattie pulled her coat tight and stuffed her hands back into her pockets. She was relieved to see the *Chronicle's* private river taxi coming into view. It shuttled employees between the newspaper's Docklands plant downstream and the more central reaches of the capital. It was the shuttle that Mattie had used to ferry her between the newspaper and Westminster. Now Krajewski had asked to meet her, with a message.

"Grev says you've got to come back," Krajewski said as he walked down the short gangway from the boat.

"I quit."

"He knows that. The whole bloody newsroom heard you. Didn't know you could slam a door that hard without the wall falling down." His tone was light, trying to humor her. "Anyway, he says he wants you back, even if it's only to work out your three months' notice."

"I'd rather freeze out here," she said, turning away.

"You will freeze if you're not working, Mattie." He took her sleeve to slow her down. "Work your notice out."

"On women's features!" she snorted in contempt.

"Use the paper as a base for finding something else. Grev says that's OK with him."

"He wants to control me."

"I want to see you."

His words sat between them, staring.

“Whatever way you want, Mattie. Take it slowly, let’s see what happens. Unless you can’t stand me, that is.”

“No, Johnnie, that’s not it.”

“Then what is it...?”

She set off again, but not at speed. They strolled along the Embankment, tracing the twisted, confusing curves of the river with the floodlit vistas of the Festival Hall and the Houses of Parliament beyond.

“So what do you make of all the Urquhart stuff?” he asked eventually, trying to find some ground they could share.

“It’s extraordinary. And exciting.”

“Like a Messiah on a white charger galloping to the rescue.”

“Messiahs don’t ride chargers, stupid; they do donkeys.”

They both laughed, felt easier. He moved closer, she slipped her arm though his as they kicked a path through the windswept piles of leaves gathered beneath the plane trees.

“Why did the paper do it?” she asked.

“Don’t know. Grev just came in late yesterday, not a word to anyone, turned the paper inside out and produced his front page editorial from out of his pocket. No warning; no explanation. Still, it seems to have caused quite a stir. Perhaps he got it right after all.”

Mattie shook her head. “I don’t think it was Grev. It takes balls to position the paper in that way and he’s such a shrivel dick. No, it could only have come from one place: the desk of our—your!—beloved proprietor. Last time he stepped in he was dethroning Collingridge, now he’s trying to hand the crown to someone else.”

“But why? Why Urquhart? He comes across as something of a loner, aristocratic, patrician, old school tie, don’t you think?”

“The strong, silent type.”

“Not one of the boys, no great fan club.”

“But maybe that’s it, Johnnie. Low profile. No one hates him enough to campaign against him, not like they’re doing with Samuel.” She turned to face him, her breath forming swirls of mist in the evening air. “You know, he might just slip through the middle while the others are all killing themselves. Landless

could have picked a winner.”

“You think he’ll stand, then?”

“Certain of it.”

“How can you be?”

“I’m a political correspondent. The best. But...”

“Gets cold on the outside of the tent, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve lost my job, Johnnie, not my curiosity. I think there’s something bigger going on here than anyone can imagine. Bigger than Landless, much bigger than Shrivel Dick. And too big even for the *Chronicle*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Woodward and Bernstein?”

“They had a newspaper to print their stuff, Mattie.”

“They also wrote a book.”

“You’re going to write a book?”

“Maybe.”

“You want me to tell Grev that?”

“Only if it really upsets him.”

Thirty-Three

The higher up the tree a cat climbs, the farther it will fall. It's the same for politicians, except politicians don't bounce.

Tuesday, November 16

Would he? Wouldn't he? The following day's news was dominated by speculation about whether Urquhart would run. The media had excited themselves to the point where they would feel badly let down if he didn't, yet by mid-afternoon he was still keeping his own counsel.

So was Roger O'Neill. The previous day Mattie had telephoned Party Headquarters wanting to get an official view about computers, literature sales, and accounting procedures, only to discover that Spence had been absolutely right about the ban on staff contact with the media for the duration of the campaign. She could talk only with the Press Office, yet no one in the Press Office seemed capable or willing to talk to her.

"Sounds as if you're investigating our expenses," a voice down the phone had suggested. "Literature sales? We're a bit busy drowning right now, Mattie. Call back in a couple of weeks."

So she had asked for O'Neill's office and been put through to Penny Guy.

"Hi, it's Mattie Storin, from the *Chronicle*," she said, feeling only a twinge of dishonesty. "We met a couple of times, at the conference, remember?"

"Yes, Mattie. How can I help?"

"I was wondering—I know it's short notice and everything—but I was wondering if I could come over tomorrow morning sometime and have a quick word with Roger."

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mattie, but he likes to keep his mornings free to clear his paperwork and for internal meetings.” It was a lie, and one she was increasingly forced to use as O’Neill’s timekeeping had become spectacularly erratic. He rarely came into the office before 1:00 p.m. nowadays.

“Damn, I was really hoping...”

“What’s it about?”

“I’ve got some ideas I want to bounce off him. About Charles Collingridge’s sudden love of political literature. And the Praed Street address.”

There was a pause, a distraction, as if Penny might have dropped the phone. “I’ll call you back,” she said and cut the connection.

* * *

Penny had expected her alarm at Mattie’s call to be converted into a volcano of panic when she phoned O’Neill, yet he seemed surprisingly confident. “She’s got nothing, Pen,” he insisted. “I hear she’s in trouble with her newspaper anyway. It’s not a problem.”

“But what does she know, Rog?”

“How the fuck should I know? Let’s get her in and find out.”

“Rog?”

“You think I can’t still do my old body swerve, Pen? She’s only a bloody girl!”

She had tried to insist that it was foolish, he should be cautious, but he didn’t do caution. Neither did he do mornings anymore, so Mattie had been invited to see him the following afternoon.

Penny loved O’Neill but her feelings brought her too close to him. She thought he was stressed, working too hard, suffering; she didn’t comprehend the mind-pulverizing effects of cocaine. It kept O’Neill hyperactive into the small hours, unable to sleep until a cascade of depressant drugs gradually overwhelmed the cocaine and forced him into an oblivion from which he rarely emerged before midday, or sometimes later. So she grew increasingly confused and embarrassed as Mattie sat waiting for O’Neill. He had promised he would be on time but as the clock on his wall ticked on remorselessly, Penny’s ability to invent new excuses began to vanish beneath her bewilderment about his public

bravado and his private remorse, his inexplicable behavior and the irrational outbursts. She brought Mattie yet another cup of coffee.

“Let me give him a call at home,” she suggested. “Perhaps he’s had to go back there. Something he forgot, or not feeling too well...”

She went into his office to make the call, away from Mattie. She sat on the corner of his desk, picked up the phone and punched the numbers. With some embarrassment she greeted Roger on the phone, explaining in a whispered voice that Mattie had been waiting for more than half an hour and...Out of sight of Mattie her face gradually began to crumple in concern as she listened. She tried to interrupt but it was useless. Her lip began to tremble; she bit it hard, until the point came when she couldn’t stand it any longer. She dropped the phone and fled from the office, past Mattie, in tears.

Mattie’s first instinct was to run after the distressed Penny; her second and stronger instinct was to find out what had upset her. The receiver was still swinging beside the desk where it had been abandoned. She put it to her ear.

The voice that was still coming out of the phone was unrecognizable as Roger O’Neill. The words were incoherent, indecipherable, slowed and slurred to the point where it sounded like a doll with the batteries almost dead. There were gasps, moans, long pauses, the sound of tears falling, the mad music of a man in emotional agony and tearing himself apart. She replaced the receiver gently in the cradle.

* * *

Mattie found Penny in the washroom, choking into a paper towel. Mattie touched her consolingly on the shoulder. Penny turned in alarm, as though slapped, her eyes raw and swollen.

“How long has he been like that, Penny?”

“I can’t say anything!” she blurted, her confusion mixed with excruciating pain.

“Look, Penny, he’s obviously in a very bad way. I’m not going to print any of this, for goodness’ sake. I think he needs help. I think maybe you need a hug.”

Mattie stretched out her arms and Penny fell into them as though she were the loneliest woman on the planet. She stayed there, locked in Mattie’s arms, until

there were no more tears left. When she had recovered sufficiently to escape, she and Mattie went for a walk in nearby Victoria Gardens to refresh themselves in the crisp air blowing off the Thames, and where they could talk without interruption. The fight had gone from Penny. She asked Mattie for an assurance that none of what she said would be printed, and when Mattie agreed, it began to pour forth. She told of how the Prime Minister's resignation had put O'Neill in turmoil, how he had always been a little "emotionally extravagant" but had been growing worse. "I think the resignation had really brought him close to a breakdown."

"But why, Penny? Surely they weren't that close?"

"He liked to think he was close to the whole Collingridge family. He was always arranging for flowers and special photographs to be sent to Mrs. Collingridge, doing little favors whenever he could. He loved it all."

Mattie sighed, took in the cold air, the same wind that had blown her grandfather on his journey across the sea. How would he have felt about what she was doing? She felt guilty; she knew she wasn't being simply a friend to Penny, but hadn't her grandfather left all his friends behind, even his family, for what he knew was right? She, like him, had to press on. "Roger's in trouble, isn't he? We both heard him just now, Penny. Something has really got to Roger, something that's eating away at him from the inside."

"I...I think he blamed himself so badly over the shares."

"The shares? You mean the Renox shares?" Mattie pressed, trying to hide a flush of alarm.

"Charlie Collingridge asked him to open the accommodation address because he wanted somewhere for his private mail. Roger and I went to Paddington in a taxi and he sent me in to do the paperwork. I knew he felt uneasy at the time, I think he sensed there was something wrong. And when he realized what it had been used for and how much trouble it had caused, he just began going to pieces."

"Why did Charlie Collingridge ask Roger to open the address and not do it himself?"

"I've no idea, it was just a silly favor Rog agreed to do for him. Perhaps Charlie felt guilty because of what he was going to use it for. Fiddling the

shares.”

They were leaning on the parapet, staring out over the gray, sluggish river. A seagull landed beside them and stared with menacing yellow eyes, hoping for food. Mattie stared back and the bird flapped its wings and disappeared, crying out in disappointment.

“I’m sure it was something like that,” Penny continued, “something Charlie was ashamed of. He took advantage of us. Roger just breezed into the office one day and said he’d got this little job to do, that it was terribly confidential and I had to keep quiet about it. As silent as if I were sucking a bishop, he said. You know Rog. Tries to be an Irish poet. Thinks he has a way with words.”

“So you never saw Charlie Collingridge yourself?”

“No. I’ve never met him. Rog likes to handle all the important people himself.”

“But you are sure it was Charlie Collingridge?”

“Of course, Rog said so. And who else could it have been?” A burst of November air sent dead autumn leaves scurrying around their ankles like rats and Penny shivered. “Oh, God, it’s all such an awful mess.”

“Penny, relax! It’ll be all right. These things sort themselves out.” Mattie linked her arm through Penny’s and they began to walk on. “Why don’t you take a couple of days off? Roger can survive without you for a little while.”

“Can he? I wonder.”

“He can’t be that useless. Knows how to make tea and use the office computer, doesn’t he?”

“He’s strictly a coffee man and types with one finger.”

“Slow but sure.”

“No, just slow.”

It made sense to Mattie. Whoever messed with the computer file was no expert. O’Neill was no expert. It didn’t make them one and the same but it made sense. So many fingers were pointing at O’Neill.

They had arrived back at Smith Square in the shadow of the church.

“You know, they still use gaslight in this square,” Mattie said, pointing to the ornate street lamp above their heads.

“Do they?” Penny looked up and shook her head in surprise. “You know, I’ve

walked around this square every day and never noticed. You have a sharp eye.”

“I try.”

They were outside the headquarters building. Penny heaved a sigh as she contemplated going back inside to everything that waited for her there. She squeezed Mattie’s hand. “I love him, you know. That’s the problem.”

“Love should never be a problem.”

“And there was me thinking how wise you were!” Penny laughed, her strength having returned. “Thanks for listening. It’s been great just to be able to talk.”

“Call me. Any time. And take care of yourself.”

“You, too.”

Mattie walked slowly the few hundred yards back to the House of Commons, oblivious of the chill, warmed by thoughts that were on fire with impatience, and with one thought burning brighter than all the others. Why the hell had Roger O’Neill framed Charles and Henry Collingridge?

Thirty-Four

Every politician has his principles. It's simply that some are on a wavelength so rare you would require a telescope at Jodrell Bank to locate them.

Tuesday, November 16—Wednesday, November 17

Urquhart declared his intention to run for the leadership at a press conference held in the House of Commons timed to catch the early evening news and the following day's first editions. This was no pavement scramble but an announcement backed by the historic atmosphere of the Palace of Westminster with its noble stone fireplaces, its dark oak paneling, and its atmosphere of ageless authority. It was dignified, restrained, almost humble. No one had accused Samuel, Woolton, and the others of such things. Mortima was by his side and he emphasized that this was a family decision. He gave the impression of a man who was being dragged reluctantly toward the seat of power, placing his duty to his colleagues and his country above his own personal interests. It was political theater, of course, from a carefully rehearsed script, but he did it so well.

The following day, on Wednesday morning, Landless also held a press conference, another piece of theater but with an entirely different atmosphere. He sat in one of the palatial reception rooms of the Ritz Hotel at a long table covered with microphones, facing the cameras and questions of the financial press. Alongside him and almost dwarfed by his bulging girth sat Marcus Frobisher, the Chairman of the United Newspapers Group who, although an industrial magnate in his own right, was clearly cast in a secondary role for this

occasion. To one side a large video screen played some of the *Chronicle's* better advertising material interspersed with cuts of Landless being greeted by workers, pulling levers to start the printing presses, and generally running his empire in a warm and personal manner. And there was the man himself, smiling for the cameras.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” Landless called the throng to order in a voice which was considerably less common cockney than the one he adopted on private occasions. “Thank you for coming at such short notice. We have invited you here to tell you about one of the most exciting steps forward for the British communications industry since Julius Reuter established his telegraph service in London more than a hundred years ago.” He shifted one of the microphones a little closer to allow a few moments for the sense of excitement to take hold. “Today we wish to make an historic announcement. We have decided to create the largest newspaper group in the United Kingdom, which will provide a platform for making this country once again the worldwide leader in information services.” He smiled around the room, then at Frobisher. “Chronicle Newspapers has made an offer to purchase the full issued share capital of the United Newspapers Group at a price which values them at £1.4 billion. That’s a premium of 40 percent above the current market price. And I am delighted to say that the board of the United Newspapers Group has unanimously accepted the bid.” More smiles. Frobisher was smiling, too, but Landless had a magnetism and physical presence that dragged all attention in upon him, leaving others struggling in shade. “We have also agreed the terms for the future management of the combined group. I shall become Chairman and Chief Executive of the new company, and my good friend and former competitor, now colleague”—he stretched a huge paw to grasp the shoulder of Frobisher, stopping just short of his neck—“is to be our President.”

Several wise heads around the room were nodding in understanding. They knew Landless, had no doubts he would be in sole charge of the new operation. Frobisher had been kicked upstairs so high that the only view anyone would get of him was his arse. He sat there trying hard to put on a good face.

“This is a huge step for the British newspaper industry, and for the country as a whole. The combined operation will control more national and major regional

titles than any other newspaper group. The amalgamation of our international subsidiaries will make us the third largest newspaper group in the world. It will be a springboard for our ambition, which very simply is to become the biggest newspaper group on the planet. And based right here in Britain.” He beamed, his huge face split with a vast predatory smile. “Now ain’t that exciting!” he declared, reverting to his east London accent, and cameras flashed as though on his command. He let them have their few moments before once more taking the reins.

“Now I know you’ll all be bursting with questions—so let’s start!”

A hum of excitement swept around the room and a forest of hands shot up to catch his eye.

“I suppose to be fair I ought to take the first question from someone who won’t be working for the group,” Landless jested. “Can we find anyone unlucky enough to fit that description?” With theatrical exaggeration he shielded his eyes from the bright lights and searched the gathering for a suitable victim and they all laughed at his cheek.

“Mr. Landless,” shouted the business editor of the *Sunday Times*. “The Government have made it very clear in recent years that in their view the ownership of British newspapers is already concentrated in too few hands. They’ve made it clear they would consider using their monopolies and mergers powers to prevent any further consolidation. How on earth do you expect to get the necessary Government approval?”

Many heads around the room nodded in agreement. Good question. Landless appeared to agree.

“An excellent point,” he said, spreading his arms wide as if to hug the question to his chest and slowly throttle it to death. “You’re right, of course, the Government will need to make its mind up. Newspapers are part of the worldwide information industry. It’s growing and changing every day. You all know that. Five years ago you lot worked in Fleet Street with old typewriters and printing presses that should’ve been scrapped when the Kaiser surrendered. Today the industry is modernized, it’s decentralized, it’s computerized.”

“Shame!” cried a voice and the room burst into nostalgic laughter for the days of long liquid lunches at El Vino’s wine bar and prolonged printers’ strikes

which allowed them weeks or sometimes months off, a time when they could write books or build boats and dream dreams, and all of it while still on full pay.

“You know that had to change. And we’ve got to keep on changing, we can’t stand still. We have to face competition not just from each other but from satellite television, local radio, breakfast TV, and the rest. More people will be demanding information twenty-four hours a day, from all parts of the world. They won’t be buying newspapers which arrive hours after the news has occurred and then covers them in filthy printing ink. If we are going to survive we’ve got to move from being parochial newspapers to being suppliers of information on a worldwide basis. And for that we need clout.” He lifted his shoulders in an enormous shrug that subsided with the deftness of an avalanche. “So the Government has got to decide. Does it play the ostrich, bury its head while the British newspaper industry goes bust like the British car industry, dead inside ten years as the Americans, Japanese, and even Australians take over? Or will it be visionary and back the best of British? Simple proposition. Do we duck and decline? Or take on the rest of the world and beat it?”

A blitz of flash guns greeted him as he sat back in his chair while the journalists who still took shorthand scribbled furiously to catch up with him. The questioner turned to his neighbor. “What do you think? Will the old bastard get away with it?”

“The industrial logic is compelling, that’s for sure, and there’s something rather charming about a working class kid on the make, don’t you think? But if I know our Ben, he won’t be relying just on persuasive logic or passion. He’s the sort of guy who’s already prepared the ground, every inch of it, even the cracks. I think we’ll soon see just how many politicians owe him favors.”

* * *

The answer seemed to be that a whole host of politicians owed Landless. With nominations closing the following day and the first ballot due in just a week, no one seemed keen to take him on and risk antagonizing the combined might of the Chronicle and United groups. There was a rush to endorse his idea that within hours had grown into a stampede among contenders as they struggled not to be left behind. Why, the man was surely not only enlightened but deeply patriotic.

Once again, it seemed that Landless had discovered the way to tickle a politician's fancy. By teatime he was able to sit back with his usual mug of Bovril and snap his red braces in delight.

Not everyone was taken in, of course. The *Independent* couldn't resist the temptation to have a dig.

The Landless announcement burst like a grenade in the middle of the leadership race—which presumably was his intention. Not since the Profumo scandal have so many politicians been caught pulling their trousers down. It is not only undignified but a dangerous state for a politician to be caught in.

Not all the aspirants joined the stampede. Samuel was cautious, noncommittal—he had too many knife wounds in his back to stick his head above the parapet yet again. He said he wanted to consult the workforce of the two groups before reaching his decision and, even before Landless's Bovril had gone cold, union representatives were denouncing the plan. They noted there were no guarantees about job security and hadn't forgotten or forgiven a tactless Landless quip that he'd had to fire ten thousand people for every million he had made. In the face of opposition from the unions, Samuel realized it would be absurd for him now to endorse the deal, so sought refuge in silence.

Urquhart also stood out from the crowd. Within an hour of the announcement he was in front of cameras giving a thoroughly polished analysis of the global information market and its likely trends. His technical expertise far outshone his rivals', yet he was cautious. "While I have the highest respect for Benjamin Landless I think it would be wrong of me to jump to conclusions before I've had an opportunity to consider all the details. I think politicians should be careful; it gives politics a bad name if we all look as if we're dashing around trying to buy the support of the editorial columns. So to avoid any possible misinterpretation, I shan't be announcing my own views until the leadership contest is over. By which time, of course," he added modestly, "they may be of no interest anyway."

"If only all his colleagues could have taken the dignified and principled stand of the Chief Whip," the *Independent* commented, raining down on him in praise.

“Urquhart is establishing a statesmanlike tone for his campaign which marks him out from the pack. It will do nothing to harm his chances.”

Other editorials echoed the line, not least the *Chronicle*.

We encouraged Francis Urquhart to stand for the leadership because of our respect for his independence of mind and his integrity. We were delighted when he accepted the challenge and we are still convinced that our recommendation was correct. His refusal to rush to judgment over the Chronicle–United newspaper merger is no less than we would expect.

We still hope that after due deliberation he will wholeheartedly endorse the merger plans, but our view of Urquhart is based on much more than commercial interest. He is the only candidate who so far has demonstrated that he has that vital characteristic missing in so many—the quality of leadership.

From around the corridors of Westminster it was possible to detect the sound of doors being slammed in frustration as ambitious politicians realized that, once again, Urquhart had stolen a march on them. A penthouse suite overlooking Hyde Park offered a different perspective. Landless gazed out across the treetops and the world he hoped would soon be his. “To you, Frankie boy,” he muttered into his glass. “To us.”

Thirty-Five

For some it is the end of the rope. For others it is only the beginning.

Thursday, November 18

When nominations closed at noon on Thursday, the only surprise was the last-minute withdrawal of Peter Bearstead. He'd been the first to announce his intention to stand but already his race was run. "I've done what I set out to do, which was to get a proper election going," he announced punchily. "I know I haven't got a chance of winning, so let the others get on with it. I'll be there to help drag the bodies out of the arena."

He had meant to say he would "be there to help bind the wounds" but not for the first time his love of a sharp phrase had run away with his judgment. He immediately signed up with the *Daily Express* to write personal and indiscreet profiles of the candidates for the duration.

So now there were nine, an unprecedentedly large field, but the prevailing view was that only five of them were in with a serious chance—Samuel, Woolton, Earle, McKenzie, and Urquhart. With the list of combatants complete, pollsters redoubled their efforts to contact Government MPs and sniff which way the tide was running.

Paul McKenzie was determined to show the sharpest edge of his sword. The Secretary of State for Health was a frustrated man. He'd been in charge of the health service for more than five years and had hoped as ardently as Urquhart for a new challenge in a post-election reshuffle. The long years in charge of an unresponsive bureaucracy had left him feeling diminished. A few years previously he had been regarded as one of the rising stars of the Party, a man

who could combine a tough intellect with a deep sense of caring. Many predicted he would go all the way. But the health service had proved to be a bureaucratic beast he was incapable of breaking let alone training, and his encounters with picket lines of protesting nurses and ambulance men had left his image deeply frayed. The postponement of the hospital expansion plan had been the last straw. He'd grown dispirited, had talked with his wife about quitting politics at the next election, so had greeted Collingridge's downfall like a drowning man discovers dry land. He entered the final five days before the first ballot overflowing with enthusiasm and energy, anxious to make an immediate impact, determined to get his head above the crowd. He had asked his staff to find a suitable photo-opportunity, some excuse to revive his tarnished image—but no bloody hospitals, he instructed. His fingers had been chewed off all too often. He'd spent the first three years of his time in the Ministry conscientiously visiting hospitals and trying to learn about patient care, only to be met on bad days by picket lines of nurses complaining about “slave wages,” and on worse days by violent demonstrations from ancillary staff protesting about “savage cuts.” He'd been nicknamed “Dr. Cut,” although the unions had often painted an additional consonant onto their banners. Even the doctors' unions seemed to take the view that health budgets should be set by the level of noise rather than the level of need. At times, but only in private, it had reduced McKenzie to tears of frustration.

He almost never got to see the patients. Even when he tried to sneak into a hospital by a back entrance the demonstrators always seemed to know beforehand precisely where he would be, ready to throw their abuse at him just when the television camera crews had arrived. Being beaten up in public by an angel of mercy was never great for the image or his self-esteem. So McKenzie had simply stopped visiting hospitals. Rather than running a gauntlet of abuse, he opted out and stuck to safer venues. It was a matter of self-preservation.

So his plan was as simple as it was safe. Instead of a hospital—“it would be entirely wrong to use sick patients for my own political purposes”—his office had arranged for him to visit the Humanifit Laboratories at their headquarters just off the M4. Humanifit made a wide range of equipment for handicapped people and had just developed a revolutionary wheelchair operated by voice

commands. Even paraplegics unable to move their limbs could use it. The combination of new British technology and enhanced care for the disabled was just what McKenzie was looking for and so, barely a couple of hours after nominations closed, the Secretary of State's car was hastening down the motorway in search of his salvation.

McKenzie had been careful. He didn't take the success of the visit for granted. Factories were all well and good but a spirited demo was a thousand times more attractive to the cameras. He had been ambushed too many times, so he was careful to ensure that his office informed the media only three hours before his impending arrival, soon enough to scramble their camera crews but not enough to get rent-a-mob out and active. As he approached the Humanifit facility, he nestled back in his leather seat, practiced his smile, and congratulated himself on his caution. It was all going to work very well.

Unfortunately for McKenzie, his staff had been too efficient. Governments need to know where their Ministers are at all times; like all other MPs they have to be available if at all possible in the event of an emergency or in case of a sudden vote in the House of Commons. So, on the previous Friday, following her standing instructions to the letter, McKenzie's diary secretary had sent a full list of his forthcoming engagements to the office of the government's coordinating authority—otherwise known as the Chief Whip.

As he was driven the final few hundred yards down the country road to the factory's green-field site, McKenzie combed his hair and prepared himself. The ministerial car passed alongside the red brick wall that curved around the site and, as the Minister in the rear seat made sure his tie was straight, it swept in through the front gates.

No sooner was it through than the driver jammed on the brakes, throwing McKenzie against the front seat, spilling papers on the floor and ruining his careful preparations. Before he had a chance to curse the driver and demand an explanation, the cause of the problem confronted and swirled around him. It was a sight beyond his wildest nightmare.

The tiny car park in front of the factory's reception office was jammed with a throng of seething protesters, all dressed in nurse's uniform and hurling abuse, with every angry word and action recorded by the three television cameras that

had been dutifully summoned by McKenzie's press officer and placed in an ideal viewing position on top of the administration block. No sooner was the official car inside the gates than the crowd surged around, kicking the bodywork and banging placards on the roof. In a couple of seconds the aerial had gone and the windscreen wipers had also been wrenched off. The driver had the sense to press the panic button fitted to all Ministerial cars which automatically closed the windows and locked the doors, but not before someone had managed to spit directly into McKenzie's face. Fists and contorted faces were pressed hard up against the glass, all threatening violence on him; the car rocked as the crowd surged against it, smothering it, suffocating him, until he could see no sky, no trees, no help, nothing but hatred at close quarters.

"Get out! Get out!" he screamed, but the driver raised his hands in helplessness. The crowd had surrounded the car, blocking off any hope of retreat.

"Get out!" he continued to scream, overcome by claustrophobia, but to no avail. It wasn't a matter of judgment, more of fallible instinct as McKenzie, in despair and desperation, leaned forward and grabbed the automatic gear stick, throwing it into reverse. The car gave a judder and moved back barely a foot before the driver's foot hit the brake but too late. It had driven into the crowd. A wheelchair had been knocked over, a woman in nurse's uniform struck. She appeared to be in great pain.

The crowd parted and, seizing his opportunity, the driver reversed his vehicle out of the gates and onto the road, pulling off a spectacular hand-brake turn to bring the nose of the car round and effect a rapid escape. He sped away leaving large black rubber scars on the road surface.

McKenzie's political career was left on the road alongside the ugly burnt tire marks. It didn't matter that the wheelchair had been empty or the woman was not badly injured, or that she wasn't in fact a nurse but a full time union convener and an experienced hand at turning a picket line drama into a newsworthy crisis. No one bothered to inquire and why should they? They already had their story. The tide had turned against the drowning man and swept poor McKenzie once more out to sea.

Thirty-Six

It was once said that all political careers end in failure. That's why politicians have a front side and a back side. It makes them easier to stack.

Friday, November 19

It had been a difficult week for Mattie. The pace of activity in the leadership race had picked up sharply yet she found herself treading water, feeling left behind by events. Nothing had come of her few job interviews. It became clear to her that she had been blacked by all the newspapers in the expanding Landless empire and none of his remaining competitors seemed particularly keen to antagonize him. The word had gotten around, she was “difficult.” And on Friday morning the mortgage rate had gone up.

But the worst of it was her frustration with herself. While she had gathered more pieces of the jigsaw, still she could find no pattern in them. Nothing seemed to fit. It left a dull, throbbing ache in her temples that had been with her for days, so she had hauled her running gear out of the wardrobe and began pounding her way around the leaf-covered tracks and pathways of Holland Park, hoping that the much needed physical exercise would purge both body and mind. Instead it seemed only to add to her pains as her lungs and legs began to complain. She was running out of ideas, stamina, and time. The first ballot was just four days away and all she was doing was scattering squirrels.

In the fading evening light she ran along the sweeping avenue of chestnut trees that towered magnificent and leafless above her; down Lime Tree Walk where in daylight the sparrows were as tame as house pets, past the red bricked ruins of old Holland House, burned to the ground half a century ago, leaving

itself wrapped in brooding memories of past glories. In the days before London had grown into a voracious urban sprawl, Holland House had been the country seat of Charles James Fox, the legendary eighteenth century radical who had spent a lifetime pursuing revolutionary causes and plotting the downfall of the prime minister. It had always been in vain. Yet who had succeeded where he had failed?

She went over the ground again, the field of battle on which Collingridge had fallen, the election campaign, the leaks, the scandals, and the personalities that had been sucked into the mire—not just Collingridge and his brother Charlie but Williams, O’Neill, Bearstead, McKenzie, Sir Jasper Grainger, and Landless, of course. That was it. That was all she had. So where did she go from here? As she climbed the slope toward the highest part of the wooded park, digging into the soft earth, she bounced the alternatives to see if any would fly.

“Collingridge isn’t giving interviews. Williams will only talk through his Press Office. O’Neill doesn’t seem capable of answering questions, and Landless wouldn’t stop for me on a pedestrian crossing. Which leaves...” She came to a sudden halt, scattering dead leaves. “Why, you, Mr. Kendrick.”

She started running once more, her feet lighter as she broke the top of the hill and began stretching out on the long downhill slope that led toward her home. She felt better now. She had gotten her second wind.

Saturday, November 20

As Harold Earle clambered gently out of bed so as not to disturb his wife and headed for the shower, he felt content with his week’s work. He’d been nominated as one of the five “most likely” candidates, then watched as Samuel’s bandwagon failed to roll and McKenzie’s derailed. There was the Chief Whip’s creditable showing, of course, but Earle couldn’t believe Urquhart could succeed; he had no senior Cabinet experience of running any great Department of State, and at the end of the day experience counted. Particularly experience like Earle’s.

He’d started his climb many years before as Maggie Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, a post of no formal power but whose position close to the eternal flame left others in awe. His promotion to the Cabinet had

been rapid and he'd held several important portfolios including, for the last two years under Collingridge, responsibility for the Government's extensive school reforms as Secretary of State for Education. Unlike some of his predecessors he had managed to find common ground with the teaching profession, although there were those who accused him of being unable to take really tough decisions and of being a conciliator.

But didn't the Party in its present mood need a touch of conciliation? The infighting around Collingridge had left scars and the growing abrasiveness of the campaign for his successor was doing little but rub salt in the wounds. Woolton in particular was proving a pain with his attempts to rekindle memories of his early rough and tumble North Country political style; calling a spade a bloody shovel only antagonized the more traditional spirits in the Party. The time was right for Earle, exactly right.

Today, Saturday, would be a big day, a rally among the party faithful in his constituency to wave the flag, a brightly decked hall packed with supporters whom he could greet on first-name terms—in front of the cameras, of course. And he would announce a major policy initiative. He and his officials had been working on it for some time and with just a little fire under their fannies they would have it ready. The Government already offered school leavers without a job a guaranteed place on a training course, but now they would have the opportunity to complete that training in another Common Market country, which would provide practical skills and language training as well.

Earle was confident it would be well received. A speech that would glow with references to new horizons and youth opportunity and brighter futures and every other kind of cliché he could squeeze within an inch of its life.

And the *coup de grâce*. He would call it that, use the French, entirely appropriate. He'd got the bureaucrats in Brussels to pay for the whole thing. He could already feel the tumultuous applause that would wash over him, carrying him all the way to Downing Street.

A large crowd of cheering supporters was waiting for him outside the Essex village hall when he arrived. They were waving little Union Jacks and old election posters proclaiming him as "The Earle of Essex," which had been brought out to give the occasion all the atmosphere of the campaign trail. There

was even a brass band that struck up as he came through the doors of the hall, proceeding down the aisle shaking hands on all sides. The local mayor led him up onto the low wooden platform as the cameramen and lighting crews maneuvered to find the best angle. He climbed the steps, kissed his wife, gazed out over the crowd, shielded his eyes from the lights, waved to their applause even as the mayor was trying to herald him as “the man who needs no introduction, not to you—and soon not to anyone in the country!” At that moment Harold Earle felt as if he was on the brink of the greatest personal triumph of his life.

And that was the moment he saw him. Standing in the front row, squashed between the other cheering supporters, waving and applauding with the rest of them. Simon. The one person in the world he had hoped he would never see or hear from again.

They had met in a railway carriage, late one night as Earle had been coming back from a rally in the Northwest. They had been alone, Earle had been drunk, and Simon had been very, very friendly. And handsome. Appealed to a side of Earle he had been struggling since university to forget. As the train thundered through the night he and Simon had entered a world cut off from the bright lights and responsibilities they had just left. Earle had discovered himself committing acts that would have made him liable to a prison sentence several years before and which were still only legal between consenting adults in private and certainly not in a British Rail carriage twenty minutes out of Birmingham.

Earle had staggered from the train at Euston, thrust two twenties into Simon’s hand, and spent the night at his club. He couldn’t face going back home.

He hadn’t seen Simon for another six months until out of the blue he’d turned up in the Central Lobby of the Houses of Parliament asking the police attendants if he could see him. When the panic-stricken Minister arrived the youth hadn’t made a public fuss, had explained how he had recognized Earle from a recent party political broadcast, had asked for the money in a very gentle fashion. Earle had paid him some “expenses” for his trip to London and wished him well.

Simon had turned up again a few weeks later and Earle knew there would be no respite. He had instructed Simon to wait. Then he had sought sanctuary in the corner of the Chamber, spent ten minutes looking over the scene he had grown

to love, knowing that the youth outside threatened everything he treasured in his life. Finding no answer himself he had dragged himself to the Chief Whip's Office and spilled the lot. There was a youth sitting in the Central Lobby blackmailing him for a brief and stupid fling they'd had many months before. He was finished.

"Bit of a bugger's muddle," Urquhart had suggested before apologizing for the inappropriate metaphor. "But not to worry, Harold, worse things happened on the retreat from Dunkirk, not to mention the Upper Corridor Committee Room. Just point the little shit out to me."

Urquhart had been as good as his word, bloody magnificent, in fact. He had introduced himself to the boy and assured him that if he were not off the premises in five minutes the police would be called and he would be arrested for blackmail. "Oh, don't think you're the first," Urquhart had assured him. "Happens remarkably often. It's simply that in such sordid cases the arrest and subsequent trial are held with desperately little publicity. No one will hear who you've been trying to blackmail, and very few people will even get to know how long you've been sent down for. Perhaps only your poor mother."

Without further inducement the youth had come to the conclusion he had made a terrible mistake and should vanish from the premises and from Harold Earle's life as quickly as possible, but Urquhart had taken the precaution of taking down the details from Simon's driving license, just in case he were to continue to cause trouble.

And now he was back, squashed into a seat in the front row, ready to make unknown demands about which Earle's fevered imagination could only torment itself. The torment went on throughout the speech, which ended as a considerable disappointment to his followers. The content was there, printed in large type on his small pages of recycled paper, but the fire was gone. He stumbled through his officials' tired prose, sweat dripping from his nose even on a cold November day, his mind seeming elsewhere even as he was delivering the lines. The faithful still clapped and applauded enthusiastically when he was finished, but it didn't help. The mayor almost had to drag him into the pit of the hall to satisfy the clamor of the crowd for one last handshake and the chance personally to wish their favorite son well. As they cheered him and pummeled

him on the back he was drawn ever closer to Simon's youthful, penetrating, knowing eyes. It was as if he were being dragged toward the gates of Hell itself. But Simon caused no scene, did nothing but shake his clammy hand and smile while toying nervously with the medallion that swung ostentatiously around his neck. Then he was gone, just another face left behind in the crowd.

* * *

When Earle arrived back home, two men were standing outside in the cold street waiting.

“Evening, Mr. Earle, Mrs. Earle. Simmonds and Peters from the *Mirror*. Interesting rally you had. We've got the press handout, the words, but we need a bit of color for our readers. Like how the audience reacted. Got anything to say about your audience, Mr. Earle?”

He rushed inside without a word, dragging his wife and slamming the door behind him. He watched through a curtained window as they shrugged their shoulders and retreated to the estate car parked on the other side of the street. They pulled out a book and a thermos flask, and settled down for the long night ahead.

Thirty-Seven

The nature of ambition is that it requires casualties.

Sunday, November 21

They were still there the following morning just after dawn when Earle looked out. One was asleep, napping under a trilby hat pulled down over his eyes, the other was rifling through the Sunday newspapers. They bore little resemblance to the previous week's editions. A leadership campaign that had been dead in the water had now, with Urquhart's intervention and McKenzie's catastrophe, sprung into life.

What was more, the pollsters were beginning to wear down the MPs' resistance. "ALL SQUARE!" declared the *Observer*, announcing that the 60 percent of the Parliamentary Party they had managed to cajole into giving a view were now evenly split between the three leading candidates—Samuel, Earle, and Woolton, with Urquhart close behind. McKenzie had disappeared without trace, as had the small lead that Samuel had previously enjoyed.

The news would give no joy to Earle. He had spent a sleepless night, pacing the floors and fending off the questions of his increasingly worried wife. He had tried to find comfort but could see only Simon's face. The presence of the two journalists had kept nagging at him. How much did they know? Why were they squatting on his doorstep? As the first fingers of dawn began to spread cold and gray in the November sky, he found himself drained. He could resist no longer. He had to know.

Peters nudged Simmonds awake as the unshaven figure of Earle, his silk dressing gown wrapped tight around him, emerged from the front door of his

house and made toward them.

“Works like a dream every time,” Peters said. “Like a mouse after cheese. Let’s see what he has to say for himself, Alf—and turn that bloody tape machine on.”

“Good morning, Mr. Earle,” Peters shouted as Earle approached. “Don’t stand out there in the cold, come sit inside. Care for a cup of coffee?”

“What do you want? Why are you spying on me?” Earle demanded, ignoring the offer.

“Spying, Mr. Earle? Don’t be silly, we’re just looking for a bit of color. You’re a leading candidate to become Prime Minister. Seen the newspapers yet? You’re all over them. People are bound to take more interest in you—about your hobbies, what you do. Who your friends are.”

“I have nothing to say!”

“Could we interview your wife, perhaps?” Simmonds asked.

“What are you implying?” Earle demanded in a contorted, high pitched voice.

“My goodness me nothing at all, sir. By the way, have you seen the photos of your rally yesterday? They’re very good, really clear. We’re thinking of using one on our front page tomorrow. Here, have a look.”

A hand thrust a large glossy photograph out of the window and waved it under Earle’s nose. He grabbed it, then he gasped. It showed him gripping the hand and looking straight into the eyes of a smiling, simpering Simon. The details were awesomely clear. It almost looked as if some hidden hand had added a trace of eyeliner around Simon’s large eyes and his fleshy, petulant lips appeared to have grown darker, more prominent. The fingers playing with the medallion around his neck were beautifully manicured.

“Know this gentleman well, do you, sir?” Simmonds asked.

“One of your close supporters, is he? And how precisely does he support you, Mr. Earle?” Peters joined in.

Earle’s hand was trembling. He threw the photograph back through the car window. “What are you trying to do? I deny everything. I shall report your harassment to your editor!”

“Editor, sir? Why, bless me, it’s him what sent us.”

Thirty-Eight

It's all very well volunteering to lead an army, but that's the point that the enemy aims at first. Better just a few steps behind, give yourself time to pick your way through the piles of bodies.

Monday, November 22

The Members' Lobby that is the main entrance to the Chamber is dominated by large bronze figures of Churchill and Attlee and Lloyd George. The toecaps of the statues are bright from the brushing fingers of MPs hoping to share in their greatness. The Lobby has two solid oak doors that protect the Chamber and on which Black Rod knocks to summon MPs for the State Opening of Parliament. The door is set in a battered stone arch that still bears the scars of the destruction of the original Chamber in the bombing of 1941. When the Chamber had been rebuilt, Churchill had asked for the disfigured and scorched arch to be retained. "To remind us."

The Lobby is also where Members collect messages.

"Hello, Mr. Kendrick."

He looked up from his inspection of various pieces of paper to find Mattie at his elbow. He smiled. "You're..."

"Mattie Storin."

"Yes, of course you are." His eyes wandered before returning to her face. "And what can I do for you, Mattie?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right."

"My pleasure. But not now, I'm afraid," he said, glancing at his watch. "How about tea? My place? Four-thirty? I'll have plenty of time for you then."

Kendrick was an Opposition backbencher and his office was a small single room in Norman Shaw North, the red brick building made famous in countless aging black and white films as New Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police. The forces of law and order had long since moved to a gray concrete fortress in Victoria Street, and the parliamentary authorities had been delighted to snap up the vacant, albeit dilapidated, space just across the road from the Houses of Parliament to provide much needed additional office space. Kendrick jumped up from his desk as she walked in.

“Mattie, come into my home and invade my personal space. It’s got as much charm as a monk’s cell, hasn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t know. I don’t do monks,” she replied.

He helped her out of her coat, his eyes appreciative rather than predatory, her woolen sweater deliberately tight, her skirt short enough to show her knees. She needed his attention and she was getting it.

“Tea, or…” he inquired, lifting an eyebrow.

“Or,” she said.

He pulled a bottle of chardonnay from a small refrigerator that stood in a corner and pulled down two glasses from a bookshelf. She sat on the small sofa while he poured.

“Home,” she said, raising her glass in salute.

“This is nothing like bloody home and I never want it to be,” he growled. “How the hell we’re expected to run a faded empire from broom closets, God only knows. But I’ll drink to it with you, anyway.”

“You can’t hate it so much. You spent years struggling to get into the place.”

“Ungrateful sod, aren’t I?” he said and burst into a fetching smile.

“And you’ve managed to make your mark very quickly.”

“Flattery, eh? And legs. You must want something very badly.” He looked at her with steady, understanding eyes. It was her turn to smile.

“Mr. Kendrick—”

“Oh, bloody hell, we’re way past the Mr. Kendrick stage, I hope.”

“Stephen, I’m looking at a piece on how Parliament works and how politics can be so full of surprises. And when it comes to surprises, yours was one of the biggest.”

Kendrick chuckled. “I’m still amazed at how my reputation was built on such a—well, what would you call it? Stroke of luck? Throw of the dice? Guesswork?”

“Are you trying to tell me you didn’t actually know the hospital scheme had been shelved, that you were guessing?” she asked, her tone incredulous.

“You don’t believe that?”

“Let me put it this way. I’m a cynic with a smile.”

“Well, so long as you’re smiling, Mattie...” He poured another glass for her. “Let me put it this way. I wasn’t absolutely certain. I took a risk.”

“So what did you know?”

“Off the record?”

“Way off, if you like.”

“I’ve never really told the full story before to anyone...” He glanced down to where Mattie was rubbing her ankles, as if to relieve sore shins. “But I like your interrogation technique. And I suppose there’s no harm in telling you a little of the background.” He pondered a second to decide how far he should go. “I found out that the Government—or rather their Party Headquarters—had planned a massive publicity campaign to promote the new hospital plan. They’d worked hard at it, spent a lot of money on the preparations—well, you would, wouldn’t you, with a plan like that? But at the last minute they canceled the whole bloody thing. Just pulled the plug on it. I thought about it for a long while, and the more I thought the only explanation that made any sense was that they weren’t pulling the plug just on the publicity campaign but on the policy itself. So I decided to challenge the Prime Minister—and he fell for it! I couldn’t have been more surprised myself.”

“I don’t remember any discussion at the time about a publicity campaign.”

“They wanted the element of surprise. I think all the planning of it was highly confidential.”

“You obviously have confidential sources.”

“And that’s exactly how they’re going to stay, even for you. Confidential! It’s the sort of thing I wouldn’t even tell my ex.”

“You’re...”

“Divorced. Very single.”

Mattie suspected he was offering a deal but, as attractive as he was, she wasn't willing to pay that sort of price. Her life was already complicated enough.

"I know how valuable sources are," she said, getting the conversation back on track, "but can you give me a little guidance? The leak could only have come from one of two sources, Party or Government, yes...?"

"Insight as well as ankles."

"There's been bad blood between Party Headquarters and Downing Street since the election. You said it was a party publicity drive, so it would be logical to suspect the information came out of Party Headquarters."

"You're very good, Mattie. But you didn't get that from me, OK? And I'm not saying any more about my source." His tone had lost its gaiety, he was now in business mode and cautious.

"No need to worry. Roger's secret is safe with me."

Kendrick was halfway through a mouthful of wine. He let it dribble back into his glass. The eyes, when they came up to meet hers, were like unhammered steel. "You think I'm shallow enough to turn on an old friend just because you flash your tits at me?"

An old friend? The pieces of this part of the jigsaw were beginning to fit together. "I know it was Roger. I don't need you to confirm it. And I'm not on an inquisition. He's got enough on his plate without this. This won't appear in the press."

"So why are you here?"

"Information. Understanding."

"And there was me beginning to like you. I think it's time for you to leave, Mattie."

* * *

The men from the *Mirror* were there at lunchtime and still there in the evening, reading, picking their teeth, watching. They had been waiting for Earle in their sordid little car almost continuously for forty-eight hours, witnessing every flicker of the curtain, photographing everyone who called including the postman and the milkman. And his wife, of course. He found only a crumb of comfort that she had left early to visit her sister. Sweet, blind woman that she was, she'd

assumed the journalists were lurking outside her front door because of the leadership campaign—which, in a way, they were.

Earle had no one to turn to, no one with whom to share his misery or seek wise counsel. He was a lonely figure, a sincere and even devout man who had made one mistake for which one day he knew he would pay.

They had grown tired with waiting. They knocked on the door. “Sorry to bother you, Mr. Earle. Simmonds and Peters again. Just a quick question our editor wanted us to ask. How long have you known him?”

Into his face was thrust another photograph of Simon, this time taken not at a public rally but in a photographer’s studio, and dressed from head to foot in black leather slashed by zip fasteners. The jacket was open to the waist, exposing a slender, tapering body, while from his right hand there trailed a long bullwhip.

“Go away. Go away. Please—go away!” he screamed, so loudly that neighbors came to the window to investigate.

“If it’s inconvenient, we’ll come back some other time, sir.” Silently they filed back to their car and resumed the watch.

Thirty-Nine

Those who wish to climb the tallest trees must accept the consequence that it is likely to expose their most vulnerable parts.

Tuesday, November 23

They were still there the following morning, waiting for him. Earle had no emotional resources left. He sat weeping gently in an armchair in the study, his fingernails, or what was left of them, buried deep into the arm. He had worked so hard, deserved so much, yet it had all come to this.

He knew he must finish it. There was no point in going on. He no longer believed in himself and knew he had forfeited the right to have others believe in him. Through misty eyes he reached into the drawer of his desk, fumbled as he took out his private phone book. He touched the numbers on the phone as if he were dipping his fingers in the cruelest acid. He fought hard to control his voice throughout the brief conversation. Then it was finished, and he could weep again.

* * *

The news that Earle had pulled out of the race left everyone aghast as it flashed through Westminster later on Tuesday morning. It had happened so unexpectedly that there was no time to alter the printed ballot papers except with an ignominious scratching through of his name with a pen. Sir Humphrey was not best pleased that his carefully laid preparations should have been thrown into chaos at the last minute and had rough words to use for anyone who was willing

to listen, but on the stroke of 10:00 a.m. Committee Room Number 14, which had been set aside for the ballot, opened its doors and the first of the 335 Government MPs who were going to vote began to file through. There would be two prominent absentees—the Prime Minister, who had announced he would not vote, and Harold Earle.

Mattie's intention had been to spend the day at the House of Commons chatting to MPs and gauging their sentiment. Most appeared to think that Earle's withdrawal would tend to help Samuel: "the conciliators tend to stick with the conscience merchants," one old buffer had explained, "so Earle's supporters will drift toward young Disraeli. They haven't got the imagination to do anything more positive." Disraeli. The Jew. The campaign was taking a more unpleasant personal edge.

She was in the press gallery cafeteria spilling coffee with other correspondents when the Tannoy system announced there was a call for her. She hoped it might be a job offer, that someone had changed their mind; she deserted her coffee and went to the nearest phone. The shock that hit her when she heard the voice was even greater than the news of Earle's withdrawal.

"Hello, Mattie. I understand you were looking for me last week. Sorry you missed me, I was out of the office. Touch of gastric flu. Do you still want to get together?"

Roger O'Neill's voice sounded so friendly and enthusiastic that she had trouble connecting it with the voice she had heard dribbling down the phone a few days earlier. It sounded like a completely different man.

"If you're still interested, why not come across to Smith Square later today?" he offered.

It left Mattie wondering what chaotic circus ride O'Neill was on. Yet her reaction was nothing compared to that of Urquhart a little earlier. He had telephoned to instruct O'Neill to make the appropriate arrangements for Simon to attend Earle's weekend meeting, and also to ensure that the *Mirror* was anonymously informed about the connections between the two men. Instead, like Mattie and Penny, he had discovered O'Neill sliding steadily into his cocaine-induced oblivion and losing touch with events outside his increasingly narrow, kaleidoscopic world. There had been a confrontation. Urquhart couldn't afford to

lose O'Neill's services, but neither could he afford to have loose ends unraveling.

"One week, Roger, one more week and you can take a break, forget all of this for a while. Come back to that knighthood you've always wanted. It will change everything for you. With a 'K' they'll never be able to look down their noses at you again. And I can arrange it, you know I can. But you let me down now, you lose control, and by God I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life. Damn you, get a grip on yourself. You've got nothing to fear. Just hold on for a few more days!"

O'Neill wasn't entirely sure what Urquhart was going on about. Hold on? Of course he could hold on. To be sure he'd been a little unwell but his befuddled brain was in denial and still refused to accept there was any major problem with his behavior. He could handle it. Everything. There was no room in his life for doubts, especially about himself. He could cope with it all, particularly with a little more help, just a little...Only a few more days, pull a few strings, a few more sidesteps, and wipe the condescending smiles off their faces. Arise, Sir Roger! It would be worth a little extra effort.

"Of course, Francis. Not a problem. I promise."

"Don't get this wrong, Roger. Don't you dare."

And O'Neill had laughed, even as his eyes flowed and his nose dribbled like an old man's on a windy day.

When at last he had wiped himself down sufficiently to return to his office, Penny had told him of Mattie's visit, that she was asking questions about the Paddington accommodation address.

"No worries, Pen. I'll deal with it," he exclaimed, burying the instantaneous flicker of alarm, falling back on the swaggering confidence of years of salesmanship. Why, hadn't they said that he could sell snow to Siberia, that old ladies would cross the street to be kissed by him? All it needed was passion, a little self-belief. Mattie was nothing but a witless woman, no heavy shit.

So when she arrived in his office after lunch, he was bright, alert, those strange eyes of his still amazingly animated but seemingly anxious to help.

"It was just a stomach upset," he explained. "Sorry I had to stand you up but whatever it was the doctor gave me really got to me, gave me a right kicking."

He smiled, so full of Irish charm. “Better now. So Pen tells me you were asking about Mr. Collingridge’s accommodation address.”

“That’s right. It was Charles Collingridge’s address?”

“Sure it was.”

“But he didn’t open it himself.”

O’Neill’s eyes were in a renewed frenzy, like objects trying to escape the pull of gravity, but the confident smile remained fixed. And Mattie was desperate to cover her source, Penny, so she invented on the spot.

“The shopkeeper has never met Collingridge, doesn’t recognize his photograph, swears he’s never been in the shop,” she continued.

“A friend, then,” O’Neill said, scrabbling for a cigarette.

“Who?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t bloody me!” O’Neill chortled, emerging from beneath a haze of tobacco smoke. “Look, Mattie, if you’re looking for something on the record, you know I’ll have to say that Mr. Collingridge’s personal affairs are his own, and there won’t be any point in your staying even to finish your tea.” He leaned closer to her, across his desk. “But if you want to talk, off the record, not for reporting...”

“I’m enjoying the tea,” she replied.

He lit the cigarette, drew on it deep, filling his lungs, swelling his confidence. “OK. Even off the record you’ll know there’s a limit to how much I can say, but you know how unwell Charlie has been recently. He’s not been—how can I put it?—‘fully responsible’ for his actions.” He curled his fingers to emphasize the quotation marks. “It would be a terrible pity if you were to go out of your way to rake through all this and punish him still further. His life is in ruins. Whatever he’s done wrong, hasn’t he suffered enough? For pity’s sake, Mattie, give the man a chance to rebuild his life.”

Mattie’s humor began to curdle inside as she watched the passing of guilt onto innocent shoulders dressed up as selfless charity, but nevertheless she smiled encouragingly. “Fair enough, Roger. Nothing to be gained from further harassment. So let me turn to a different point.”

And she saw his eyes grow steady for a second, the smile relax. He thought he’d won. Beaten this simple girl at her own game. Another sidestep, another

swerve, and he was free. God, Roger, you're good!

"Let's talk about leaks," she continued. "So many of them in recent months. The Prime Minister is supposed to blame Smith Square for much of his troubles."

"I doubt whether that is fair, but it is not a state secret that relations between him and the Party Chairman have been very strained."

"Strained enough for that opinion poll we published during party conference to have been deliberately leaked from inside Party Headquarters?"

The eyes began wobbling once again. "People always want someone to blame. Someone else. I guess that's partly what we're here for." He laughed in self-mockery. "It's so easy to point the finger but I think that assumption is very difficult to justify. Apart from the Party Chairman there are only—what, five people in this building who get sent those full opinion polls. I'm one of those five, and I can tell you we take their confidentiality damned seriously." He lit another cigarette. Time to think. "But they also get sent to every Cabinet minister, all twenty-two of them, either at the House of Commons where they might first go through the hands of a gossipy secretary, or to their departments, and they're often a nest of vipers, civil servants who have no love for this Government. If you're looking for leaks, they're the obvious places to start."

"OK, but the papers were leaked at the headquarters hotel in Bournemouth. Secretaries or unfriendly civil servants don't go to the Party conference or roam around the headquarters hotel."

"Well, who knows, Mattie? It's still much more likely to have come from a source like that. For the love of God, can you imagine Lord Williams down on his hands and knees outside hotel room doors?"

He laughed loudly to show how ridiculous it was, and Mattie joined him. But O'Neill had just admitted he knew the manner in which the opinion poll had been leaked. He could only have known that for one reason. His overconfidence was tightening like a noose around his neck.

"Let me turn to another leak, then, the one on the hospital scheme. I'm told that you were planning a major publicity drive that had to be scrapped at the last minute because of the change of plan."

"Really? Who on earth told you that?" O'Neill asked, his mind in hyper-drive

and coming to settle on his old friend Kendrick. Stupid bastard, always had a weakness for a pretty woman. “Never mind, I won’t push you, I know you won’t reveal your sources. But they sound exaggerated to me. The Publicity Department here is always ready to support Government policy, that’s what we do. If the scheme had gone ahead then certainly we’d have wanted to help promote it, for sure, but we had no specific campaign in mind.”

“I was told you had to scrap a big publicity push which had been carefully planned and was ready to go.”

The limp ash from his cigarette gave up its struggle to defy the laws of gravity and cascaded down his tie; O’Neill ignored it, his brows knitted in concentration. “If that’s what you’ve heard, Mattie, you’ve been misinformed. Sounds to me like someone with his own ax to grind. Are you sure he’s in a position to know all the facts? Maybe he’s got his own angle to sell?”

With a broad grin, O’Neill tried to smother Kendrick as a reliable source. The smile grew more rigid when he realized he’d talked about the source as “he,” but there was no way this slip of a girl could have picked up on such a gentle stumble. Yet she was asking too many questions; O’Neill was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He felt a gut-wrenching need for more substantial support than a cigarette could give him, no matter what Urquhart had said.

“Mattie, I’ve got a busy day, what with the result of the ballot later this evening and everything. Could we finish it here?”

“Thanks for your time, Roger. I’ve found it immensely helpful.”

“I haven’t told you anything.”

“But you do it so persuasively.”

“Any time I can help,” he said as he guided her toward the door. As they did so, they passed by the computer terminal stationed in the corner of his crowded office. She bent down to inspect it and her blouse fell forward a couple of inches. He drew closer, delighted at the excuse.

“Your Party is well ahead of the others in the technology game. I suppose all the terminals in this building are linked through the central computer?”

He straightened, alarm bells ringing from somewhere deep inside and loud enough to distract him for the curve of her breasts. “I...guess so,” he said. He placed a hand in the small of her back and pushed her gently toward the door.

“I’m afraid I’m a bit of a moron with computers. Maybe sometime you could give me a few lessons, Roger.”

“You’d have to be desperate to ask me,” he joked.

“You seem like a man who could handle most things.”

“We all get put through a training course but I’m scarcely capable of switching the wretched thing on,” he said. “Barely use it myself. Just for internal mail, that sort of thing.” His eyes were flickering violently, he was no longer in control. “Sorry, got to rush,” he muttered, and fled from his own office.

* * *

At 5:00 p.m. the doors to Commons Committee Room 14 were ceremoniously shut to bar any further attempts to lodge votes. The gesture was an entirely empty one because the last of the 335 votes had been cast ten minutes earlier. Behind the locked doors and beneath huge oil paintings and flock wallpaper of the deepest hue, Sir Humphrey and his small team of scrutineers gathered, content that the day had gone smoothly in spite of the appalling start given to their preparations by Earle. A bottle of whiskey did the rounds while they fortified themselves for the count. In different rooms within the Palace, the eight candidates waited in various states of excitement and sobriety for the summons that would change their lives.

Big Ben had struck the quarter after six before the call went out, by half past six the doors to the committee room were unlocked and a swarm of MPs swept in to witness a moment of history. There were too many of them to be accommodated on the long school-like desks and even in standing room, so the doors were left open and the throng spilled into the corridor outside. Substantial sums were being wagered as Members made last-minute calculations as to the likely outcome; in the corridor among the overspill, the men from the media tried to soak up every whisper.

Sir Humphrey was enjoying his moment. He was in the twilight of his career, long since past his parliamentary heyday, and even the small misunderstanding over his holiday in the West Indies had helped bring him greater recognition around the Westminster circuit than he’d enjoyed for many years. “’Tis an ill wind that blows up no skirt,” he had been heard quipping in the Smoking Room.

Now he sat on the raised dais of the Committee Room flanked by his lieutenants, smoothing his mustache and calling the meeting to order.

“Since there has been such an unprecedentedly large number of names on the ballot paper, I propose to read the results out in alphabetical order,” he began.

This was unwelcome news for David Adams, the foppish former Leader of the House who had been banished to exile on the backbenches by Collingridge’s first reshuffle after claiming too publicly that he spent more time with the Queen than did the Prime Minister. He had hoped for a respectable showing in order to establish his claim for a return to Cabinet. His silk pocket handkerchief seemed to droop in dismay as Newlands announced he had received only twelve votes. He’d been promised much more as he had poured decent claret down so many of his colleagues’ throats. “Bitches!” he was heard to mumble.

Sir Humphrey continued with his roll call. None of the next four names, including McKenzie’s, could muster more than twenty of their colleagues. Paul Goddard, the maverick Catholic who had stood on the single issue of banning all forms of legalized abortion, received but three. He shook his head defiantly; his rewards were not to be of the earthly kind.

Sir Humphrey had only three more names to announce—Samuel, Urquhart, and Woolton—and a total of 281 votes to distribute. The level of tension in the packed room soared. A minimum of 169 votes was required for success on the first ballot. A couple of huge side bets were hurriedly concluded in one corner as two Honorable Members wagered whether there would, after all, be a result on the first round.

“Michael Samuel,” intoned the chairman, gazing round the room like a Hamlet at the grave. “Ninety-nine votes.”

The room was in dead silence until a tug on its way up the Thames blew its klaxon three times. A ripple of amusement covered the tension and Samuel muttered that it was a pity tug masters didn’t have a vote. He was clearly disappointed to be such a long way from the winning line.

“Francis Urquhart—ninety-one votes.”

He had been given a seat on one of the long desks at the front; he offered a silent nod of gratitude.

“Patrick Woolton—ninety-one votes.”

And it was done. The room erupted. No one was paying attention to Newlands any longer. He tried to struggle through. "Since no candidate has been elected, there will be a second round a week today. I would remind everyone that those wishing to offer themselves for the second ballot must resubmit their nominations to me by Thursday. I declare this meeting closed!"

But no one was paying the slightest attention to him any longer.

Forty

Political friendships are only impressions, easily rubbed away.

Urquhart's office was overflowing with colleagues and alcohol. Celebration was in full swing. It was one of the finest offices available to a Member with a gracious window offering a fine view across the river to the Archbishop of Canterbury's ancient Gothic palace at Lambeth. "Different sides," as he would occasionally reflect. He stood dispensing drinks as still more newcomers pressed his hand and offered their congratulations. It was the first time during the campaign he had seen some of these faces but that did not matter. New faces were new votes.

"Quite splendid, Francis. Absolutely excellent result. Do you think you can go on to win?" inquired one of his senior parliamentary colleagues.

"I believe so," Urquhart responded with quiet confidence. "I have as good a chance as anyone."

"I think you're right, you know," his colleague said, gushing as he quenched some inner fire with a huge gulp of something white. "Young Samuel may be ahead but his campaign is going backwards. It's between the experienced hands now, you and Patrick. And, Francis, I want you to know you have my wholehearted support."

Which, of course, you will want me to remember when I have my hands on all that Prime Ministerial patronage, Urquhart thought to himself, chuckling as he offered his gratitude and Mortima, who was gliding seraphically around the room despite the crush, refreshed the depleted glass and offered an endearing smile.

One of his younger supporters had produced a box of lapel badges and was pushing his way through the room sticking them on jackets. The badges simply proclaimed “FU.” The young politician, who was Napoleonic in stature and flushed in face, found himself standing in front of Mortima. Excitedly he thrust one of the badges in the general direction of her chest. His eyes were endearing but, as his hand approached her bosom, increasingly uncertain. Then they met hers and he blanched as though whipped. “Oh, God. Sorry. I think this belongs elsewhere,” he blurted and disappeared back into the crowd.

“Where do you get these people from?” she whispered in mock awe into her husband’s ears.

“When he grows up he might be a great man.”

“If he grows up, send him to me. I’ll let you know.”

New arrivals were still pouring into the room.

“Where have they all come from?” Mortima asked, worried they might run out of refreshment.

“Oh, some of them have been very busy,” he replied. “They’ll already have made brief but prominent appearances at both Samuel’s and Woolton’s receptions, on the basis that we can never be too sure. And you can’t, can you, my dear? Be too sure?”

“I like to know where I stand with those around me, Francis.”

“Of course, my dear. That’s why I have a friendly Whip in both Michael’s and Patrick’s parties, counting heads, collecting faces. Making sure.”

They stared into each other’s face, oblivious for the moment of the crush around them.

“Whatever it takes, Francis.”

“Will you want to know?”

She shook her head. “No, any more than you want to know, my love.” She turned and pressed on with her duties.

In the background the telephone had been ringing persistently with messages of congratulation and inquiry. Urquhart’s secretary had been fielding the calls in between opening bottles and providing small talk, yet now she was at Urquhart’s side, a frown creasing her face. “It’s for you,” she whispered urgently. “Roger O’Neill.”

“Tell him I’m busy and that I will call him later,” he instructed.

“But he called earlier. He sounds very anxious. Asked me to tell you it was ‘very bloody hot,’ to quote his exact words.”

With an impatient curse he withdrew from his guests to the window, where his desk gave him a little shelter from the press of celebration. “Roger?” His tone was gentle as he cast a bright face around the room at his guests, not wanting them to know the irritation he felt inside. “Is this really necessary? I’ve got a room full of people.”

“She’s on to us, Francis. That bloody bitch—she knows, I’m sure. She knows it’s me and she’ll be on to you next, the cow. I haven’t told her a thing but she’s got hold of it and God knows how but...”

“Roger, listen carefully. Pull yourself together.” Urquhart’s tone remained controlled but he turned to the window, away from lip readers.

But O’Neill was gabbling, his conversation running away like a driverless express.

Urquhart interrupted, “Roger, tell me slowly and clearly what all this is about.”

Yet the gabbling began again and Urquhart was forced to listen, trying to make sense of the chaotic mixture of words, splutters and sneezes. “She came over to see me, the cow from the press lobby. I don’t know how, Francis, it’s not me and I told her nothing. I fobbed her off—think she went away happy. But somehow she’s got onto it. Everything, Francis. The Paddington address, the computer. Even that bloody leaked opinion poll. And that bastard Kendrick must’ve shot his mouth off. Jesus, Francis. I mean, what if she doesn’t believe me?”

“Hold your tongue for a second,” Urquhart seethed as he smiled. “Who, Roger? Who are we talking about?”

“Storin. Mattie Storin. And she said...”

“Did she have any firm evidence? Or is she just guessing?”

O’Neill paused for the briefest of moments. “Nothing firm, I think. Just guesswork. Except...”

“Except what?”

“She’s been told I had something to do with opening that Paddington

address.”

“How on earth—?”

“I don’t know, Francis, I don’t bloody know. But it’s all right, no need to worry, she thinks I did it for Collingridge.”

“Roger I could happily—”

“Look, it’s me who’s done all the dirty jobs for you, taken all the risks. You’ve got nothing to worry about while I’m in it up to my neck. Oh, Francis, I need help, I’m scared! I’ve done too many things for you that I shouldn’t have touched, but I didn’t ask questions and just did what you said. You’ve got to get me out of this, I can’t take much more—and I won’t take much more. You’ve got to protect me, Francis. Do you hear? Oh, God, please, you’ve got to help me!”

“Roger, calm yourself,” he said quietly into the receiver, cupping it with both hands. “She has absolutely no proof and you have nothing to fear. We are in this together, you understand? And we shall get through it together, all the way to Downing Street.”

Nothing but uncontrollable sobbing came from the other end of the phone.

“I want you to do two things, Roger. I want you to keep remembering that knighthood. It’s just a few days away now.”

Urquhart thought he could detect a stumbling expression of gratitude.

“And in the meantime, Roger, I want you to keep well away from Miss Storin. Do you understand?”

“But—”

“Keep away!”

“Whatever you say, Francis.”

“I will deal with her,” Urquhart whispered and cut the connection.

He stood, his shoulders braced, looking out of the window, letting his emotions wash over him. From behind him came the hubbub of the powerful men who would propel him into Downing Street. To the front he gazed across the centuries-old view of the river that had inspired so many great men. And he had just put the phone down on the only man who could ruin it all for him.

Forty-One

What does a politician end up saying to St. Peter when at last they meet? Complain about the number of spoiled ballot papers? Plead that if only the polling stations had stayed open a little longer everything would be different?

I have my own plan. I intend to look him in the eye and tell the old bastard he's fired.

He had called her later that evening. "Mattie, would you care to come round?"

"Francis, I'd love to, really love to, but won't there be a scrum outside your house?"

"Make it late. They will all have gone."

"And...Mrs. Urquhart? I wouldn't want to disturb her."

"Already returned to the country for several days."

It was nearly midnight when she slipped quietly through the front door in Cambridge Street, making sure no one was watching. She felt somehow devious, yet expectant.

He took off her coat, very slowly, was looking closely at her. She felt awkward and suddenly kissed him on the cheek.

"Sorry," she blushed. "It's just...congratulations. Bit unprofessional, I suppose."

"You might say that, Mattie. But I'm not going to complain." And he started laughing.

Soon they were seated in his study with its close, almost conspiratorial cracked-leather atmosphere, whiskey in hands.

“Mattie, you’ve been rather naughty, I hear.”

“What have you heard?” she asked in alarm.

“Among other things, that you’ve upset Greville Preston.”

“Oh, that. I’m afraid I have.”

“Afraid?”

“Grev won’t print anything of mine. I’ve been banished. On gardening duty.”

“That could be rather attractive.”

“Not when the whole world is changing and I’m not part of it. Not when...”

She hesitated.

“When what, Mattie? I can tell something’s bothering you.”

“When something truly wicked is going on.”

“That’s politics for you.”

“No, this isn’t just politics. It’s far worse.”

“Tell me everything—if you’d like to. Treat me as a father confessor.”

“No, I could never do that, Francis.”

“I thought you said I reminded you of your father.”

“Only in your strength.”

Her cheeks brightened a little, she seemed bashful; he smiled. And suddenly for Mattie the room was filled with a swirl of colors—the crystal blue of his eyes, the swirling amber of the whiskey, the deep dark hues of the old leather, the rug of Persian purples. She could hear her heart beating in the womb-like silence. She held out her glass as he refilled it, knowing that she had started something by coming here that she would have to finish.

“I think someone deliberately targeted Collingridge.”

“I’m fascinated.”

“The leaked polls, leaked information. I think the Paddington address was a set-up, which means...”

“What does it mean?”

“The share dealing was a set-up, too.”

Urquhart looked startled, as if someone had pinched his cheek. “But why?”

“To get rid of the Prime Minister, of course!” she exclaimed, frustrated that he was being so slow to see what she had now clearly understood.

“But...but...who, Mattie? Who?”

“Roger O’Neill’s part of it.”

“Roger O’Neill?” Urquhart burst into mocking laughter. “But what on earth could he possibly have to gain from all this?”

“I don’t know!” She pounded the leather sofa with her fist, her frustration boiling over.

Urquhart rose from his own chair and came to sit by her. He took her hand, slowly unfurled each of her fingers, rubbed the palm with his thumb. “You’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset. I’m a journalist sitting on the biggest bloody story of the century and no one will print it.”

“And I think you’re too upset to think clearly.”

“What do you mean?” she said, affronted.

“Roger O’Neill,” he repeated, his tone full of scorn. “The man can’t control his own habits let alone juggle the parts of a complicated plot.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“So...?” he prodded, encouraging her.

“He must be acting with someone else. Someone more significant, more powerful. Someone who could benefit from the change of leadership.”

He nodded in agreement. “There has to be another figure in there somewhere, pulling O’Neill’s strings.” He was pushing her down a dangerous trail but he knew she would get there eventually under her own steam. Better to hold her hand.

“So we’re looking for a mystery man with both means and the motive. In a position to control O’Neill. With access to sensitive political information.”

He looked at her with growing admiration. She was not only beautiful but, once she got going, made her way along the path with surprising skill. She gasped as she reached the end of the trail and suddenly saw the view.

“Someone who’d been engaged in a bitter battle with the Prime Minister.”

“There are plenty of those.”

“No! No! Don’t you see? There’s only one man who fits that whole bill.” She was panting with the excitement of discovery. “Only one. Teddy Williams.”

He sat back on the sofa, his jaw sagging. “Dear God. This is appalling.”

It was her turn to take his hand, squeezing it. “Now can you understand why

I'm so frustrated. This extraordinary story, but Grev won't touch it."

"Why?"

"Because I can't prove it. There's no hard evidence. So I'm stuffed. I just don't know what to do, Francis."

"That's one of the reasons I asked you round here tonight, Mattie. You're going through a difficult time. I think I might be able to help."

"Really?"

"You need something else to offer Preston, something he'll be unable to resist."

"What's that?"

"The inside story of the Urquhart campaign. Who knows, I might even win. And if I do, afterwards those who have favored access would be in a very powerful position in Fleet Street. And I can assure you, Mattie, that if I win, you will have particularly favorable access."

"You're serious, Francis? You would do that for me?"

"Most certainly."

"But why?"

"Because!" His eyes lit up in amusement, then became serious once again, looking deep inside her. "Because you are quite brilliant at your job, Mattie. Because you are exquisitely beautiful—am I allowed to venture that opinion?"

She smiled coquettishly. "You are very much allowed to say that. I couldn't possibly comment."

"And because, Mattie, I like you. Very much."

"Thank you, Francis." She leaned forward, kissed him, not on the cheek this time but on the lips. She drew back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

He hadn't moved, steady, like a rock. She kissed him again.

* * *

It was much later that evening, well after one, after Mattie had returned to her home, that Urquhart left his house and went back to his room in the Commons. His secretary had already emptied the ashtrays, cleared the glasses, straightened the cushions. It had still been boiling with noise when he had left but now it was a silent as the dead. He closed the door behind him, locked it carefully. He

crossed to the four-drawer filing cabinet with its stout security bar and combination lock. He twirled the dial four times, back and forth, until there was a gentle click and the security bar fell away into his hands. He removed it and bent down to open the bottom drawer.

The drawer creaked as it came open. It was stuffed full of files, each with the name of a different MP, each containing embarrassing and even incriminating material he had carefully withdrawn from the safe in the Whips' Office. It had taken him nearly three years to amass these secrets, these acts of utter stupidity.

He knelt on the floor while he sorted through the files. He found what he was looking for, a padded envelope, already addressed and sealed. He put it to one side, then he closed the drawer and secured the filing cabinet, testing as he always did to make sure the lock and security bar had caught properly.

He didn't drive straight home. Instead he drove to one of the twenty-four-hour motorcycle messenger services that flourish among the seedier basements of Soho. He dropped the envelope off and paid in cash for it to be delivered to its destination. It would have been easier, of course, for him to have posted it in the House of Commons where they have one of the most efficient post offices in the country. But he didn't want a House of Commons postmark anywhere near this envelope.

Forty-Two

Cruelty of any kind is unforgivable. That's why there is no point at all in being cruel in half-measure.

Wednesday, November 24

The letters and newspapers arrived almost simultaneously with a dull thud on Woolton's Chelsea doormat. Hearing the early-morning clatter, he came downstairs in his dressing gown and gathered them up, spreading the newspapers across the kitchen table while he left the post on a small antique bench in the hallway. He received more than three hundred letters a week from his constituents and other correspondents and had long since given up trying to read them all. So he left them for his wife, who was also his constituency secretary and for whom he got a generous secretarial allowance from the parliamentary authorities to supplement his Cabinet minister's stipend.

Inevitably, the newspapers were dominated by the leadership election. The headlines seemed to have been written by journalists moonlighting from the *Sporting Life* and phrases such as "Neck and Neck," "Three Horse Race," and "Photo Finish" were splashed across the front pages. Inside, the less feverish commentaries explained that it was difficult to predict which of the three leading contenders was now best placed. He bent over the analysis in the *Guardian*, not normally his first port of call. It often hopped around uselessly on its left leg but, since it wouldn't end up supporting any of the candidates at the next election, it was arguably more measured and objective about the outcome.

The Party is now presented with a clear choice. Michael Samuel is by far

the most popular and polished of the three, with a clear record of being able to pursue a political career without throwing out his social conscience. The fact that he has been attacked by some elements of the Party as being “too liberal by half” is a badge he should wear with pride.

Patrick Woolton is an altogether different politician. Immensely proud of his Northern origins, he poses as a man who could unite the two halves of the country. Whether his robust style of politics could unite the two halves of his own Party is altogether more debatable. Despite his time in the Foreign Office, he professes to have little patience with diplomacy and plays his politics as if he were still hooking for his old rugby league club. The Leader of the Opposition once described him as a man wandering the streets of Westminster in search of a fight, and not particularly bothered with whom.

Woolton let out a muffled roar of appreciation, demolished half a slice of toast and rustled the paper once more.

Francis Urquhart is more difficult to assess. The least experienced and well known of the three, nevertheless his performance in the first round ballot was remarkable. Three reasons seem to explain his success. First, as Chief Whip he knows the Parliamentary Party extremely well, and they him. Since it is his colleagues in the Parliamentary Party and not the electorate at large who will decide this election, his low public profile is less of a disadvantage than many perhaps assumed.

Second, he has conducted his campaign in a dignified style which sets him apart from the verbal fisticuffs and misfortunes of the other contenders. What is known of his politics suggests he holds firm to the traditionalist line, somewhat patrician and authoritarian perhaps, but sufficiently ill-defined for him not to have antagonized either wing of the Party.

Finally, perhaps his greatest asset is that he is neither of the other two. Many MPs have certainly supported him in the first round rather than commit themselves to one of the more contentious candidates. He is the obvious choice for those who wish to sit on the fence. But it is that which could ultimately derail his campaign. As the pressure for a clear decision grows, Urquhart is the candidate who could suffer most.

So the choice is clear. Those who wish to air their social consciences will support Samuel. Those who thirst for blood-and-thunder politics will support Woolton. Those who cannot make up their minds have an obvious choice in Urquhart. Whichever way they decide, they will inevitably deserve what they get.

Woolton chuckled as he finished off the last of the toast and his wife arrived to join him, her arms laden with the morning's post.

"What do they say?" she said, nodding at the newspapers.

"That I'm Maggie Thatcher without the tits," he said. "Home and bloody dry."

She replenished his mug of tea and sighed as she sat beside the pile of mail and began sifting through it. She had gotten the process down to a fine art. Her word processor was carefully programmed with a series of standard responses that, with only the barest brush of a keyboard, would make a reply seem personalized. Then they would be signed with the help of a little autograph machine he had brought back from the States. Even though many of the letters were from the usual bunch of discontents, lobbyists, professional whingers, and nutters who wrote in green ink, they would all get an answer. She wouldn't risk losing her husband even a single vote by failing to offer some form of reply even to the most abusive.

She left the padded brown envelope until last. It had been hand-delivered and was firmly stapled down; she had to struggle to open it, risking her manicure in the process. As she pulled out the last tenacious staple a cassette tape fell into her lap. There was nothing else in the envelope, no letter, no compliments slip, no label on the tape to indicate where it had come from or what it contained.

"Fools. How on earth do they expect us to reply to that?"

"It's probably a recording of last weekend's speech or a tape of a recent interview," he suggested distractedly, not bothering to look up from his newspaper. "Give us some more tea, lass, and let's give it a whirl." He waved broadly in the general direction of the stereo unit.

His wife, dutiful as ever, did as he bade. He was slurping his tea, his attention fixed to the editorial in the *Sun*, when with a burst of red light the playback

meter on the tape deck began to show it was reading something. There was a series of low hisses and crackles, it was clearly not a professional recording.

“Turn the bloody thing up, then, love,” he instructed, “let the fox hear the chicken.”

The sound of a girl’s laughter filled the room. It was followed, moments later, by her low, deep gasp. The noise hypnotized the Wooltons, rooting them to the spot. No tea was supped and no paper turned for several minutes as through the speakers came many noises: heavy breaths, low curses, a complaining mattress, a grunt of happiness, the rhythmic banging of a headboard against a wall. The tape left little to the imagination. The woman’s sighs became shorter and more shrill, only pausing to gasp for breath before they climbed ever higher.

Then, with mutual cries of ascension and fulfillment, it was done. A woman’s giggles mixed with the deep bass panting of her companion.

“Oh, my, that was bloody marvelous,” the man gasped.

“Not bad for an oldie.”

“That’s what you get with age. Stamina!”

“Can we do it again, then?”

“Not if you’re going to wake up the whole of bloody Bournemouth,” an unmistakable Lancashire accent said.

Neither Woolton nor his wife had moved since the tape had begun but now she stepped slowly across the room and switched it off. A soft, gentle tear fell down one cheek as she turned to look at her husband. He couldn’t return her gaze.

“What can I say? I’m sorry, love,” he whispered. “I’ll not lie and tell you it’s bogus. But I am sorry, truly. I never meant to hurt you.”

She made no reply. The look of sorrow on her face cut him far more deeply than any angry word.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked gently.

She turned on him, her face flooded with pain. She had to dig her nails deep into her palm to retain control. “Pat, I have turned many a blind eye over the last twenty-three years and I’m not so stupid as to think this is the only time. You could at least have had the decency to keep it away from me and to make sure my face wasn’t rubbed in it. You owed me that.”

He hung his head. She let her anger sink into him before she continued.

“But one thing my pride will not tolerate is having a tart like that trying to break up my marriage and make a fool of me. I’ll not stand for it. Find out whatever the blackmailing little bitch wants, buy her off or go to the police if necessary. But get rid of her. And get rid of this!” She flung the tape at him; it bounced off his chest. “It doesn’t belong in my house. And neither will you if I have to listen to that filth again!”

He looked at her with tears in his own eyes. “I’ll sort it out. I promise. You’ll hear no more about it.”

Forty-Three

Love reaches a man's heart. Fear, on the other hand, gets to his more persuadable parts.

Thursday, November 25

Penny cast an unwelcoming frown in the direction of the solid steel sky and, muffled in wool, she stepped carefully onto the pavement from the Earl's Court mansion block in which she lived. The weathermen had been talking for days about the possibility of a sudden cold snap and now it had arrived, intent on getting on with its job. As she picked her way over frozen puddles she regretted her decision to wear heels instead of boots. She was moving slowly along the edge of the pavement, blowing hot breath on her fingers, as a car door swung open, blocking her path.

She bent low to tell the driver to be more bloody careful when she saw Woolton at the wheel. She beamed at him but he didn't return her warmth. He was looking straight ahead, not at her as she obeyed his clipped instruction and slipped into the passenger seat.

"What is it you want?" he demanded in a voice as hard as the morning air.

"What are you offering?" She smiled, but an edge of uncertainty was already creeping in as she saw his eyes. They were soulless.

The lips were thin, curled, exposing his teeth as he spoke.

"Did you have to go and send that tape to me at home? That was a damned cruel thing to do. My wife heard it. It was also extremely stupid because she knows about it now so you can't blackmail me. No newspaper or radio station will touch it, the potential libel damages will have them all running for cover, so

there's not much use you can make of it."

It wasn't the truth. The tape could still do immense damage to him in the wrong hands but he hoped she would be too stupid to see all that. His bluff seemed to have worked as he watched her face fill with alarm.

"Pat, what on earth are you talking about?"

"The bloody tape you sent me, you silly trollop. Don't you go coy on me!"

"I...I sent you no tape. I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

The unexpected assault on her feelings had come as a considerable shock and she began to sob and gasp for breath. He grabbed her arm ferociously and tears of real pain began to flow.

"The tape! The tape! You sent me the tape!"

"What tape, Pat? Why are you hurting me...?"

The trickle of tears had become a torrent. The street outside began to disappear behind misted windows and she was locked in a world of madness.

"Look at me and tell me you didn't send me a tape of us in Bournemouth."

"No. No. What tape?" Suddenly she gasped and the tears died in horror. "There's a tape of us in Bournemouth? Pat, that's vile. But who?"

He released her arm and his head sank slowly onto the steering wheel. "Oh, my God, this is worse than I thought," he muttered.

"Pat, I don't understand."

His face was gray, suddenly aged, his skin stretched like old parchment across his cheeks. "Yesterday a cassette tape arrived at my home. It was a recording of us in bed at the Party conference."

"And you thought that *I* had sent it? Why, you miserable shit!"

"I hoped it was you, Pen."

"Why? Why me?" she shouted in disgust.

He gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white, looking ahead, but not at the road. "I hoped it was you, Pen, because if it's not you then I haven't the faintest idea who's doing this. And it can't be any type of coincidence that it's arrived now, so many weeks after it was made. They're not trying to blackmail me for money. They want me out of the leadership race." His voice faded to a whisper. "As far as next Tuesday goes, I'm toast."

* * *

Woolton spent the rest of the morning trying to think constructively. He had no shred of doubt it was the leadership race that had caused the sudden appearance of the tape. He threw a dozen ideas against the wall as to who was behind it, even the Russians, but nothing stuck. He had nowhere else to go. He called his wife—he owed her that, and more—then he called a press conference.

Faced with such a problem, some men might have decided to fade gently from the scene and pray that their quiet retirement would not be disturbed, but Woolton wasn't some men. He was the type who would rather go down fighting, trying to salvage whatever he could from the wreckage of his dreams. He had nothing to lose.

He was in a determined mood by the time the press conference gathered shortly after lunch. With no time to make more formal arrangements he had summoned the media to meet him on the Albert Embankment, on the south side of the river directly opposite the Houses of Parliament. He needed a dramatic backdrop and the gingerbread palace with the tower of Big Ben would provide it. As soon as the cameramen were ready, he began.

“Good afternoon. I’ve got a short statement to make and I’m sorry I’ll not have time afterwards for questions. But I don’t think you’re going to be disappointed.”

He waited as another camera crew arrived and heaved their equipment into position.

“Following the ballot on Tuesday, it seems as if only three candidates have any realistic chance of success. In fact, I understand that all the others have already announced they’ll not be standing in the second round. So, as you gentlemen have put it, this is a three-horse race.”

He paused. Bugger it, but this was hard. He hoped they were all freezing, too.

“Of course, I’m delighted to be one of those three, honored, but three can be an unlucky number. There aren’t really three alternatives in this election, only two. Either the Party can stick to the practical approach to politics that’s proved so successful and kept us in power for over a decade. Or it can develop a new raft of policies, sometimes called conscience politics, which will get

Government much more deeply involved—some would say trapped—in trying to sort out every problem in the world. Big Brother it's called, and as you all know that's never been my brand of tea."

The reporters stirred. Everyone knew there were divisions within the Party but it was rare for them to be given such a public airing.

"However well intentioned, I don't believe that a new emphasis on conscience politics would be appropriate—fact is, I think it would be a disaster for the Party and the country. I reckon that's also the view of the clear majority within the Party. Yet that is just the way we could end up drifting if that majority gets divided between two candidates. The two candidates who support pragmatic policies are Francis Urquhart and myself. Now I am a practical man. I don't want my personal ambitions to stand in the way of achieving those policies in which I've always believed. But that's just what might happen."

Despite the cold air his words were catching fire, sending spirals into the air.

"That place"—he cocked a thumb at the Parliament building behind him—"means too much to me. I want to make sure the right man is running it with the right policies in place. So, ladies and gentlemen"—he gave one last look around at the mass of cameras and bodies that pressed around him, toying with them for a second more—"I'm not going to take any risks. Too much is at stake. So I am withdrawing from the race. I shall be casting my own vote for Francis Urquhart, who I sincerely hope will be our next Prime Minister. I have nothing more to say."

His last words were almost lost in the clatter of a hundred camera shutters. He didn't wait but began striding up the riverside steps toward his waiting car. A few gave chase, running after him, but were able to get no more than the sight of him being driven off across Westminster Bridge. The rest stood in a state of bewilderment. He had left them no time for questions, no opportunity to develop theories or detect hidden meanings behind his words. They had only what he had given them so they would have to report it straight—which is precisely what Woolton intended.

He drove home, where his wife stood waiting on the doorstep, no less confused. He was smiling ruefully as they went inside; she allowed him a kiss on her cheek, he made the tea.

“You decided to spend more time with your family, Pat?” she asked, skeptical, as they sat on opposite sides of the kitchen table.

“Would do no harm, would it?”

“But. There’s always a ‘but’ somewhere with you. I understand why you had to back out and I suppose that’s going to have to be punishment enough.”

“You’ll stick with me, love? That’s more important than anything, you know that.”

She chose her words carefully, not wanting to let him slip so freely off the hook. “I shall go on *supporting* you, as I always have. But...”

“That bloody word again.”

“But why on earth did you decide to support Francis Urquhart? I never knew you two were that close.”

“That superior bugger? We’re not close. I don’t even like him!”

“Then why?”

“Because I’m fifty-five and Michael Samuel is forty-eight, which means that he could be in Downing Street for twenty years until I’m dead and buried. Francis Urquhart, on the other hand, is almost sixty-two. He’s not likely to be in office more than five years. So with Urquhart, there’s a chance of another leadership race before I’m reduced to dog meat. In the meantime, if I can find out who’s behind that tape, or they suffer some really brutal and horribly painful accident, as I sincerely hope they will, then I’m in with a second chance.”

His pipe was hurling thick blue smoke at the ceiling as he worked on his logic.

“In any event, I’ve nothing to gain from remaining neutral. Samuel would never tolerate me in his Cabinet. So instead I’ve handed the election to Urquhart on a plate and he’ll have to show some public gratitude for that.”

He looked at his wife, forced a smile for the first time since they had heard the tape.

“Hell, it could be worse. How do you fancy being the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s wife for the next couple of years?”

Forty-Four

To lie about one's strength is the mark of leadership; to lie about one's faults, the mark of politics.

Friday, November 26

The following morning's weather was still well below freezing, but a new front had passed over the capital bringing crystal skies to replace the leaden cloud of the previous day. It felt like a fresh start. From the window of his office Urquhart gazed out at what seemed for him to be a future as bright as the sky. After Woolton's endorsement he felt invulnerable. He was almost home.

Then the door burst open with the sound of an exploding shell and from the rubble emerged the tattered figure of Roger O'Neill. Even before Urquhart could demand to know what on earth he was doing, the babbling commenced. The words were fired like bullets, being hurled at Urquhart as if to overwhelm him by force.

"They know, Francis. They've discovered the file is missing. The locks were bent and one of the secretaries noticed and the Chairman's called us all in. I'm sure he suspects me. What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

Urquhart was shaking him to stop the incomprehensible gabble. "Roger, for God's sake shut up!"

He pushed him bodily into a chair and slapped his face. Only then did O'Neill pause for breath.

"Now slowly, Roger. Take it slowly. What are you trying to say?"

"The files, Francis. The confidential party files on Samuel you asked me to send to the Sunday newspapers." He was panting from both physical and

nervous exhaustion. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, the rims as raw as open wounds, the face the color of ashes. “You see, I was able to use my pass key to get into the basement without any trouble, that’s where all the storage rooms are, but the files are in locked cabinets. I had to force the lock, Francis. I’m sorry but I had no choice. Not very much but it bent a little. There’s so much dust and cobwebs around that it looked as if no one had been in there since the Boer War, but yesterday some bitch of a secretary decided to go in there and noticed the bent lock. Now they’ve gone through the whole lot and discovered that Samuel’s file is missing.”

“You sent them the original file?” Urquhart asked, aghast. “You didn’t just copy the interesting bits as I told you?”

“Francis, the file was as thick as my arm, it would have taken hours to copy. I didn’t know which bits they’d be most interested in, so—I sent them the lot. It could have been years before anyone noticed the file was missing, and then they’d have thought it was simply misplaced.”

“You absolute bloody fool, you...”

“Francis, don’t shout at me!” O’Neill screamed. “It’s me who’s taken all the risks, not you. The Chairman’s personally interrogating everyone with a pass key and there are only nine of us. He’s asked to see me this afternoon. I’m sure he suspects. And I’m not going to take the blame all on my own. Why should I? I only did what you told me...” He was weeping. “Francis, I can’t go on lying. I simply can’t stand it anymore. I’ll go to pieces!”

Urquhart froze as he realized the truth behind O’Neill’s desperate words. This quivering man in front of him had neither resistance nor judgment left; he was beginning to crumble like an old wall without foundations. Not even for a week, not even for this week of all weeks, could O’Neill control himself. He was on the edge of his own personal disaster, the slightest wind would send him hurtling down toward destruction. And he would take Urquhart with him.

When he spoke his voice was firm but conciliatory. “Roger, you are over-anxious. You have nothing to fear, no one can prove anything and you must remember that I’m on your side. You are not alone in this. Look, don’t go back to the office, call in sick and go home. The Chairman can wait till Monday. And tomorrow I would like you to come and be my house guest in Hampshire. Come

for lunch and stay overnight while we talk the whole thing through—together, just the two of us. How does that sound to you?”

O’Neill gripped Urquhart’s hand like a cripple clinging to his crutch. “Just you and me, Francis...” he wept.

“But you mustn’t tell anyone you’re coming to visit me. It would be very embarrassing if the press were to find out that a senior party official was my house guest just before the final leadership ballot—it wouldn’t look right for either of us. So this must be strictly between the two of us. Not even your secretary must know.”

O’Neill tried to mutter words of gratitude but was cut short by three enormous sneezes that had Urquhart reeling in disgust. O’Neill didn’t seem to notice as he wiped his face and smiled with the newfound eagerness of a spaniel.

“I’ll be there, Francis. You can trust me.”

“Can I, Roger?”

“Course you can. Even if it kills me, I’ll be there.”

Saturday, November 27

Urquhart slipped from his bed before dawn. He hadn’t slept but wasn’t tired. He was alone, his wife away for the weekend, he wasn’t entirely sure where, but it was his choice, he had asked her for a little time alone. She had searched his face carefully, trying to spot the reflection in his eye of some lover or inappropriate entanglement. He wouldn’t be so stupid, of course, not on the weekend before such a week, yet men had the capacity to be so inexplicably stupid.

“No, Mortima,” he had whispered, understanding her concern. “I need a while to reflect, walk a little, read a little Burke.”

“Whatever it takes, Francis,” she had replied, and left.

It was early, even before the first light of morning was breaking above the New Forest moors. He dressed in his favorite hunting jacket, pulled on his boots, and walked out into the freezing morning air along a bridle path that led across Emery Down toward Lyndhurst. The ground mist clung closely to the hedgerows, discouraging the birds and damping down all sound, a cocoon in which only he and his thoughts had any existence. He had walked nearly three miles before he began a long, slow climb up the southern face of a hill, and

slowly the fog began to clear as the rising sun cut through the damp air. He had just emerged from a bank of swirling mist when he saw the stag across the patch of sun-cleared hillside, browsing among the damp gorse. He slipped gently behind a low bush, waiting.

He wasn't prone to introspection but there were moments when he needed to dig inside himself, and in that inner space he found his father, or elements of him. It was on a patch of moor similar to this, but in the Highlands of Scotland, beneath a bush of yellow flowering gorse, that they had found his body. Beside him had been his favorite twenty-bore Purdy, handed down from his own father, only one cartridge used. That was all it had taken to blow off half his head. A stupid man, weak. Brought shame upon the name of Urquhart that still made the son twist inside and feel somehow lessened.

The stag, a fallow deer, had his head high, sniffing the morning air, his broad oar-like antlers catching the young sun, a scar on his mottled flank suggesting he might have fought a recent rut and lost. This was a young buck, he would have another day, but Urquhart knew he wouldn't be so fortunate. The fight in which he was engaged would be his last, his time wouldn't come round again.

The stag edged closer as it continued to browse, oblivious of his presence, the rich chestnut coat shining in the light, its short tail twitching. It was a sight that when he was younger he might have watched for hours, yet he couldn't sit here now, not with his father. Urquhart stood, not thirty yards in front of the buck. It froze in confusion, sensing it should already be dead. Then it leaped to one side and in an instant was gone. Urquhart's laughter followed it into the mist.

When he returned home he walked straight to his study, without changing, and picked up the phone. He called the editors of the four leading Sunday newspapers. He discovered that two of them were writing editorials supporting, one was waving the flag for Samuel and the other was noncommittal. However, all four were in varying degrees confident that he had a clear advantage, a conclusion confirmed by the *Observer's* pollsters who by now had succeeded in contacting a substantial majority of the Parliamentary Party. The survey predicted that Urquhart would win comfortably with 60 percent of the vote.

"It seems it would take an earthquake to stop you winning now," the editor had said.

“Or the truth,” Urquhart whispered, after he had put down the receiver.

Urquhart was still sitting in his study when he heard O’Neill’s car draw up sharply on the gravel driveway outside. The Irishman parked carelessly and clambered out wearily. As he stepped into the hallway, Urquhart couldn’t help but note that his guest was almost unrecognizable as the man he had taken to lunch in his club less than six months before. The casual elegance had turned into outright scruffiness, the hair that was once informal was now unkempt, the clothes were creased, the collar unbuttoned and crumpled. The once suave and fashionable communicator now appeared like a common tramp and those deep, twinkling eyes, the features which both women and clients had found so captivating, had sunk without trace, replaced by two wild, staring orbs that flashed around the hallway in constant pursuit of something they could never find.

Urquhart led O’Neill to one of the second floor guest rooms. He said little as they climbed the stairs, every space in time filled by O’Neill’s babbling and breathless commentary. The guest showed little interest in the fine views across the New Forest afforded by the room; he threw his overnight bag carelessly on the bed. They retraced their way down two flights of stairs until Urquhart led him through an old, battered oak door into his book-lined study.

“Francis, this is beautiful, truly beautiful,” O’Neill said, gazing at the collection of leather-bound books, paintings covering a range of traditional topics from ships under full sail in heavy seas to clansmen in a distinctive green tartan, and a pair of antique globes. It wasn’t beautiful, that was typical exaggeration, but it was intimate and entirely Urquhart. Cut crystal glasses surrounded two decanters that stood in an alcove in the dark wooden bookcase.

“Help yourself, Roger,” Urquhart invited. “There is a rare Speyside and an island whiskey full of peat and seaweed. You choose.” He watched with clinical concentration as O’Neill overfilled a tumbler with whiskey and began draining it.

“Oh, can I get one for you, Francis?” O’Neill spluttered, finally remembering his manners.

“My dear Roger, not *just* at this moment. I must keep a clear head, you understand. But please feel free.”

O'Neill poured another enormous glass and slumped into a chair. And as they talked the alcohol began to do battle with whatever else was inside his system and the raging in his eyes became a touch less frenetic even as his tongue became thicker and his conversation increasingly lost its coherence. Depressant fought stimulant, never achieving peace or balance, always leaving him on the point of toppling into the abyss.

"Roger," Urquhart was saying, "it looks as though we shall be in Downing Street by the end of the week. I've been doing some thinking about what I'll need. I thought we might talk about what *you* wanted."

O'Neill took another gulp before answering.

"Francis, I'm drenched in gratitude that you should be thinking of me. You're going to be a class act as Prime Minister, Francis, really you are. As it happens, I've also been giving some thought to it all, and I was wondering whether you could use someone like me in Downing Street—you know, as an adviser or even your press spokesman. You're going to need a lot of help and we seem to have worked so well together and I was thinking..."

Urquhart waved his hand for silence. "Roger, there are scores of civil servants to take on those responsibilities, people who are already doing that work. What I need is someone just like you in charge of the political side of things, who can be trusted to avoid all those wretched mistakes that the Party organization has been making in recent months. I'd very much like you to stay at Party Headquarters—under a new Chairman, of course."

A look of concern furrowed O'Neill's brow. The same meaningless job, watching from the sidelines as the civil service ran the show? Wasn't that what he'd been doing these last years? "But to do something like that effectively, Francis, I shall need support, some special status. I thought we'd mentioned a knighthood."

"Yes, indeed, Roger. That would be no more than you deserve. You've been absolutely indispensable to me and you must understand how grateful I am. But I've been making inquiries. That sort of recognition may not be possible, at least in the short term. There are so many who are already in line to be honored when a Prime Minister retires and there's a limit on the number of honors a new Prime Minister can hand out. I'm afraid it could take a while..."

O'Neill had been slumped in his chair, slipping forward on the leather seat, but now he pulled himself up straight, confused, indignant. "Francis, that's not what we said."

Urquhart was determined to test O'Neill, to bully him, prod him, stick a finger in his eye or up his arse, shower him in offense and disappointment, put him to a little of the pressure he would inevitably come under in the next few months. He wanted to see how far O'Neill could be pushed before reaching the limit. He hadn't a moment longer to wait.

"No, that's not what we fucking said, Francis. You promised! That was part of the deal! You gave your word and now you're telling me it's not on. No job. No knighthood. Not now, not soon, not ever! You've got what you wanted and now you think you can get rid of me. Well, think again! I've lied, I've cheated, I've forged, and I've stolen for you. Now you treat me just like all the rest. I'm not going to have people laughing at me behind my back anymore and looking down their noses as if I were some smelly Irish peasant. I deserve that knighthood—and I demand it!"

The tumbler was empty and O'Neill, shaking with emotion, hauled himself from the chair to refill it from the decanter. He chose the second decanter, not caring what was in it, spilling the dark malty liquid over the rim of the glass. He slurped a huge mouthful before turning to Urquhart and resuming his avalanche of outrage.

"We've been through all of this together, as a team, Francis. Everything I've done has been for you and you wouldn't have gotten anywhere near Downing Street without me. We succeed together—or we get fucked together. If I'm going to end up on the shit heap, Francis, I'm damned if I'm going there on my own. You can't afford that, not with what I know. You owe me!" He was trembling, spilling more whiskey. The pupils of his eyes were like pinpricks. He was dribbling.

The words had been spoken, the threat made. Urquhart had offered O'Neill a gauntlet of provocation that, almost without pause for breath, had been picked up and slapped into Urquhart's face. It was clear it was no longer a matter of whether O'Neill would lose control, but how quickly, and it had taken no time at all. There was little point in continuing to test him. Urquhart brought the

moment to a rapid conclusion with a broad smile and shake of the head.

“Roger, my dear friend. You misunderstand me entirely. I’m only saying that it will be difficult this time around, in the New Year’s Honors List. But there’s another one in the spring, for the Queen’s Birthday. Just a few weeks away, really. I’m only asking you to wait until then.” He laid his hand on O’Neill’s trembling shoulder. “And if you want a job in Downing Street, then we shall find you one. We work as a team, you and I. You’ve deserved it. On my word of honor, Roger, I will not forget what you deserve.”

O’Neill was unable to respond beyond a murmur. His passion had been spent, the alcohol burrowing its way inside, his emotions torn to pieces and now pasted back together. He fell back into his chair, ashen, exhausted.

“Look, have a sleep before lunch. We can sort out the details of what you want later,” Urquhart suggested, refilling O’Neill’s glass himself.

Without another word, O’Neill closed his eyes. He drained the glass yet again and within seconds his breathing had slowed, yet even asleep his eyes still flickered beneath their lids in constant turmoil. Wherever O’Neill’s mind was wandering, it had found no peace.

Urquhart sat looking at the shrunken figure. Mucus was dripping from O’Neill’s nose. The sight reminded Urquhart yet again of his childhood, and of a Labrador that had been with him through years of faithful service as a gun dog and constant companion. One day the gillie had come and explained that the dog had suffered a stroke; it must be put down. Urquhart had been devastated. He had rushed to the stable where it slept and was greeted with the pitiful sight of an animal that had lost control of itself. The rear legs were paralyzed, it had fouled itself, and its nose and mouth, like O’Neill’s, were dribbling uncontrollably. It was as much as it could do to raise a whimper of greeting. There was a tear in the old gillie’s eye as he fondled its ear. “There’ll be no more chasing o’ rabbits for you, old fella,” he had whispered. He had turned to the young Urquhart. “Time for you to go, Master Francis.”

But Urquhart had refused. “I know what is needed,” he had said.

So together they had dug the grave at the back of the orchard near a thick hedge of yew, had lifted the dog to a bright spot nearby where it could feel the warmth of an autumn sun. Then Urquhart had shot it. Put an end to its suffering.

As he stared now at O'Neill, he remembered the tears he had shed, the times he had visited the spot where he had buried it, and wondered why some men deserved less pity than dumb animals.

He left O'Neill in the library and made his way quietly toward the kitchen. Under the sink he found a pair of rubber kitchen gloves and stuffed them, along with a teaspoon, into his pocket before proceeding through the back door toward the outhouse. The old wooden door groaned on rusty hinges as he entered the potting shed. The mustiness hit him. He used this place rarely but he knew precisely what he was looking for. High on the far wall stood an ancient, battered kitchen cupboard that had been thrown out of the old scullery many years before and which now served as a home for half-used tins of paint, stray cans of oil, and a vigorous army of woodworm. At the back, behind the other cans, he found a tightly sealed tin. He put on the rubber gloves before taking it from its shelf and walking back toward the house, holding the can as if he were carrying a flaming torch.

Once back in the house he checked on O'Neill, who was still profoundly asleep and snoring like a distant storm. He made his way quietly upstairs to the guest room and was relieved to discover that O'Neill hadn't locked his overnight case. He found what he was looking for in the toilet bag, crammed alongside the toothpaste and shaving gear. It was a tin of men's talcum powder, the head of which came away from the shoulders when he gave it a slight wrench. Inside there was no talcum but a small self-sealing polyethylene bag with the equivalent of a large tablespoonful of white powder. He took the bag to the polished mahogany writing desk that stood in the bay window and extracted three large sheets of blue writing paper from the drawer. He placed one sheet flat and poured the contents of the bag into a small mound on top of it. He placed a second sheet beside it and, still in his rubber gloves, opened the tin he had brought from the potting shed and spooned out another similarly sized pile of white powder. Using the flat end of the spoon as a spatula he proceeded with the greatest care to divide both mounds of white powder into two equal halves, scraping one half of each onto the third page of writing paper that he had creased down its middle. The grains were of an almost identical color and consistency, and he mixed the two halves together to hide the fact that they had ever been

anything but one. With the aid of the crease along the middle of the paper, he prepared to pour the mixture back into the polyethylene bag.

He stared at the sheet of paper, and his hand. It had a gentle tremble. Was that nerves, age, indecision? Something he had inherited from his father? No, never that. Whatever it took, never that! The powder slipped unprotesting into the polyethylene bag, which he then resealed. It looked as if it had never been touched.

Five minutes later, in a corner of the garden near the weeping willow, where his gardener always had a small pile of garden rubbish ready to burn, he lit a fire. The tin was now empty, its contents flushed away, and he buried it in the midst of the blaze along with the blue writing paper and the rubber gloves. Urquhart watched the flames as they flared, then smoked, until there was little left but a battered old can covered in ash.

He returned to the house, poured himself a large whiskey, swallowed it almost as greedily as had O'Neill, and only then did he relax.

It was done.

Forty-Five

It was that wise old sailor of stormy seas, Francis Drake, who remarked that the wings of opportunity are fledged with the feathers of death. Someone else's death, for preference.

O'Neill had been asleep for three hours when he was roused by someone shaking him fiercely by the shoulder. Slowly he focused his eyes and saw Urquhart leaning over him, instructing him to wake up.

“Roger, there's been a change of plan. I've just had a call from the BBC asking if they can send a film crew over here to shoot some footage for their coverage on Tuesday. Samuel has apparently already agreed, so I felt I had little choice but to say yes. They'll be here for some time. It's just what we didn't want. If they find you here it'll start all sorts of speculation about how Party Headquarters is interfering in the leadership race. Best to avoid confusion. I'm sorry, but I think it best that you leave right away.”

O'Neill was still trying to find second gear on his tongue as Urquhart poured some coffee past it, explaining once again how sorry he was about the weekend but how glad he was they had cleared up any confusion between them.

“Remember, Roger. A knighthood next Whitsun, and we can sort out the job you want next week. I'm so happy you were able to come. I really am so grateful,” Urquhart was saying as he tipped O'Neill into his car.

He watched as O'Neill edged his way with practiced caution down the driveway and out through the gates.

“Good-bye, Roger,” he whispered.

Forty-Six

Lust broadens the horizon. Love narrows it to the point of blindness.

Sunday, November 28

The dawn chorus of the quality Sundays made sweet music for the Chief Whip and his supporters.

“URQUHART AHEAD,” the *Sunday Times* declared on its front page, supplementing that with the endorsement of its editorial columns. Both the *Telegraph* and the *Express* openly backed Urquhart while the *Mail on Sunday* tried uncomfortably to straddle the fence. Only the *Observer* gave editorial backing to Samuel yet even this was qualified by its report that Urquhart had a clear lead.

It took one of the more lurid newspapers, the *Sunday Inquirer*, to give the campaign a real shake. In an interview conducted with Samuel about “the early years,” it quoted him as acknowledging a passing involvement in many different university clubs. When pressed he had admitted that until the age of twenty he had been a sympathizer with a number of fashionable causes that, thirty years later, seemed naive and misplaced. Only when the reporter had insisted the paper had documentary evidence to suggest that these causes included the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and republicanism had Samuel suspected he was being set up.

“Not that old nonsense again,” Samuel had responded testily. He thought he’d finished with those wild charges twenty years ago when he had first stood for Parliament. An opponent had sent a letter of accusation to Party Headquarters; the allegations had been fully investigated by the Party’s Standing Committee on

Candidates and he had been given a clean bill of health. But here they were again, risen from the dead after all these years, just a few days before the final ballot.

“I did all the things that an eighteen-year-old college student in those days did. I went on two CND marches and was even persuaded to take out a regular subscription to a student newspaper which I later found was run by republicans.” He had tried to raise a chuckle at the memory, determined not to give any impression that he had something to hide. “I was also quite a strong supporter of the anti-apartheid movement and to this day I actively oppose apartheid,” he had told the journalist. “Regrets? No, I have no real regrets about those early involvements; they weren’t so much youthful mistakes as an excellent testing ground for the opinions I now hold. I know how foolish CND is—I’ve been there. And I love my Queen!”

That was not the line the *Inquirer* chose to emphasize. “SAMUEL WAS A COMMIE!” it screamed over half its front page, declaring in “shocking revelations” it claimed were “exclusive” that Samuel had been an active left-winger while at university. Samuel could scarcely believe the manner in which his remarks had been interpreted; he wondered for a moment whether it was actually libelous. Yet underneath the headline, the article got even worse.

Last night Samuel admitted he had marched through the streets of London for the Russians in his days as a CND member in the 1960s when ban-the-bomb marches frequently ended in violence and disruption.

He was also a financial supporter of a militant anti-monarchy group, making regular monthly payments to the Cambridge Republican Movement some of whose leaders actively voiced support for the IRA.

Samuel’s early left-wing involvement has long been a source of concern to party leaders. In 1970 at the age of twenty-seven years old, he applied to fight as an official party candidate in the general election. The Party Chairman was sufficiently concerned to write to him demanding an explanation of “the frequency with which your name was associated at university with causes that have no sympathy for our Party.” He managed to pass the test and got himself elected. But last night Samuel was still

defiant.

“I have no regrets,” he said, adding that he still sympathized strongly with some of those left-wing movements he used to support...

The rest of the day was filled with fluster and commotion. Nobody truly believed he was a closet Communist; it was another of those silly, sensationalist pieces intended to raise circulation rather than the public’s consciousness, but it had to be checked out. The inevitable result was confusion at a time when Samuel was trying desperately to reassure his supporters and refocus attention on the serious issues of the campaign.

By midday Lord Williams had issued a stinging denunciation of the newspaper for using confidential documents that he claimed had been stolen. The *Inquirer* immediately responded that, while the Party itself seemed to be unforgivably incompetent with safeguarding its confidential material, the newspaper was happy to fulfill its public obligations and return the folder in its possession to its rightful owners at Party Headquarters—which they did later that day in time to catch the television news and give the story yet another lease of life.

Nobody took the story as having deep meaning. Most dismissed it as being as much about the typical incompetence of Party Headquarters as Samuel himself. But his campaign had run into misfortune since it began. Napoleon had asked for lucky generals and Britain could demand no less. None of it was reassuring for someone who claimed to be on top of events. It wasn’t the way to spend the final hours before battle.

* * *

He had called Mattie. “I need you. Can you come round?”

She had all but run to him, at his home in Cambridge Street, and the moment he had closed the door against the outside world he was on her, over her, soon inside her. He seemed to have extraordinary energy, a man in desperate need of release. He had cried out as he had finished, a lonely sound that for a moment she mistook for anguish, or was it guilt? The pursuit of power raised many passions that didn’t always sit comfortably with each other. She knew that

herself.

When they had finished and she had eased her body off his, they lay silently beside each other for a while, lost in their thoughts.

“Why did you call me, Francis?” she asked eventually.

“I needed you, Mattie. I was feeling suddenly very lonely.”

“You’ll soon be surrounded by the entire world. You won’t have a moment to yourself.”

“I think that was partly it. I’m a little frightened. I need someone I can trust. I can trust you, can’t I, Mattie?”

“You know you can.” She kissed him. “This won’t last forever, I know that, but when you’ve finished with me I’ll understand more about myself and everything I’m interested in.”

“Which is?”

“Power. Its limits. The compromises it requires. The deceptions.”

“Have I made you so cynical?”

“I want to be the best political correspondent in the country, perhaps in the entire world.”

“You’re using me!” he chuckled.

“I hope so.”

“We are different in so many ways, you and I, Mattie, but somehow I feel that if I can be certain of your”—he searched for a suitable word—“loyalty, then for a while the entire world might follow in your footsteps.”

She ran a soft finger across his lips. “I think it’s more than loyalty, Francis.”

“We can’t get too deep, Mattie. The world won’t let us.”

“But there’s only you and me here, Francis.” She slipped on top of him once more and this time he didn’t cry out in anguish.

Forty-Seven

Sometimes I hate myself for my inadequacies. But I find it easier to hate others more.

Monday, November 29

The janitor found the body soon after he had clocked on at 4:30 on a dark, frost-kissed morning for his shift at the Rownhams service area, located on the M27 outside Southampton. He was cleaning the toilets when he discovered that one of the cubicle doors wouldn't open. He was nearing his sixty-eighth birthday and cursed as he lowered his old bones in order to peer under the door. He had difficulty making it all the way down but eventually spotted two shoes. Since socks and feet were attached to the shoes he needed nothing more to satisfy his curiosity. There was a man inside the cubicle and whether he was drunk, diseased, or dying it was going to knock hell out of the cleaning schedule. The elderly man cursed as he staggered off to fetch his supervisor.

The supervisor used a screwdriver in an attempt to open the lock from the outside but it appeared that the man's knees were wedged firmly up against the door, and push as hard as he might he couldn't force it open more than a few inches. The supervisor bent his hand around the door in an attempt to shift the man's knees but instead grabbed a dangling hand that was as cold as ice. He recoiled in horror and insisted on washing his hands meticulously before he stumbled off to call the police and an ambulance, while the cleaner stood guard.

The police arrived shortly after 5:00 a.m. and, with rather more experience in such matters than the janitor and supervisor, had the cubicle door off its hinges in seconds. O'Neill's body, fully clothed, was slumped against the wall. His face

was drained of color and stretched into a leering death mask exposing his teeth. The eyes were staring wide open. In his lap the police found two halves of an empty tin of talc, and on the floor beside him they discovered a small polyethylene bag containing a few grains of white powder and a briefcase stuffed with political pamphlets. They found other small white granules of powder still clinging to the leather cover of the briefcase, which had evidently been placed on O'Neill's lap to provide a flat surface. From one clenched fist they managed to prise a twisted £20 note that had been fashioned into a tube before being crumpled by O'Neill's death fit. His other arm was stretched aloft over his head, as if the grinning corpse was giving one final, hideous salute of farewell.

"Another druggie taking his last flaming fix," the police sergeant muttered to his younger colleague. "It's more usual to find them with a needle up their arm but this one looks as if he did his dying swan routine on cocaine."

"Didn't realize that was lethal," the constable said.

"Might have been too much for his heart. Or maybe the stuff was adulterated. There's a lot of it pushed around these motorway service stations and the junkies never know what they're buying. Sometimes they get unlucky." He started rummaging through O'Neill's pockets for clues to his identity. "Let's get on with it, laddie, and call the ruddy photographers to capture this sordid little scene. No use us standing here guessing about...Mr. Roger O'Neill," he announced as he found a wallet bearing a few credit cards. "Wonder who he is? Or was."

It was 7:20 by the time the coroner's representative had authorized the removal of the body. Ambulance men were struggling to get the contorted body out from the cubicle and onto their stretcher when the call came over the radio. The body not only had a name but also a track record.

"Hell," the sergeant told the radio controller, "that'll put the pussies among the pigeons. We'll have CID inspectors, superintendents, even the chief constable arriving to get a gander at this one." He scratched his chin as he turned to the fresh-faced constable. "Got ourselves a prize one here, we have. Seems our boy beneath the blanket was a senior political figure with his fingers in Downing Street. You better make sure you write a damned good report, laddie.

Dotted *I*'s and crossed *T*'s. Going to make a bit of a bestseller, is my guess.”

* * *

Mattie was in the shower, washing away the last traces of the previous evening, when her phone rang. It was Krajewski, calling from the *Chronicle*'s newsroom.

“It’s a little damned early, Johnnie,” she began complaining before he cut her off.

“You need to know this. Another of your impossible coincidences. It’s just come over the tape. Seems the Southampton police found your Roger O’Neill dead in a public lavatory just a couple of hours ago.”

She stood naked, dripping over her carpet but oblivious to the mess that was spreading around her. “Tell me this is simply your tasteless way of saying good morning, Johnnie. Please.”

“Seems I’m destined always to be a disappointment to you, Mattie. It’s for real. I’ve already sent a reporter down to the scene but it appears the local police have called in the Drug Squad. Word is he may have overdosed.”

Mattie trembled as one of the pieces fell into place like the slamming of a cell door. “So that was it. An addict. No wonder he was all over the place.”

“Not the sort of guy you’d want sitting beside the plane’s emergency exit, that’s for sure,” he responded, but even as he did so a wail of misery and frustration poured down the phone.

“Mattie, what on earth...?”

“He was our man. The only one we know for certain was involved in all the dirty tricks, who left his prints over everything. The man who could unlock the whole bloody mystery for us. Now he’s disappeared from the scene the day before they elect a new Prime Minister, leaving us with a big fat zero. Don’t you see, Johnnie?”

“What?”

“This can’t be coincidence. It’s bloody murder!”

* * *

As soon as she had thrown on some clothes and even without drying her hair, Mattie rushed off in search of Penny Guy, yet it seemed a futile chase. She rang

the bell of Penny's mansion block continuously for several minutes with no response until a young resident in a hurry left the door ajar and Mattie slipped inside. She took the creaking lift to the third floor and found Penny's apartment. She knocked on it for several further minutes before she heard a scuffling from inside and the latch was thrown. The door opened slowly. At first there was no sign of Penny, but when Mattie walked inside she found Penny sitting quietly on the sofa, curtains drawn, staring into emptiness.

"You know," Mattie whispered.

The agony that had run lines through Penny's face was answer enough.

Mattie sat down beside her and held her. Slowly Penny's fingers tightened around Mattie's hand as a drowning woman clings to driftwood.

When at last Penny spoke, her voice was faltering, soaked in misery. "He didn't deserve to die. He was a weak man, maybe, but not an evil one. He was very kind."

"What was he doing in Southampton?"

"Spending the weekend with someone. Wouldn't say who. It was one of his silly secrets."

"Any idea?"

Penny shook her head stiffly, by fractions.

"Do you know why he died?" Mattie asked.

Penny turned to face her with eyes that burned in accusation. "You're not interested in him, are you? Only in his death."

"I'm sorry he died, Penny. I'm also sorry because I think Roger will be blamed for a lot of bad things that have happened recently. And I don't think that's fair."

Penny blinked slowly, like a simpleton struggling with a matter of advanced physics. "But why would they blame Roger?"

"I think he's been set up. Someone has been using Roger, twisting him and bending him in a dirty little political game—until Roger snapped."

Penny considered this for several long moments. "He's not the only one who's been set up," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Pat. He was sent a tape. He thought I'd done it."

“Pat who?”

“Patrick Woolton. He thought I’d made a tape of us in bed together so that I could blackmail him. But it was someone else. It wasn’t me.”

“So that’s why he quit!” Mattie gasped in a rush of understanding. “But... who could have made such a tape, Penny?”

“Don’t know. Almost anybody at the Party conference I suppose. Anyone in Bournemouth, anyone at the hotel.”

“Penny, that can’t be right! Whoever blackmailed Patrick Woolton would have to know you were sleeping with him.”

“Rog knew. But he would never...Would he?” she pleaded, suddenly desperate for reassurance. Doubts were beginning to close in on her.

“Someone was blackmailing Roger, too. Someone who must have known he was on drugs. Someone who forced him to leak opinion polls and alter computer files and do all those other things. Someone who...”

“Killed him?”

“I think so, Penny,” she said softly.

“Why...?” Penny wailed.

“To cover his tracks.”

“Will you find him for me, Mattie?”

“I’ll try,” she said. “I just don’t know where to start.”

* * *

The weather had grown bitterly cold but Mattie seemed unaware. Her mind had become like her laundry basket, overflowing with cast off ideas, and in the attempt to sort through them she had spent the day punishing herself. She had gone for a long run through the park, had attacked the masses of cleaning that had piled up in every corner of her flat, even got to ironing her underwear, but nothing helped. O’Neill’s death had slammed the door on every thought in her head. It was evening before she called Krajewski.

“Come over, Johnnie. Please.”

“You must be desperate.”

Her silence did nothing to make him feel any better.

“But it’s bloody snowing outside,” he protested.

“Is it?”

“Twenty minutes,” he muttered before putting the phone down.

It was nearer forty. He arrived clutching a large box of pizza.

“Is that for me?” she asked as she opened her door. “How sweet.”

“No, it’s for me, actually. I assumed you’d eaten.” He sighed. “But I guess there’s enough for two.” He was determined not to give her an easy time. She didn’t deserve it.

They finished the pizza with their backs propped against her living room wall, crumbs scattered around them, the box discarded, her newly cleaned floor once more a mess.

“Did you tell Grev I was writing a book?” she asked.

He wiped his fingers on some kitchen towel. “Decided not to. I didn’t think it was a great idea to let him know I was still in contact. You’re not exactly flavor of the month at the *Chronicle*, Mattie. Anyway,” he added, the touch of sourness back in his voice, “everyone would assume I was shagging you.”

“I’ve hurt you, haven’t I?”

“Yup.”

“Sorry.”

“There’s always the chance I might make a footnote in that bloody book, I suppose.”

“The story just gets bigger and bigger, Johnnie, but I haven’t got the ending, the missing piece.”

“Which is?”

“Who killed O’Neill.”

“What?” he spluttered in alarm.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” she said, earnest and animated once more. “None of what’s been going on was coincidence. I’ve found out that Woolton was deliberately blackmailed out of the leadership race. Somebody got rid of him, just as they got rid of Collingridge, and McKenzie, and Earle, I suspect. And O’Neill.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying? The stupid sod overdosed! This isn’t the KGB we’re dealing with.”

“As far as O’Neill is concerned it might just as well have been.”

“Jesus!”

“Johnnie, there is someone out there who will stop at nothing.”

“But who? Why?”

“That’s the bloody trouble. I don’t know! Everything leads back to O’Neill and now he’s gone!” She kicked the empty pizza box in frustration.

“Look, isn’t it much easier to suppose that any nonsense was down to O’Neill himself?”

“But why would he have gotten involved?”

“I don’t know. Blackmail. Money for his drugs, maybe. Perhaps a power thing. Addicts never know when to stop. He got too deeply involved—and got scared. Lost control and killed himself.”

“Who kills themselves in a public lavatory?” she said scornfully.

“His mind was blown!”

“And whoever killed him took advantage of that!”

They were both panting in frustration, shoulder to shoulder yet a world apart.

“Back to basics,” Krajewski said doggedly, trying once more. “All the leaks. Let’s play motive and opportunity.”

“Money wasn’t the motive. There’s no sign of that.”

“So it must be some dirty little power game.”

“Agreed. Which means O’Neill wasn’t the man behind it.”

“He had the opportunity, though.”

“Not for all the leaks. Some of them were from Government, not from the Party. Highly confidential stuff that wouldn’t have been available even to every member of the Cabinet, let alone a party official.”

“Not even Teddy Williams?”

“He would scarcely need to burgle his own files, would he? Least of all files that dropped his chum Samuel into the sewage system.”

“So...”

“Government. It has to be someone in government.”

Krajewski found a morsel of pizza stuck in his cheek and moved it around with his tongue while he thought. “You got a list of Cabinet ministers?”

“In a drawer somewhere.”

“Then get off that sensational arse of yours and find it.”

After a little rummaging that exposed the profound limitations of her efforts to clean up, she discovered the list among a pile of papers and handed it to him. He went to her work table and with his arm swept the piles of books and assorted debris to one side, exposing the smooth, laminated white work surface. The whiteness of the desk was like an open notepad waiting to be filled. He grabbed an artist's pen and began scrawling down all twenty-two names.

"OK. Who could have been responsible for the leaks? Come on, Mattie. Think!"

She paced the room as she concentrated, trying to find her way through the bureaucratic maze. "There were two leaks which could only have come from inside the Cabinet," she said at last. "The Territorial Army cuts and the Renox drug approval. And at a guess I think we can add the cancellation of the hospital program; I never bought into the idea that O'Neill and the Party were deeply involved."

"So who in Government would have known about those?"

"Whoever was on the relevant Cabinet committee."

"Ready to play when you are," he said, pen poised.

Slowly she began reciting the members of the various ministerial groups that would have had early knowledge of the decisions. "Right, the TA cuts," she began. "There's the Defense Secretary, the Financial Secretary, the Chancellor possibly." The membership of Cabinet committees was supposed to be confidential but was the subject of informed gossip among everyone in the lobby. "And of course the Prime Minister." She was counting off on her fingers. "Then there's the Employment Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, too."

He ticked the names on the list.

"The hospital scheme would have been an entirely different committee. Health Secretary, Treasury Ministers, Trade and Industry, Education, Environment. I think that's it."

More ticks.

"But the Renox drug approval...Damn it, Johnnie, that wouldn't have gone to any Cabinet committee. It was a departmental thing, would've been handled by the Health Secretary and his Ministers. The Prime Minister's office would have heard about it, of course. I can't think of anyone else."

Now she was at his side, both leaning over the table, staring at his handiwork. As she searched the list, her shoulders sagged.

“We seem to have screwed up,” Krajewski muttered quietly.

There was only one name with three ticks beside it, one man with access to all three bits of leaked information, one man who they could pronounce guilty.

Henry Collingridge. The man who had been the victim of these leaks. Their efforts had led them to the most absurd conclusion of all.

“Fuck!” she exclaimed bitterly and turned away, kicking the battered pizza box yet again and sending more crumbs flying. Then her frustration turned to quiet tears that began sliding down her cheek and onto her breast.

He put his arms around her. “Sorry, Mattie,” he whispered, “I guess it was just Roger all along.” He kissed her cheeks, tasting the salt, then he kissed her lips in a manner that was intended to take her far away from her sorrows. She pulled back sharply.

“What’s wrong, Mattie?” he asked, hurt. “Sometimes we’re so close and then...”

She wouldn’t answer, shed more tears; he decided to give it one more chance.

“Can I stay the night?”

She shook her head.

“On the sofa?”

Another shake.

“It’s snowing like bloody Alaska outside,” he pleaded.

She raised her eyes, whispered. “I’m sorry, Johnnie.”

“There is someone else, isn’t there?”

Again no answer.

He slammed the door behind him with such force that more papers scattered around the floor.

Forty-Eight

Westminster is a zoo. There you will find great beasts on display, penned in behind bars, their strength drained, their spirits slowly crushed, objects of derision for those of small minds and profound disinterest for those of great thoughts.

I prefer the jungle.

Tuesday, November 30

The morning newspapers fell onto the doormats of a million homes like a death knell for Samuel's candidacy. One by one, editor by editor, they lined up behind Urquhart, not just the titles that Landless had his fingers on but most of the others, too. Sometimes even editors like to play safe, swim with the tide, and it was flowing inexorably in Urquhart's direction.

Only two newspapers among the quality press swam on their own, the *Guardian* because it was bloody minded and insisted on backing Samuel, and the *Independent* because it had too many minds and so refused to endorse any one.

The mood was reflected in the two camps, Urquhart's supporters finding it difficult to hide their air of confidence, Samuel's already working on excuses.

Even before the appointed hour of 10:00 a.m. a large group of MPs had gathered outside the oak doors of Committee Room 14, each hoping to be the first to cast a vote and qualify for a footnote in history. The thickening snow that was beginning to blanket Westminster gave the proceedings a surrealistic calm. It would be Christmas soon, the lights had already been switched on in Oxford Street. Peace on earth. In a few hours the battle would be over, with public

handshakes and congratulations all round when the result was announced, even as in private the victors planned their recriminations and the losers plotted revenge.

* * *

Mattie hadn't managed any sleep. She felt overwhelmed, there were too many ideas wrestling with each other inside her head. Why was she treating Johnnie so badly? Why was she falling for a man like Urquhart she could never have? Why couldn't she see the pattern in what was going on around her? Too many dead ends. They made her feel a failure.

She had spent the morning trudging heedlessly through the snow searching for inspiration but ending up soaked, her feet frozen with her hair left in damp strings. It was early afternoon before she turned up at Westminster. The snow had stopped falling and the skies were clearing to blue crystal, leaving the capital looking like a scene from a Victorian Christmas card. The Houses of Parliament appeared particularly resplendent, like some wondrous gingerbread cake covered in white icing. The Union flag on Victoria Tower stretched proudly as Concorde flew overhead on its flight path to Heathrow. In the churchyard of St. Margaret's, nestling under the wing of the great medieval Abbey, carol singers filled the air with song and rattled collecting tins at tourists. None of this she noticed.

Celebrations were already under way in various parts of the House of Commons. As she made her way beneath the shadow of Big Ben, one of her colleagues from the press gallery rushed over to share the latest news. "About eighty percent of them have already voted. Urquhart's home and dry. It looks like a landslide." He cast a curious eye at her. "Christ, Mattie, you look awful," he said, before scurrying on.

Mattie felt a flutter of excitement. With Francis in Downing Street she had a chance of rebuilding her life. Yet even as she thought of such things a cold hand of doubt closed around her. She didn't deserve it. Foolishly, early that morning, she had walked toward his house in Cambridge Street, drawn to him, desperate for his wisdom, only to see him on his distant doorstep kissing his wife Mortima for the benefit of cameras. Mattie had put her head down and hurried quickly

away, ashamed of herself.

Yet her doubts, and her needs, had grown. Some wickedness, some outrage was taking place but the world seemed stubbornly blind to it. Surely Francis would understand, know what to do. She knew she would never be with him on her own again, not once he was in Downing Street surrounded by body guards and diary secretaries. If she were to get to him, it had to be now. Her only chance.

Urquhart wasn't in his room, nor in any of the bars or restaurants of the Palace of Westminster. She asked in vain around the corridors but no one seemed able to help. She was about to conclude that he had left the premises, for lunch or interviews, when one of the friendly Palace bobbies told her he'd seen Urquhart not ten minutes earlier headed in the direction of the roof garden. She had no idea that such a place existed, or even where it was.

"That's right, miss," he laughed, "there aren't many who do know about our roof garden. Only the staff, really, not the politicians. We like to keep quiet about it in case they all rush up there and spoil it for us. But Mr. Urquhart, he's different, seems to know every corner of this place."

"Where is it? Will you tell me?"

"It's directly above the Chamber itself. A roof terrace where we've put some tables and chairs so that in summer the staff can catch a little sun, take sandwiches and a flask of coffee. It'll be empty this time of year, though. Except for Mr. Urquhart, that is. I guess he wants to do a bit of pondering on his own. Chosen the right place for it, he has. Now don't you go disturbing him or after tomorrow I'll have to arrest you!"

She had smiled, he had succumbed, and now she was following his directions, using the stairs past the Strangers' Gallery and up again until she had passed the paneled dressing room reserved for the Palace doorkeepers. Then she saw a fire door that had been left ajar. As she stepped through it she emerged onto the roof, bathed in sunlight, and let out a gasp of awe. The view was magnificent. Directly in front of her, towering into the cloudless sky and made brilliant in the sunshine and snow, was the honey-drenched tower of Big Ben. Every detail of the beautifully crafted stone stood out with stunning clarity and she could see the tremor of the great clock hands as the ancient mechanism

pursued its remorseless course. To her left she found the vastness of the tiled roof of Westminster Hall, the oldest part of the Palace, survivor of fire, war, bomb, riot, and revolution; to her right the irrepressible Thames ebbed and eddied in its own timeless fashion.

There were fresh footsteps in the snow. He was standing by the balustrade at the far end of the terrace, looking out beyond the rooftops of Whitehall to the white stone walls of the Home Office. Behind it lay Buckingham Palace where, later that evening, he would be driven in triumph.

She trod in his footsteps, for comfort. He turned suddenly, startled, when he heard the creaking of her step.

“Mattie!” he exclaimed. “This is a surprise.”

She advanced toward him, reaching out, but something in his eyes told her this was neither the time nor the place. Her arms fell to her side.

“I had to see you, Francis.”

“But of course. What is it you want, Mattie?”

“I’m not entirely sure. To say good-bye, perhaps. I don’t think we’re going to get much chance to see each other anymore, not like...”

“Our time the other night? I think you may be right, Mattie. But we will always share that memory. And you will always have my friendship.”

“I also wanted to warn you.”

“About what?”

“Something evil is going on.”

“Where?”

“All around us—around you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There have been so many leaks.”

“Politics is a soggy business.”

“Patrick Woolton was blackmailed.”

“Really?” He looked at her in sudden alarm, as though he had been slapped.

“The Collingridges were set up over the Renox shares.”

He was silent now.

“And I think someone killed Roger O’Neill.” She looked at the incredulity bubbling up in his eyes. “You think I’m mad?”

“No, not at all. You looked distressed, not mad. But that’s a very serious allegation, Mattie. Do you have any sort of proof?”

“A little. Not enough. Not yet.”

“So who is behind it all?”

“I don’t know. For a while I thought it might be Teddy Williams, it might still be, but I can’t do this on my own, Francis. I don’t even have a newspaper to write for any more. I was hoping you might help.”

“And how would you like me to help, Mattie?”

“I believe one man was behind it all. He used Roger O’Neill, then got rid of him. If we can find one link in the chain, just one, perhaps the shares, then it will lead to the others, and everything will come out, it always does, and we can—”

She was babbling as it all tumbled forth. He stepped toward her and held her arms, squeezing them gently, forcing her to stop.

“You look tired, Mattie. You’re very upset.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Far from it. You may have stepped upon the greatest story you will ever write. Westminster is a dark and sometimes dirty corner where men trade their principles for a few years in power. It’s a very old game. But it’s also a dangerous game. You must be very careful, Mattie. If you’re right and someone has been responsible for Roger O’Neill’s death, that places you in the line of fire, too.”

“What should I do, Francis?”

“Will you allow me to take charge of this for you, for a little while? With luck by tomorrow I shall be in a position to ask all sorts of questions, put a few ferrets down the rabbit holes. Let’s see what comes up.”

“Would you?”

“For you I’d do just about anything, Mattie, surely you must know that.”

Her head fell forward onto his chest in gratitude and release. “You are a very special man, Francis. Better than all the rest.”

“*You* might say that, Mattie.”

“There are many people who are saying that.”

“But you know I couldn’t possibly comment.”

He smiled, their faces only inches apart.

“You must trust me completely on this, Mattie. Will you? Not a word to anyone else.”

“Of course.”

“And one weekend, very soon, during the Christmas break, perhaps you can come to my country house. I’ll make some excuse about needing to clear some papers from it. My wife will be listening to Wagner in some corner of the continent. You and I can be alone again. Sort this out.”

“Are you sure?”

“The New Forest can be beautiful at that time of the year.”

“You live in the New Forest?”

“Near Lyndhurst.”

“Just off the M27?”

“That’s right.”

“But that’s where Roger O’Neill died.”

“Is it?”

“Probably no more than half a dozen miles.”

He was looking at her strangely now. She stepped away from him, feeling weak, dizzy, leaned against the balustrade for support. And the pieces of the jigsaw moved about in her mind and suddenly fitted precisely together.

“Your name wasn’t on the list,” she whispered.

“What list?”

“Of Cabinet members. Because the Chief Whip isn’t a full member of the Cabinet. But because you’re responsible for discipline in the party they’d be bound to consult you about canceling the hospital program. And the TA cuts. So that you can—what is it you say?—*put a bit of stick about.*”

“This is very silly of you, Mattie.”

“And every Government department has a junior whip attached to it to make sure there’s proper coordination. Fingers on the pulse, ears to the ground, all that sort of thing. Your men, Francis, who report back to you. And because you are the Chief Whip you know all about their little foibles, who is off his head with cocaine, who is sleeping with who, where to put the tape recorder...”

His face had gone pale, the glow in his cheeks drained, like an alabaster mask, except for the eyes.

“Opportunity. And motive,” she whispered, aghast. “From nowhere to Prime Minister in just a couple of months. How on earth did I miss it?” She shook her head in self-mockery. “I missed it because I think I love you, Francis.”

“Which doesn’t make you particularly objective. As you said, Mattie, you don’t have a single shred of proof.”

“But I will get it, Francis.”

“Is there any joy in the pursuit of such truth, Mattie?”

A solitary snowflake fell from the sky. As he watched it he remembered something an old embittered colleague had told him when he had first entered the House, that a life in politics was as pointless as nailing your ambition to a snowflake. A thing of beauty. Then it was gone.

“How did you kill Roger?” she asked.

A fire had taken hold of her, a flame of understanding that glowed fierce. He knew there was no point in prevarication.

“I didn’t kill him. He killed himself. I did no more than hand him the pistol. A little rat poison mixed with his cocaine. He was an addict, driven to self-destruction. Such a weak man.”

“No one deserves to die, Francis.”

“You told me yourself the other night, I remember your words clearly. I remember everything about the other night, Mattie. You said you wanted to understand power. The compromises it requires, the deceits it entails.”

“But not this.”

“If you understand power, you will know that sometimes sacrifice is necessary. If you understand me, you will know that I have the potential to make an exceptional leader, one who could be great.” There was a rising passion in his voice. “And if you understand love, Mattie, you of all people will give me that chance. Otherwise...”

“What, Francis?”

He stood very still, his lips grown thin, the cheeks gaunt. “Did you know my father killed himself?” he asked, his voice so soft it all but carried away in the winter air.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Is that what you want of me?”

“No!”

“Expect of me?”

“Never!”

“Then why do you pursue me?” He was gripping her arms tightly, his face contorted. “There are choices we have to make in life, Mattie, desperately difficult choices, ones we may hate ourselves for but which become inevitable. You and I, Mattie, we must choose. Both of us.”

“Francis, I love you, really I do, but—”

And with that tiny, sharp-edged conjunction, he broke. The chaos within him suddenly froze, his eyes stared at her, melting in sorrow like the flake of snow that had fallen from the crystal Westminster sky. He let forth a desperate sob of despair, an animal in unbearable pain. Then he lifted her and threw her over the balustrade.

She cried as she fell, more in surprise than alarm. The cries stopped as she hit the cobbles below and lay still.

* * *

She was a strange girl. I think she was infatuated with me. That sometimes happens, sadly, to people in public positions. She turned up on my doorstep once, late at night, completely out of the blue.

Disturbed? Well, you might say that but it's not for me to comment, although I do know she had recently left her job at the Chronicle and had been unable to find new employment. I can't tell you whether she resigned or was fired. She lived on her own, apparently. A sad case.

When she approached me on the roof she seemed distressed and rather disheveled. A number of people including a newspaper colleague and one of our policemen in the Palace can attest to that. She asked me for a job. I told her that wouldn't be possible, but she persisted, pestered, grew hysterical. I tried to calm her but she only grew worse. We were standing by the balustrade and she threatened to throw herself off. I moved to grab her but she seemed to slip on the ice, the conditions were quite treacherous, and before I knew it or could stop her she had disappeared. Was it deliberate on her part? I hope not. Such a tragic waste of a young life.

It's not the best way to start a premiership, of course it's not. I wondered for a while if I should step aside rather than carry this burden forward. Instead I intend to take a close interest in the issue of mental illness among the young. We must do more. I will never forget the sadness of that moment on the rooftop. It may sound strange but I believe that young lady's suffering will give me strength, something to live up to. You understand that, don't you?

I start my time in Downing Street with a renewed determination to bring our people together, to put an end to the constant drip of cynicism that has eroded so much of our national life and to devote myself to our country's cause. I shall make sure that Miss Storin's death will not have been in vain.

And now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do.

The End

Afterword

It was a most glorious, splendiferous, monumental cock-up that took place twenty-five years ago. It completely changed my life. It was this book, *House of Cards*.

I was on the tiny island of Gozo and in a sore mood. I started complaining about everything—the sun, the sea, and in particular the latest bestseller. Soon my partner was fed up. “Stop being so bloody pompous,” she said. “If you think you can do any better, for God’s sake, go and do it. I haven’t come on holiday to listen to you moaning about that wretched book!”

Spurred on by her encouragement, I took myself down to the pool. I’d never thought of writing a book, but now I was armed with a pad, a pen, and a bottle of wine, everything I needed to become a writer—except, of course, for those irksome details known as Character and Plot. What could I possibly write about? My mind wandered back a few weeks, to the reason I was sulking and feeling so sore.

Conservative Party headquarters, 1987. A week before Election Day. I was Margaret Thatcher’s chief of staff. She was about to win a record third election but Maggie had been persuaded by a combination of rogue opinion polls and uncharacteristic nervousness that she might lose. She hadn’t slept properly for days, had a raging toothache, and insisted that someone else should suffer. That someone was me. On a day that became known as “Wobble Thursday,” she stormed, she blew up a tempest, she was brutally unfair. Her metaphorical handbag swung at me time and again. I was about to become another footnote in history.

When we left the room, that wise old owl and Deputy Prime Minister, Willie Whitelaw, rolled his eyes and declared: “That is a woman who will never fight another election.” He’d spotted the seeds of self-destruction that all too soon would become apparent to the entire world.

As I sat beside my swimming pool, Willie’s words were still ringing in my ear. I reached for my pen and my bottle of wine. Three bottles later I thought I had found my character—his initials would be FU—and a plot. About getting rid of a Prime Minister. So Francis Urquhart and *House of Cards* was born.

I had no thought of getting it published—for me it was no more than a little private therapy—but through glorious and entirely unplanned good fortune soon it was a bestseller and the BBC was transforming it into an award-winning drama series with the magnificent Ian Richardson. I retired hurt from active politics and became a full-time writer. Now, twenty-five years after the book was published, FU is changing my life again. Step forward Kevin Spacey with his sensational new TV series. My house of cards has been rebuilt.

To mark this new lease of life for FU, I’ve taken the opportunity of reworking the novel—no great changes, no one who read the original will think it a different book, but the narrative is a little tighter, the characters more colorful, and the dialogue perhaps crisper. I’ve revisited it in order to repay some of the pleasure that *House of Cards* has given me during all these years. What has remained constant is the novel’s unashamed wickedness. Bathe in it. Enjoy.

So was it worth that drubbing by Maggie Thatcher? Well, what’s that phrase? You might say that, but I couldn’t possibly comment.

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THAT INSPIRED
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TO
PLAY
THE
KING

MICHAEL DOBBS

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To Play the King

[Front Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

PART TWO

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

Twenty-Seven

Twenty-Eight

Twenty-Nine

Thirty

Thirty-One

Thirty-Two

Thirty-Three

Thirty-Four

Thirty-Five

Thirty-Six

PART THREE

Thirty-Seven

Thirty-Eight

Thirty-Nine

Forty

Forty-One

[Forty-Two](#)

[Forty-Three](#)

[Forty-Four](#)

[Forty-Five](#)

[Forty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Introduction

When I wrote *To Play the King* in 1990 as a sequel to *House of Cards*, it was partly because I believed that the Royal yacht was heading for turbulent waters. And so it proved to be. I wrote about fractured marriages, financial scandal, political controversy, and public humiliations, and for the next few years the Royal Family seemed to follow the script with breathless tenacity. At times it seemed as though various individuals were openly auditioning for parts in the story. If my book was intended to be by way of a warning, as I suppose it was, it failed completely. The House of Windsor was to endure some of its worst moments. The yacht nearly sank and some members of the crew were thrown overboard.

My fictional king isn't simply a version of Prince Charles—there have been many heirs to the throne who have gotten themselves into difficulties and I took a little inspiration from more than one—but it was inevitable that some comparisons would be made. At the time I began writing it was clear that his marriage was falling apart, despite all the official denials, so I decided that my kingly character would have no wife. I hope none of what I wrote amounted to disrespect because that is not what I intended.

In any event, despite those dire years, both he and the institution have displayed their tenacity and powers of recovery, and today they stand higher in public esteem than they have for decades. The royal yacht sails on.

And so does FU. Nearly thirty years after I created him he has developed a life of his own, in books, on global television, as a character who has been quoted both in Parliament and the press. Do you suspect he might even have

been muttered about in the corners of various palaces? Well, you might say that but I am not going to comment...

M. D. 2013

Prologue

Away with kings. They take up too much room.

It was the day they would put him to death.

They led him through the park, penned in by two companies of infantrymen. The crowd was thick and he had spent much of the night wondering how they would react when they saw him. With tears? Jeers? Try to snatch him to safety or spit on him in contempt? It depended who had paid them best. But there was no outburst; they stood in silence, dejected, cowed, still not believing what was about to take place in their name. A young woman cried out and fell in a dead faint as he passed, but nobody tried to impede his progress across the frost-hard ground. The guards were hurrying him on.

Within minutes they were in Whitehall, where he was lodged in a small room. It was just after ten o'clock on a January morning, and he expected at any moment to hear the knock on the door that would summon him. But something had delayed them; they didn't come until nearly two. Four hours of waiting, of demons gnawing at his courage, of feeling himself fall to pieces inside. During the night he had achieved a serenity and sense of inner peace, almost a state of grace, but with the heavy passage of unexpected minutes, growing into hours, the calm was replaced by a sickening sense of panic that began somewhere in his brain and stretched right through his body to pour into his bladder and his bowels. His thoughts became scrambled and the considered words, crafted with such care to illuminate the justice of his cause and impeach their twisted logic, were suddenly gone. He dug his fingernails deep into his palms; somehow he would find the words, when the time came.

The door opened. The captain stood in the dark entrance and gave a curt, somber nod of his helmeted head. No need for words. They took him and within seconds he was in the Banqueting Hall, a place he cherished with its Rubens ceiling and magnificent oaken doors, but he had difficulty in making out the details through the unnatural gloom. The tall windows had been partially bricked up and boarded during the war to provide better defensive positions. Only at one of the farther windows was there light where the masonry and barricades had been torn down and a harsh gray glow surrounded the hole, like the entrance to another world. The corridor formed by the line of soldiers led directly to it.

My God, but it was cold. He'd had nothing to eat since yesterday, he'd refused the meal they had offered, and he was grateful for the second shirt he had asked for, to prevent him shivering. It wouldn't do to be seen to shiver. They would think it was fear.

He climbed up two rough wooden steps and bowed his head as he crossed the threshold of the window, onto a platform they had erected immediately outside. There were half a dozen other men on the freshly built wooden stage while every point around was crammed by teeming thousands, on foot, on carriages, on roofs, leaning from windows and other vantage points. Surely now there would be some response? But as he stepped out into the harsh light and their view, their restlessness froze in the icy wind and the huddled figures stood silent and sullen, ever incredulous. It still could not be.

Driven into the stage on which he stood were four iron staples. They would rope him down, spread-eagled between the staples, if he struggled, yet it was but one more sign of how little they understood him. He would not struggle. He had been born to a better end than that. He would but speak his few words to the throng and that would be sufficient. He prayed that the weakness he felt in his knees would not betray him; surely he had been betrayed enough. They handed him a small cap into which with great care he tucked his hair, as if preparing for nothing more than a walk through the park with his wife and children. He must make a fine show of it. He dropped his cloak to the ground so that he might be better seen.

Heavens! The cold cut through him as if the frost were reaching for his racing heart and turning it straightway to stone. He took a deep, searing breath to

recover from the shock. He must not tremble! And there was the captain of his guard, already in front of him, beads of sweat on his brow despite the weather.

“Just a few words, Captain. I would say a few words.” He racked his mind in search of them.

The captain shook his head.

“For the love of God, the commonest man in all the world has the right to a few words.”

“Your few words would be more than my life is worth, sir.”

“As my words and thoughts are more than my life to me. It is my beliefs that have brought me to this place, Captain. I will share them one last time.”

“I cannot let you. Truly, I am sorry. But I cannot.”

“Will you deny me even now?” The composure in his voice had been supplanted by the heat of indignation and a fresh wave of panic. It was all going wrong.

“Sir, it is not in my hands. Forgive me.”

The captain reached out to touch him on the arm but the prisoner stepped back and his eyes burned in rebuke. “You may silence me, but you will never make me what I am not. I am no coward, Captain. I have no need of your arm!”

The captain withdrew, chided.

The time had come. There would be no more words, no more delay. No hiding place. This was the moment when both they and he would peer deep inside and discover what sort of man he truly was. He took another searing lungful of air, clinging to it as long as he could as he looked to the heavens. The priest had intoned that death was the ultimate triumph over worldly evil and pain but he discovered no inspiration, no shaft of sunlight to mark his way, no celestial salvation, only the hard steel sky of an English winter. He realized his fists remained clenched with the nails biting into the flesh of his palms; he forced his palms open and down the side of his trousers. A quiet prayer. Another breath. Then he bent, thanking God that his knees still had sufficient strength to guide him, lowering himself slowly and gracefully as he had practiced in his room during the night, and lay stretched out on the rough wooden platform.

Still from the crowd there came no sound. His words might not have lifted or inspired them, but at least they would have vindicated. He was drenched in fury

as the overwhelming injustice of it all hit him. Not even a chance to explain. He looked despairingly once more into the faces of the people, the men and women in whose name both sides had fought the war and who stood there now with blank stares, ever uncomprehending pawns. Yet, dullards all, they were his people, for whose salvation he was bound to fight against those who would corrupt the law for their own benefit. He had lost, but the justice of his cause would surely be known in the end. In the end. He would do it all again, if he had another chance, another life. It was his duty, he would have no choice. No more choice than he had now on this bare wooden stage, which still smelt of resin and fresh sawdust. And they would understand, wouldn't they? In the end...?

A plank creaked beside his left ear. The faces of the crowd seemed frozen in time, like a vast mural in which no one moved. His bladder was going—was it the cold or sheer terror? How much longer...? Concentrate, a prayer perhaps? Concentrate! He set on a small boy, no more than eight years old, in rags, with a dribble of crumbs on his dirt-smearred chin, who had stopped chewing his hunk of loaf and whose innocent brown eyes had grown wide with expectation and were focused on a point about a foot above his head. By God, but it was cold, colder than he had ever known! And suddenly the words he had fought so hard to remember came rushing back to him, as though someone had unlocked his soul.

And in the year sixteen hundred and forty-nine, they took their liege lord King Charles Stuart, Defender of the Faith and by hereditary right King of Great Britain and Ireland, and they cut off his head.

In the early hours of a winter's day, in a bedroom overlooking the forty-acre garden of a palace that hadn't existed at the time Charles Stuart took his walk into the next life, his descendant awoke with a start. The collar of his pajama shirt clung damply and he lay facedown on a block-hard pillow stained with sweat, yet he felt as cold as...As cold as death. He believed in the power of dreams and their ability to unravel the mysteries of the inner being, and it was his custom on waking to write down everything he could remember, reaching for the notebook he kept for the purpose beside his bed. But not this time. There was

no need. He would never forget the smell of the crowd mixed with resin and sawdust, nor the heavy metallic color of the sky on that frost-ridden afternoon. Nor the innocent, expectant brown eyes of a boy with a dirty chin smeared with crumbs. Nor that feeling of terrible despair that they had kept him from speaking out, rendering his sacrifice pointless and his death utterly in vain. He would never forget it. No matter how hard he tried.

PART ONE

One

Never cross an unknown bridge while riding an elephant.

—Chinese proverb

December: The First Week

It had not been a casual invitation; he never did anything casually. It had been an insistent, almost peremptory call from a man more used to command than to cajolment. He expected her for breakfast and it would not have crossed his mind that she might refuse. Particularly today, when they were changing Prime Ministers, one out and another in and long live the will of the people. It would be a day of great reckoning.

Benjamin Landless opened the door himself, which struck her as strange. It was an apartment for making impressions, overdesigned and impersonal, the sort of apartment where you'd expect if not a doorman then at least a secretary or a PA to be on hand, to fix the coffee, to flatter the guests while ensuring they didn't run off with any of the Impressionist paintings enriching the walls. Landless was no work of art himself. He had a broad, plum-red face that was fleshy and beginning to sag like a candle held too near the flame. His bulk was huge and his hands rough, like a laborer's, with a reputation to match. His *Chronicle* newspaper empire had been built by breaking strikes as well as careers; it had been as much he as anyone who had broken the career of the man who was, even now, waiting to drive to the Palace to relinquish the power and prestige of the office of Prime Minister.

“Miss Quine. Sally. I'm so glad you could come. I've wanted to meet you for

a long time.”

She knew that to be a lie. Had he wanted to meet her before he would most certainly have arranged it. He escorted her into the main room around which the penthouse apartment was built. Its external walls were fashioned entirely of high-impact glass, which offered a magnificent panorama of the Parliament buildings across the Thames, and half a rain forest seemed to have been sacrificed to cover the floor in intricate wooden patterns. Not bad for a boy from the backstreets of Bethnal Green.

He ushered her toward an oversized leather sofa in front of which stood a coffee table laden with trays of piping-hot breakfast food. There was no sign of the hidden helper who must only recently have prepared the dishes and laid out the crisp linen napkins. She declined any of the food but he was not offended. He took off his jacket and fussed about his own plate while she took a cup of black coffee and waited.

He ate his breakfast in single-minded fashion; etiquette and table manners were not his strong points. He offered little small talk, his attention focused on the eggs rather than on her, and for a while she wondered if he might have decided he'd made a mistake in inviting her. He was already making her feel vulnerable.

“Sally Quine. Born in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Aged thirty-two, and a girl who's already made quite a reputation for herself as an opinion pollster. In Boston, too, which is no easy city for a woman among all those thickheaded Micks.” She knew all about that; she'd married one. Landless had done his homework, had pawed over her past; he wanted to make that clear. His eyes searched for her reaction from beneath huge eyebrows tangled like rope. “It's a lovely city, Boston, know it well. Tell me, why did you leave everything you'd built there and come to England to start all over again? From nothing?”

He paused, but got no reply. “It was the divorce, wasn't it? And the death of the baby?”

He saw her jaw stiffen and wondered whether it was the start of a storm of outrage or a move for the door. But he knew there would be no tears. She wasn't the type; you could see that from her eyes. She was not unnaturally slim and pinched as the current fashion demanded; her beauty was more classical, the hips

perhaps a half inch too wide but all the curves well defined. She was immaculately presented. The skin of her face was smooth, darker and with more luster than any English rose, the features carefully drawn as though by a sculptor's knife. The lips were full and expressive, the cheekbones high, her long hair thick and of such a deep shade of black that he thought she might be Italian or Jewish. Yet her most exceptional feature was her nose, straight and a fraction long with a flattened end that twitched as she talked and nostrils that dilated with emphasis and emotion. It was the most provocative and sensuous nose he had ever seen; he couldn't help but imagine it on a pillow. Yet the eyes disturbed him, didn't belong on this face. They were shaped like almonds, full of autumnal russets and greens, translucent like a cat's, yet hidden behind oversized spectacles. They didn't sparkle like a woman's should, like they probably once had, he thought. They had an edge of mistrust, as if holding something back.

She looked out of the window, ignoring him. Christmas was but a couple of weeks away, yet there was no seasonal cheer in the air. The festive spirit lay discarded in the running gutters, and somehow it didn't seem a propitious day for changing Prime Ministers.

A seagull beaten inland by North Sea storms cartwheeled outside the window, its shrieks and insults penetrating the double glazing, envying them their breakfast before finally tumbling away through the blustery sky. She watched it disappear into the grayness.

"Don't expect me to be upset or offended, Mr. Landless. The fact that you have enough money and clout to do your homework doesn't impress me. Neither does it flatter me. I'm used to being chatted up by middle-aged businessmen." The insult was intended; she wanted him to know he wasn't going to get away with one-way traffic. "You want something from me. I've no idea what but I'll listen. So long as it's business."

She crossed her legs slowly and deliberately so that he would notice. From her days as a child she had had no doubts that men found her body appealing and their excessive attention meant she had never had the opportunity to treat her sex as something to treasure, only as a tool to carve a path through a difficult and ungenerous world. She had decided long ago that if sex were to be the currency of life then she would turn it into a business asset, to open the doors that would

otherwise be barred. And men could be such reliable dickheads.

“You’re very direct, Miss Quine.”

“I prefer to cut through it rather than spread it. And I can play your game.” She sat back into the sofa and began counting off the carefully manicured fingers of her left hand. “Ben Landless. Age...well, for your well-known vanity’s sake, let’s say not quite menopausal. A rough son of a bitch who was born to nothing and now controls one of the largest press operations in this country.”

“Soon to be the largest,” he interrupted quietly.

“Soon to take over United Newspapers,” she nodded, “when the Prime Minister you nominated, backed, and got elected virtually single-handed takes over in a couple of hours’ time and waves aside the minor inconvenience of his predecessor’s mergers and monopolies policy. You must’ve been celebrating all night; I’m surprised you had the appetite for breakfast. But you have the reputation of being a man with insatiable appetites. Of all kinds.” She spoke almost seductively in an accent that had been smoothed and carefully softened but not obliterated. She wanted people to take notice and to remember, to pick her out from the crowd. So the vowels were still New England, a shade too long and lazy for London, and the sentiments often rough as if they had been fashioned straight from the unemployment lines of Dorchester. “So what’s on your mind, Ben?”

A smile played around the publisher’s rubbery lips but his eyes remained unmoved, watching her closely. “There is no deal. I backed him because I thought he was the best man for the job. There’s no private payoff. I shall take my chances, just like all the rest.”

She suspected that was the second lie of the conversation, but let it pass.

“Whatever else happens, it’s a new era. A change of Prime Minister means fresh challenges. And opportunities. I suspect he’ll be more relaxed about letting people make money than was Henry Collingridge. That’s good news for me. And potentially for you.”

“With all the economic indicators scooting downhill?”

“That’s just the point. Your opinion-research company has been in business for...what, twenty months? You’ve made a good start, you’re well respected. But you’re small, and small boats like yours could be swamped if it gets rough

over the next couple of years. Anyway, you've no more patience than I do in running a shoestring operation. You want to make it big, to be on top. And for that you need cash."

"Not your cash. If I had newspaper money poured into my operation it would ruin every shred of credibility I've built. My business is supposed to be objective analysis, not smears and scares with a few naked starlets thrown in to boost circulation."

He ran his thick tongue around his mouth as if trying absentmindedly to dislodge a piece of breakfast. "You underestimate yourself," he muttered. He produced a toothpick, which he used like a sword swallower to probe into a far corner of his jaw. "Opinion polls are not objective analysis. They're news. If an editor wants to get an issue rolling he commissions people like you to carry out some research. He knows what answers he wants and what headline he's going to run, he just needs a few statistics to give the whole thing the smack of authenticity. Polls are the weapons of civil war. Kill off a government, show the nation's morals are shot to hell, establish that we all love Palestinians or hate apple pie."

He grew more animated as he warmed to his theme. His hands had come down from his mouth and were grasped in front of him as if throttling an incompetent editor. There was no sign of the toothpick; perhaps he had simply swallowed it, as he did most things that got in his way.

"Information is power," he continued. "And money. A lot of your work is done in the City, for instance, with companies involved in takeover bids. Your little polls tell them how shareholders and the financial institutions might react, whether they'll be supportive or simply dump the company for a bit of quick cash. Takeover bids are wars, life or death for the companies concerned. That information of yours has great value."

"And we charge a very good fee for such work."

"I'm not talking thousands or tens of thousands," he barked dismissively. "That's petty cash in the City. The sort of information we're talking about allows you to name your own figure." He paused to see if there would be a squawk of impugned professional integrity; instead she reached behind her to pull down her jacket, which had ridden up against the back of the sofa. As she did so she

exposed and accentuated the curves of her breasts. He took it as a sign of encouragement.

“You need money. To expand. To grab the polling industry by the balls and to become its undisputed queen. Otherwise you go belly-up in the recession. Be a great waste.”

“I’m flattered by your avuncular interest.”

“You’re not here to be flattered. You’re here to listen to a proposition.”

“I’ve known that from the moment I got your invitation. Although for a moment there I thought we’d wound up on the lecture circuit.”

Instead of responding he levered himself out of his chair and crossed to the window. The gun-gray clouds had descended still lower and it had begun to rain again. A barge was battling to make headway through the ebbing tide beneath Westminster Bridge where the December winds had turned the usually tranquil river into a muddy, ill-tempered soup of urban debris and bilge oil. He gazed in the direction of the Houses of Parliament, his hands stuffed firmly into the folds of his tentlike trousers, scratching himself.

“Our leaders over there, the fearless guardians of the nation’s welfare. Their jobs are full of shared confidences, information waiting to be sensationalized and abused. And every single one of those bastards would leak the lot if it served their purposes. There’s not a political editor in town who doesn’t know every word of what’s gone on within an hour of a Cabinet meeting finishing, nor a general who hasn’t leaked a confidential report before doing battle over the defense budget. And you find me the politician who hasn’t tried to undermine a rival by starting gossip about his sex life.” His hands flapped in his trouser pockets like the sails of a great ship trying to catch the wind. “Prime Ministers are the worst,” he snorted contemptuously. “If they want to rid themselves of a troublesome Minister, they’ll assassinate him in the press beforehand with tales of drunkenness or disloyalty. Inside information. It’s what makes the world go round.”

“Perhaps that’s why I never went into politics,” she mused.

He turned toward her, to discover her seemingly engrossed in removing a stray hair from her sweater. When she was sure she had his full attention she stopped toying with him and hid once again inside the folds of her silk-cotton

jacket. “So what is it you are going to suggest I do?”

He sat down beside her on the sofa. No jacket, only a swathe of tailored shirt, now at close quarters. His physical presence was, surprisingly to her fashion-conscious eye, indeed impressive.

“I’m going to suggest you stop being an also-ran, a woman who may strive for years to make it to the top yet never succeed. I’m suggesting a partnership. With me. Your expertise”—they both knew he meant inside information—“backed by my financial clout. It would be a formidable combination.”

“But what’s in it for me?”

“A guarantee of survival. A chance to make a lot of money, to get where you want to go, to the top of the pile. To show your former husband that not only can you survive without him but even succeed. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“And how is all this supposed to happen?”

“We pool our resources. Your information and my money. If there’s any action going on in the City I want to be part of it. Get in there ahead of the pack and the potential rewards are huge. You and I split any profit right down the middle.”

She brought her forefinger and thumb together in front of her face. Her nose offered an emphatic bob. “Excuse me, but if I understand you right, isn’t that just the tiniest bit illegal?”

He responded with silence and a look of unquenchable boredom.

“And it sounds as if you would be taking all the risk,” she continued.

“Risk is a fact of life. I don’t mind taking the risk with a partner I know and trust. I’m sure we could get to trust each other very closely.”

He reached out and brushed the back of her hand; a glaze of distrust flashed into her eyes.

“Before you ask, getting you into bed is not an essential part of the deal—no, don’t look so damned innocent and offended. You’ve been flashing your tits at me from the moment you sat down so let us, as you say, cut through it all and get down to basics. Getting you on your back would be a pleasure but this is business and in my book business comes first. I’ve no intention of cocking up what could be a first-class deal by letting my brains slip between my legs. We’re here to screw the competition, not each other. So...what’s it to be? Are you

interested?”

As if on cue a phone began to warble in a distant part of the room. With a grunt of exasperation he levered himself up, but as he crossed the room to answer the call there was also anticipation; his office had the strictest instruction not to bother him unless...He barked briefly into the phone before returning to his guest, his hands spread wide.

“Extraordinary. My cup runs over. That was a message from Downing Street. Apparently our new Prime Minister wishes me to call on him as soon as he’s back from the Palace, so I’m afraid I must rush off. Wouldn’t do to keep him waiting.” His candle-wax face was contorted in what passed for a grin. She would be the focus of his attention for only a few moments longer: another place, another partner beckoned. He was already climbing into his coat. “So make it a very special day for me. Accept.”

She stretched for her handbag on the sofa but he was there also, his huge laborer’s hand completely encasing her own. They were very close and she could feel the heat from his body, smell him, sense the power beneath the bulk that was capable of crushing her instantly if he so chose. But there was no threat in his manner, his touch was surprisingly gentle. For a moment she caught herself feeling disarmed, almost aroused. Her nose twitched.

“You go sort out the nation’s balance of payments. I’ll think about mine.”

“Think carefully, Sally, and not too long.”

“I’ll consult my horoscope. I’ll be in touch.”

At that moment the seagull made another screeching attack, hurling insults as it pounded against the window, leaving it dripping with guano. He cursed.

“It’s supposed to be a lucky omen,” she laughed lightly.

“Lucky?” he growled as he led her out of the door. “Tell that to the bloody window cleaner!”

Two

A man should sleep uneasy in his palace if he wishes to keep it.

It hadn't been as he had expected. The crowds had been much thinner than in years gone by; indeed, fewer than two dozen people standing outside the Palace gates, skulking tortoise-like beneath umbrellas and plastic raincoats, could scarcely be counted as a crowd at all. Maybe the great British public simply didn't give a damn anymore who their Prime Minister was.

He sat back in the car, a man of bearing and distinction amid the leather, his tired smile implying a casual, almost reluctant acceptance of his lot. He had a long face, the skin aging but still taut beneath the chin, austere like a Roman bust with lank silver-sandy hair carefully combed away from the face. He was dressed in his habitual charcoal-gray suit with two buttons and a brightly colored, almost foppish silk handkerchief that erupted out of the breast pocket, an affectation he had adopted to distance himself from the Westminster hordes in their banal Christmas-stockings ties and Marks & Spencer suits. Every few seconds he would bend low, stretching down behind the seat to suck at the cigarette he kept hidden below the window line, the only outward show of the tension and excitement that bubbled within. He took a deep lungful of nicotine and for a while didn't move, feeling his throat go dry as he waited for his heart to slow.

The Right Honorable Francis Ewan Urquhart, MP, gave a perfunctory wave to the huddled group of onlookers from the rear seat of his new ministerial Jaguar as it passed into the forecourt of Buckingham Palace. His wife Mortima had wanted to lower the window in order for the assorted cameramen to obtain a

better view of them both, but discovered that the windows on the official car were more than an inch thick and cemented in place. She had been assured by the driver that nothing less than a direct hit from a mortar with armor-piercing shells would open them.

The last few hours had seemed all but comic. After the result of the leadership ballot had been announced at six o'clock the previous evening he had rushed back to his house in Cambridge Street and waited there with his wife. For what, they hadn't quite known. What was he supposed to do now? There had been no one to tell him. He had hovered beside the phone but it stubbornly refused to ring. He'd rather expected a call of congratulation from some of his parliamentary colleagues, perhaps from the President of the United States, or at the very least his aunt, but already the new caution of his colleagues toward a man formerly their equal and now their master was beginning to exert itself; the President wouldn't call until he'd been confirmed as Prime Minister, and his aged aunt apparently thought his telephone would be permanently engaged for days. In desperation for someone with whom to share their joy he and Mortima took to posing for photo calls at the front door and chatting with the journalists on the pavement outside.

Urquhart, or FU as he was often known, was not naturally gregarious; a childhood spent roaming alone with no more than a dog and a satchelful of books across the heathers of the family estates in Scotland had attuned him well to his own company, but it was never enough. He needed others, not simply to mix with but against whom to measure himself. It was what had driven him South, that and the financial despair of the Scottish Highlands. A grandfather who had died with no thought of how to avoid the venality of the Exchequer; a father whose painful sentimentality toward and attachment to tradition had brought the estate's finances to their knees. He had watched his parents' fortunes and their social position wither like apple blossoms in snow. Urquhart had gotten out while there was still something to extract from the heavily mortgaged moors, ignoring his father's entreaties on family honor that in despair had turned to tearful denunciation. It had been scarcely better at Oxford. His childhood companionship with books had led to a brilliant academic career and to a readership in Economics, but he had not taken to the life. He had grown to

despise the crumpled corduroy uniforms and fuzzy moralizing so many of his colleagues seemed to dress and die in and found himself losing patience with the dank river mists that swept off the Cherwell and the petty political posturings of the dons' dinner table. One evening the Senior Common Room had indulged in mass intellectual orgasm as they had flayed a junior Treasury Minister within an inch of his composure; for most of those present it had merely confirmed their views of the inadequacies of Westminster, for Urquhart it had reeked only of the opportunities. So he had turned his back on both the teeming moors and dreaming spires and had risen fast, while taking great care all the while to preserve his reputation as an academic. It made other men feel inferior, and in politics that was half the game.

It was only after his second photo call, about eight thirty p.m., that the telephone jumped back to life. A call from the Palace, the Private Secretary. Would he find it convenient to come by at about nine tomorrow morning? Yes, he would find that most convenient, thank you. Then the other calls began to flow in. Parliamentary colleagues unable any longer to control their anxieties about what job he might in the morning either offer to or strip from them. Newspaper editors uncertain whether to fawn or threaten their way to that exclusive first interview. Solicitous mandarins of the civil service anxious to leave none of the administrative details to chance. The chairman of the party's advertising agency, who had been drinking and couldn't stop gushing. And Ben Landless. There had been no real conversation, simply coarse laughter down the phone line and the unmistakable sound of a champagne cork popping. Urquhart thought he might have heard at least one woman giggling in the background. Landless was celebrating, as he had every right to. He had been Urquhart's first and most forthright supporter, and between them they had maneuvered, twisted, and tormented Henry Collingridge into premature retirement. Urquhart owed him, more than he could measure, while characteristically the newspaper proprietor had not been coy in identifying an appropriate yardstick.

He was still thinking about Landless as the Jaguar shot the right-hand arch at the front of the Palace and pulled into the central courtyard. The driver applied the brakes cautiously, aware not only of his regal surroundings but also of the fact that you cannot stop more than four tons of reinforced Jaguar in a hurry

without making life very uncomfortable for the occupants and running the risk of triggering the automatic panic device that transmitted a priority distress alert to the Information Room at Scotland Yard. The car drew to a halt not beneath the Doric columns of the Grand Entrance used by most visitors but beside a much smaller door to the side of the courtyard, where, smiling in welcome, the Private Secretary stood. With great speed yet with no apparent hurry he had opened the door and ushered forward an equerry to spirit Mortima Urquhart off for coffee and polite conversation while he led Urquhart up a small but exquisitely gilded staircase to a waiting room scarcely broader than it was high. For a minute they hovered, surrounded by oils of Victorian horse-racing scenes and admiring a small yet uninhibited marble statue of Renaissance lovers until the Private Secretary, without any apparent consultation of his watch, announced that it was time. He stepped toward a pair of towering doors, knocked gently three times, and swung them open, motioning Urquhart forward.

“Mr. Urquhart. Welcome!”

Against the backdrop of a heavy crimson damask drape that dressed one of the full-length windows of his sitting room stood the King. He offered a nod of respect in exchange for Urquhart’s deferential bow and motioned him forward. The politician paced across the room and not until he had almost reached the Monarch did the other take a small step forward and extend his hand. Behind Urquhart the doors had already closed; the two men, one ruler by hereditary right and the other by political conquest, were alone.

Urquhart remarked to himself how cold the room was, a good two or three degrees below what others would regard as comfortable, and how surprisingly limp the regal handshake. As they stood facing each other neither man seemed to know quite how to start. The King tugged at his cuffs nervously and gave a tight laugh.

“Worry not, Mr. Urquhart. Remember, this is the first time for me, too.” The King, heir for half a lifetime and Monarch for less than four months, guided him toward two chairs that stood either side of a finely crafted white stone chimneypiece. Along the walls, polished marble columns soared to support a canopied ceiling covered in elaborate classical reliefs of Muses, while in the alcoves formed between the stone columns were hung oversized and heavily

oiled portraits of royal ancestors painted by some of the greatest artists of their age. Handcarved pieces of furniture stood around a huge Axminster, patterned with ornate red and gold flowers and stretching from one end of the vast room to the other. This was a sitting room, but only for a king or emperor, and it might not have changed in a hundred years. The sole note of informality was struck by a desk, placed in a distant corner to catch the light cast by one of the garden windows and completely covered by an eruption of papers, pamphlets, and books that all but submerged the single telephone. The King had a reputation for conscientious reading; from the state of his desk it seemed a reputation well earned.

“I’m not quite sure where to start, Mr. Urquhart,” the King began as they settled in the chairs. “We are supposed to be making history but it appears there is no form for these occasions. I have nothing to give you, no rich words of advice, not even a seal of office to hand over. I don’t have to invite you to kiss my hand or take any oath. All I have to do is ask you to form a Government. You will, won’t you?”

The obvious earnestness of his Sovereign caused the guest to smile. Urquhart was in his early sixties, ten years older than the King, although the difference appeared less; the younger man’s face was stretched and drawn beyond its years with a hairline in rapid retreat and the beginnings of a stoop. It was said that the King had replaced his complete lack of material concerns with a lifetime of tortured spiritual questioning, and the strain was evident. While Urquhart had the easy smile and small talk of the politician, the intellectual aloofness of an academic, and the ability to relax of a man trained to dissemble and if necessary to deceive, the King had none of this. Urquhart felt no nervousness, only the cold; indeed, he began to pity the younger man’s gravity. He leaned forward.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It will be my honor to attempt to form a Government on your behalf. I can only hope that my colleagues won’t have changed their minds since yesterday.”

The King missed the mild humor as he struggled with his own thoughts, a deep furrow slicing across the forehead of a face that had launched a million commemorative mugs, plates, tea trays, T-shirts, towels, ashtrays, and even the occasional chamber pot, most of them made in the Far East. “You know, I do

hope it's auspicious, a new King and new Prime Minister. There's so much to be done. Here we are on the very brink of a new millennium, new horizons. Tell me, what are your plans?"

Urquhart spread his hands wide. "I scarcely...there's been so little time, sir. I shall need a week or so, to reshuffle the Government, set out some priorities..." He was waffling. He knew the dangers of being too prescriptive and his leadership campaign had offered years of experience rather than comprehensive solutions. He treated all dogma with a detached academic disdain and had watched with grim satisfaction while younger opponents tried to make up for their lack of seniority with detailed plans and promises, only to discover they had advanced too far and exposed vulnerable ideological flanks. Urquhart's strategy for dealing with aggressive questioning from journalists had been to offer a platitude about the national interest and to phone their editors; it had gotten him through the twelve tumultuous days of the leadership race, but he had doubts how long such a game plan would last. "Above all I shall want to listen."

Why was it that politicians uttered such appalling clichés that their audiences nevertheless seemed so blithe to accept? The Monarch was nodding his head in silent agreement, his tense body rocking gently to and fro as he sat on the edge of his chair. "During your campaign you said that we were at a crossroads, facing the challenges of a new century while building on the best from the old. 'Encouraging change while preserving continuity.'"

Urquhart acknowledged the phrase.

"Bravo, Mr. Urquhart, more power to your hand. It's an admirable summation of what I believe my own job to be, too." He grasped his hands together to form a cathedral of bony knuckles, his frown unremitting. "I hope I shall be able to find—that you will allow me—some way, however small, of helping you in your task." There was an edge of apprehension in his voice, like a man accustomed to disappointment.

"But of course, sir, I would be only too delighted...did you have anything specific in mind?"

The King's fingers shifted to the knot of his unfashionably narrow tie and twisted it awkwardly. "Mr. Urquhart, the specifics are the stuff of party politics, and that's your province. It cannot be mine."

“Sir, I would be most grateful for any thoughts you have...” Urquhart heard himself saying.

“Would you? Would you really?” There was a rising note of eagerness in his voice that he tried to dispel, too late, with a chuckle. “But I must be careful. While I was merely heir to the Throne I was allowed the luxury of having my own opinions and was even granted the occasional privilege of expressing them, but Kings cannot let themselves be dragged into partisan debate. My advisers lecture me daily on the point.”

“Sir,” Urquhart interjected, “we are alone. I would welcome any advice.”

“No, not for the moment. You have much to do and I must not delay you.” He rose to indicate that the audience was at an end, but he made no move toward the door, steepling his fingers to the point of his bony, uneven nose and remaining deep in thought, like a man at prayer. “Perhaps—if you will allow me?—there is just one point. I’ve been reading the papers.” He waved toward the chaos of his desk. “The old Department of Industry buildings on Victoria Street, which are to be demolished. The current buildings are hideous, such a bad advertisement for the twentieth century, they deserve to go. I’d love to drive the bulldozer myself. But the site is one of the most important in Westminster, near the Parliament buildings and cheek by jowl with the Abbey itself, one of our greatest ecclesiastical monuments. A rare opportunity for us to grasp, don’t you think, to create something worthy of our era, something we can pass on to future generations with pride? I do so hope that you, your Government, will ensure the site is developed...how shall I put it?” The clipped boarding school tones searched for an appropriately diplomatic phrase. “Sympathetically.” He nodded in self-approval and seemed emboldened by Urquhart’s intent stare. “Encouraging change while preserving continuity, as one wise fellow put it? I know the Environment Secretary is considering several different proposals and, frankly, some of them are so outlandish they would disgrace a penal colony. Can’t we for once in our parsimonious lives make a choice in keeping with the existing character of Westminster Abbey, create something that will respect the achievements of our forefathers, not insult them by allowing some misguided modernist to”—his lips quivered in indignation—“to construct a stainless-steel mausoleum that crams people on the inside and has its mechanical entrails

displayed without?” Passion had begun to overtake the diffidence and a flush had risen to color his cheeks.

Urquhart smiled in reassurance, an expression that came as easily as oxygen. “Sir, I can assure you that the Government”—he wanted to say “my Government” but the words still seemed to dry behind his dentures—“will have environmental concerns at the forefront of their considerations.” More platitudes, but what else was he supposed to say?

“Oh, I do hope so. Perhaps I should apologize for raising the matter, but I understand the Environment Secretary is to make a final decision at any time.”

For a moment Urquhart felt like reminding the King that it was a quasi-judicial matter, that many months and more millions had been poured into an official planning inquiry that now awaited the Solomon-like deliberation of the relevant Minister. Urquhart might have suggested that, to some, the King’s intervention would look no better than jury nobbling. But he didn’t. “I’ll look into it. You have my word, sir.”

The King’s pale blue eyes had a permanent downward cast that made him appear always sincere and frequently mournful as though burdened by some sense of guilt, yet now they sparkled with unmistakable enthusiasm. He reached out for the other man’s hand. “Mr. Urquhart, I believe we are going to get along famously.”

Seemingly unbidden, the King’s Private Secretary was once more at the open doors and with a bow of respect Urquhart made his way toward them. He had all but crossed the threshold when he heard the words thrown after him. “Thank you once again, Prime Minister!”

Prime Minister. There it was. The first time. He’d done it.

“So...what did he say?” They were in the car on the way to Downing Street before his wife roused him from his reverie.

“What? Oh, not a lot. Wished me well. Talked about the great opportunities ahead. Went on about a building site near Westminster Abbey. Wants me to ensure it’s built in mock Tudor or some such nonsense.”

“Will you humor him?”

“Mortima, if sincerity could build temples then the whole of England would be covered in his follies, but this is no longer the Dark Ages. The King’s job is to give garden parties and to save us the bother of electing someone else president, not to go round interfering.”

Mortima snorted her agreement as she fumbled impatiently through her bag in search of lipstick. She was a Colquhoun by birth, a family that could trace its descent in direct line from the ancient kings of Scotland. They had long since been stripped of the feudal estates and heirlooms, but she had never lost her sense of social positioning or her belief that most modern aristocracy were interlopers—including “the current Royal Family,” as she would frequently put it. Royalty was merely an accident of birth, and of marriage and of death and the occasional execution or bloody murder; it could just as easily have been a Colquhoun as a Windsor, and all the more pure stock for that. At times she became distinctly tedious on the subject, and Urquhart decided to head her off.

“Of course I shall humor him. Better a King with a conscience than not, I suspect, and the last thing I need is sour grapes growing all over the Palace. Anyway, there are other battles to be fought and I want him and his popularity firmly behind me. I shall need it.” His tone was serious and his eyes set upon a future of perceived challenges. “But at the end of the day, Mortima, *I* am the Prime Minister and he is the King. He does what I tell him to, not the other way around. The job’s ceremony and sanctimony, that’s all. He’s the Monarch, not a bloody architect.”

They were driving past the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, slowing down as they approached the barriers at the head of Downing Street, and Urquhart was relieved to see there were rather more people here to wave and cheer him on for the benefit of the cameras than at the Palace. He thought he recognized a couple of young faces; perhaps party headquarters had turned out their rent-a-crowd. His wife idly slicked down a stray lock of his hair while his mind turned to the reshuffle and the remarks he would make on the doorstep, which would be televised around the world.

“So what are you going to do?” Mortima pressed.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Urquhart muttered out of the corner of his mouth as he smiled for the cameras as the car turned into Downing Street. “As a new King

the man is inexperienced, and as constitutional Monarch he is impotent. He has all the menace and bite of a rubber duck. But fortunately on this matter I happen to agree with him. Away with modernism!” He waved as a policeman came forward to open the heavy car door. “So it really can’t be of any consequence...”

Three

Loyalty is the vice of the underclasses. I hope I am above such things.

“Put the papers down, David. For God’s sake take your nose out of them for just a minute of our day together.” The voice was tense, more nervous than aggressive.

The gray eyes remained impassive, not moving from the sheaf of documents upon which they had been fixed ever since he had sat down at the breakfast table. The only facial reaction was an irascible twitch of the neatly trimmed mustache. “I’m off in ten minutes, Fiona; I simply have to finish them. Today of all days.”

“There’s something else we have to finish. So put the bloody papers down!”

With reluctance David Mycroft raised his eyes in time to see his wife’s hand shaking so vigorously that the coffee splashed over the edge of her cup. “What on earth’s the matter?”

“You. And me. That’s the matter.” She was struggling to control herself. “There’s nothing left to our marriage and I want out.”

The King’s press aide and principal public spokesman switched automatically into diplomatic gear. “Look, let’s not have a row, not now, I’m in a hurry and...”

“Don’t you realize? We never have rows. That’s the problem!” The cup smashed down into the saucer, overturning and spreading a menacing brown stain across the tablecloth. For the first time he lowered his sheaf of papers, every movement careful and deliberate, as was every aspect of his life.

“Perhaps I could get some time off. Not today, but...We could go away together. I know it’s been a long time since we had any real chance to talk...”

“It’s not lack of time, David! We could have all the time in the world and it would make no difference. It’s you, and me. The reason we don’t have any rows is because we have nothing to argue about. Nothing at all. There’s no passion, nothing. All we have is a shell. I used to dream that once the children were off our hands it might all change.” She shook her head. “But I’m tired of deluding myself. It will never change. You will never change. And I don’t suppose I will.” There was pain and she was dabbing her eyes, yet held her control. This was no flash of temper.

“Are you...feeling all right, Fiona? You know, women at your time of life...”

She smarted at his patronizing idiocy. “Women in their forties, David, have their needs, their feelings. But how would you know? When did you last look at me as a woman? When did you last look at any woman?” She returned the insult, meaning it to hurt. She knew that to break through she was going to have to batter down the walls he had built around himself. He had always been so closed, private, a man of diminutive stature who had sought to cope with his perceived physical inadequacies by being utterly formal and punctilious in everything he did. Never a hair on his small and rather boyish head out of place, even the streaks of gray beginning to appear around his dark temples looking elegant rather than aging. He always ate breakfast with his jacket on and buttoned.

“Look, can’t this wait? You know I have to be at the Palace any—”

“The bloody Palace again. It’s your home, your life, your lover. The only emotion you ever show nowadays is about your ridiculous job and your wretched King.”

“Fiona! That’s uncalled for. Leave him out of this.” The mustache with its hint of red bristled in indignation.

“How can I? You serve him, not me. His needs come before mine. He’s helped ruin our marriage far more effectively than any mistress, so don’t expect me to bow and fawn like the rest.”

He glanced anxiously at his watch. “Look, for goodness’ sake, can we talk about this tonight? Perhaps I can get back early.”

She was dabbing at the coffee stain with her napkin, trying to delay meeting his gaze. Her voice was calmer, resolved. “No, David. Tonight I shall be with

somebody else.”

“There’s someone else?” There was a catch in his throat; he had clearly never considered the possibility. “Since when?”

She looked up from the mess on the table with eyes that were now defiant and steady, no longer trying to evade. This had been coming for so long, she couldn’t hide from it anymore. “Since two years after we got married, David, there has been someone else. A succession of ‘someone elses.’ You never had it in you to satisfy me—I never blamed you for that, really I didn’t, it was just the luck of the draw. What I bitterly resent is that you never even tried. I was never that important to you, not as a woman. I have never been more than a housekeeper, a laundress, your twenty-four-hour skivvy, an object to parade around the dinner circuit. Someone to give you respectability at Court. Even the children were only for show.”

“Not true.” But there was no real passion in his protest, any more than there had been passion in their marriage. She had always known they were sexually incompatible; he seemed all too willing to pour his physical drive into his job while at first she had contented herself with the social cachet his work at the Palace brought them. But not for long. In truth she couldn’t even be sure who the father of her second child was, while if he had doubts on the matter he didn’t seem to care. He had “done his duty,” as he once put it, and that had been an end of it. Even now as she poured scorn on him as a cuckold she couldn’t get him to respond. There should be self-righteous rage somewhere, surely, wasn’t that what his blessed code of chivalry called for? But he seemed so empty, hollow inside. Their marriage had been nothing but a rat’s maze within which both led unrelated lives, meeting only as if by accident before passing on their separate ways. Now she was leaping for the exit.

“Fiona, can’t we—”

“No, David. We can’t.”

The telephone had started ringing in its insistent, irresistible manner, summoning him to his duty, a task to which he had dedicated his life and to which he was now asked to surrender his marriage. We’ve had some great times, haven’t we, he wanted to argue, but he could only remember times that were good rather than great and those were long, long ago. She had always come a

distant second, not consciously but now, in their new mood of truth, undeniably. He looked at Fiona through watery eyes that expressed sorrow and begged forgiveness; there was no spite. But there was fear. Marriage had been like a great sheet anchor in strong emotional seas, preventing him from being tossed about by tempestuous winds and blown in directions that were reckless and lacking in restraint. Wedlock. It had worked precisely because it had been form without substance, like the repetitive chanting of psalms that had been forced on him during his miserable school years at Ampleforth. Marriage had been a burden but, for him, a necessary one, a distraction, a diversion. Self-denial, but also self-protection. And now the anchor chains were being cut.

Fiona sat motionless across a table littered with toast and fragments of eggshell and bone china, the household clutter and crumbs that represented the total sum of their life together. The telephone still demanded him. Without a further word he rose to answer it.

Four

The scent of victory blinds many men. The game isn't over until the bayonet has been run in and twisted.

“Come in, Tim, and close the door.”

Urquhart was sitting in the Cabinet Room, alone except for the new arrival, occupying the only chair around the coffin-shaped table that had arms. Before him was a simple leather folder and a telephone. The rest of the table stood bare.

“Not exactly luxurious, is it? But I’m beginning to like it.” Urquhart chuckled.

Tim Stamper looked around, surprised to discover no one else present. He was—or had been until half an hour ago when Urquhart had exchanged the commission of Chief Whip for that of Prime Minister—the other man’s loyal deputy. The role of Chief Whip is mysterious, that of his deputy invisible, but together they had combined into a force of incalculable influence, since the Whip’s Office is the base from where discipline within the Parliamentary Party is maintained through a judicious mixture of team spirit, arm twisting, and outright thuggery.

Stamper had ideal qualities for the job—a lean, pinched face with protruding nose and dark eyes of exceptional brightness that served to give him the appearance of a ferret, and a capacity for rummaging about in the dark corners of his colleagues’ private lives to uncover their personal and political weaknesses. It was a job of vulnerabilities, guarding one’s own while exploiting others’. He had long been Urquhart’s protégé; fifteen years younger, a former estate agent from Essex, it was an attraction of opposites. Urquhart was sophisticated,

elegant, academic, highly polished; Stamper was none of these and wore off-the-rack suits from British Home Stores. Yet what they shared was perhaps more important—ambition, an arrogance that for one was intellectual and for the other instinctive, and an understanding of power. The combination had proved stunningly effective in plotting Urquhart’s path to the premiership. Stamper’s turn would come, that had been the implicit promise to the younger man. Now he was here to collect.

“Prime Minister.” He offered a theatrical bow of respect. “Prime Minister,” Stamper repeated, practicing a different intonation as if trying to sell him the freehold. He had a familiar, almost camp manner that hid the steel beneath, and the two colleagues began to laugh in a fashion that managed to be both mocking and conspiratorial, like two burglars after a successful night out. Stamper was careful to ensure he stopped laughing first; it wouldn’t do to outmock a Prime Minister. They had shared so much over recent months, but he was aware that Prime Ministers have a tendency to hold back from their colleagues, even their fellow conspirators, and Urquhart didn’t continue laughing for long.

“Tim, I wanted to see you entirely *à deux*.”

“Probably means I’m due to get a bollocking. What’ve I done, anyway?” His tone was light, yet Urquhart noticed the anxious downward cast at the corner of Stamper’s mouth and discovered he was enjoying the feeling of mastery implied by his colleague’s discomfort.

“Sit down, Tim. Opposite me.”

Stamper took the chair and looked across at his old friend. The sight confirmed just how much their relationship had changed. Urquhart sat before a large oil portrait of Robert Walpole, the first modern and arguably greatest Prime Minister who had watched for two centuries over the deliberations in this room of the mighty and mendacious, the woeful and miserably weak. Urquhart was his successor, elevated by his peers, anointed by his Monarch and now installed. The telephone beside him could summon statesmen to their fate or command the country to war. It was a power shared with no other man in the realm; indeed, he was no longer just a man but, for better or worse, was now the stuff of history. Whether in that history he would rate a footnote or an entire chapter only time would tell.

Urquhart sensed the swirling emotions of the other man. “Different, isn’t it, Tim? And we shall never be able to turn back the clock. It didn’t hit me until a moment ago, not while I was at the Palace, not with the media at the front door here, not even when I walked inside. It all seemed like a great theater piece and I’d simply been assigned one of the roles. Yet as I stepped across the threshold every worker in Downing Street was assembled in the hallway, from the highest civil servant in the land to the cleaners and telephonists, perhaps two hundred of them. They greeted me with such enthusiasm that I almost expected bouquets to be thrown. The exhilaration of applause.” He sighed. “It was beginning to go to my head, until I remembered that scarcely an hour beforehand they’d gone through the same routine with my predecessor as he drove off to oblivion. That lot’ll probably applaud at their own funerals.” He moistened his thin lips, as was his habit when reflecting. “Then they brought me here, to the Cabinet Room, and left me on my own. It was completely silent, as though I’d fallen into a time capsule. Everything in order, meticulous, except for the Prime Minister’s chair, which had been drawn back. For me! It was only when I touched it, ran my finger across its back, realized no one was going to shout at me if I sat down, that finally it dawned on me. It isn’t just another chair or another job, but the only one of its kind. You know I’m not by nature a humble man yet, dammit, for a moment it got to me.” There was a moment of prolonged silence, before his palm smacked down on the table. “But don’t worry. I’ve recovered!”

Urquhart laughed that conspiratorial laugh once more, while Stamper could only manage a tight smile as he waited for the reminiscing to stop and for his fate to be pronounced.

“To business, Tim. There’s much to be done and I shall want you, as always, right by my side.”

Stamper’s smile broadened.

“You’re going to be my Party Chairman.”

The smile rapidly disappeared. Stamper couldn’t hide his confusion and disappointment.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find you some ministerial sinecure to get you a seat around the Cabinet table—Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster or some such nonsense. But for the moment I want your mittens firmly on the Party machine.”

Stamper's jaw was working furiously, trying to marshal his arguments. "But it's been scarcely six months since the last election, and a long haul before the next one. Three, maybe four years. Counting paper clips and sorting out squabbles among local constituency chairmen is scarcely my strong suit, Francis. You should know that after what we've been through together." It was an appeal to their old friendship.

"Think it through, Tim. We've a parliamentary majority of twenty-two and a party that's been torn apart by the recent leadership battle. And we are just about to get a beating from a swine of a recession. We're no better than even in the opinion polls and our majority won't last three or four years. We'll be shot to pieces at every by-election we face and we've only to lose fewer than a dozen seats before this Government is dead. Unless, that is, you can guarantee me no by-elections, that you've found some magic means of ensuring none of our esteemed colleagues will be caught canvassing in a brothel, misappropriating church funds, or simply succumbing to senility and excessive old age?"

"Doesn't sound like a lot of fun for a Party Chairman, either."

"Tim, the next couple of years are going to be hell, and we probably don't have a sufficient majority to survive long enough for us to get through the recession. If it's painful for the Party Chairman it'll be bloody agony for the Prime Minister."

Stamper was silent, unconvinced, unsure what to say. His excitement and dreams of a few moments before had suddenly frayed.

"Our futures can be measured almost in moments," Urquhart continued. "We'll get a small boost in popularity because of my honeymoon period while people give me the benefit of their doubt. That will last no longer than March."

"You're very precise about that."

"Indeed I am. For in March there has to be a Budget. It'll be a bastard. We let everything rip in the markets to get us through the last election campaign and the day of judgment for that little lot is just around the corner. We borrowed off Peter to buy off Paul, now we have to go back to pick the pockets of them both. They're not going to care for it." He paused, blinking rapidly as he ordered his thoughts. "That's not all. We'll take a beating from Brunei."

"What?"

“The Sultan of that tiny oil-infested state is a great Anglophile and one of the world’s most substantial holders of sterling. A loyal friend. Unfortunately not only does he know what a mess we’re in, but he’s also got his own problems. So he’s going to unload some of his sterling—at least three billion worth sloshing around the markets like orphans in search of a home. That’ll crucify the currency and stretch the recession on for probably another year. For old time’s sake he says he’ll sell only as and when we suggest. So long as it’s before the next Budget.”

Stamper found difficulty in swallowing, his mouth had run dry.

Urquhart began to laugh but without the slightest hint of humor. “And there’s more, Tim, there’s more! To top it all the Attorney General’s office has quietly let it be known that the trial of Sir Jasper Harrod will begin immediately after Easter. Which is March the twenty-fourth, to save you looking it up. What do you know of Sir Jasper?”

“Only what most people know, I guess. Self-made megamillionaire, chairman of the country’s biggest computer-leasing operation. Does a lot of work with government departments and local authorities and has gotten himself accused of paying substantial backhanders all over the place to keep hold of his contracts. Big into charities, I seem to remember, which is why he got his K.”

“He got his knighthood, Tim, because he was one of the party’s biggest contributors. Loyally and discreetly over many years.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Having come to our aid whenever we asked for it, he now expects us to come equally loyally to his. To pull a few strings with the Director of Public Prosecutions. Which of course we can’t, but he refuses to understand that.”

“There’s more, I know there’s more...”

“And he insists that if the case comes to trial he will have to reveal his substantial party donations.”

“So?”

“Which were paid all in cash. Delivered in suitcases.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Enough of it to give us all acute hemorrhoids. He not only gave to the central Party but supported the constituency election campaigns of almost every

member of the Cabinet.”

“Don’t tell me. All spent on things that weren’t reported as election expenses.”

“In my case everything was recorded religiously and will bear full public scrutiny. In other cases...” He arched an eyebrow. “I’m told the Trade Secretary, later this afternoon to reinforce our glorious backbenches, used the money to pay off a troublesome mistress who was threatening to release certain compromising letters. It was made over to her, and Harrod still has the canceled check.”

Stamper pushed his chair back from the table until it was balancing on its rear legs, as if trying to distance himself from such absurdity. “Christ, Francis, we’ve got all this crap about to hit us at a hundred miles an hour and you want me to be Party Chairman? If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather seek asylum in Libya. By Easter, you say? It’ll take more than a bloody resurrection to save anybody caught in the middle of that lot.”

His waved his arms forlornly, drained of energy and resistance, but Urquhart was straining forward in great earnest, tension stiffening his body.

“By Easter. Precisely. Which means we have to move before then, Tim. Use the honeymoon period, beat up the Opposition, get in ahead of the recession, and get a majority that will last until all the flak has been left well behind us.”

Stamper’s voice was breathless. “An election, you mean?”

“By the middle of March. Which gives us exactly fourteen weeks, only ten weeks before I have to announce it, and in that time I want you as Party Chairman getting the election machine as tight as it can be. There are plans to be made, money to be raised, opponents to be embarrassed. And all without anyone having the slightest idea what we’re about to spring on them.”

Stamper’s chair rocked back with a clatter as he endeavored to recover his wits. “Bloody Party Chairman.”

“Don’t worry. It’s only for fourteen weeks. If all goes well you can have the pick of any Government department you want. And if not...Well, neither of us will have to worry about a political job ever again.”

Five

A politician has no friends.

“This is truly appalling.” Mortima Urquhart screwed up her nose with considerable violence as she surveyed the room. It had been several days since the Collingridges removed the last of their personal effects from the small apartment above 10 Downing Street reserved for the use of Prime Ministers, and the sitting room now had the ambience of a three star hotel. It lacked any individual character—that had already been transported in the packing cases, and what was left was in good order but carried the aesthetic touch of a British Rail waiting room. “Simply revolting. It won’t do,” she repeated, gazing at the wallpaper, where she half expected to find the faded impressions of a row of flying china ducks. She was momentarily distracted as she passed by a long wall mirror, surreptitiously checking the conspicuous red tint her hairdresser had applied earlier in the week as she had waited for the final leadership ballot. A celebratory highlight, the stylist had called it, but no one could any longer mistake it for a natural hue and it had left her constantly fiddling with the color balance on the remote control, wondering whether it was time to change the television or her hair salon.

“What extraordinary people they must have been,” she muttered, brushing some imagined speck of dust from the front of her Chanel suit while her husband’s House of Commons secretary, who was accompanying her on the tour of inspection, buried herself in her notebook. She thought she rather liked the Collingridges; she was more definite in her views of Mortima Urquhart, whose cold eyes gave her a predatory look and whose constant diets to fend off the

advance of cellulite around her expensively clad body seemed to leave her in a state of unremitting impatience, at least with other women, particularly those younger than herself.

“Find out how we get rid of all this and see what the budget is for refurbishment,” Mrs. Urquhart snapped as she led the way briskly down the short corridor leading to the dark entrails of the apartment, fingertips tapping in rebuke the flesh beneath her chin as she walked. She gave a squawk of alarm as she passed a door on her left, behind which she discovered a tiny galley kitchen with a stainless-steel sink, red and black plastic floor tiles, and no microwave. Her gloom was complete by the time she had inspected the claustrophobic dining room with the atmosphere of a locked coffin and a view directly onto a grubby attic and roof. She was back in the sitting room, seated in one of the armchairs covered in printed roses the size of elephants’ feet and shaking her head in disappointment, when there came a knock from the entrance hall.

“Come in!” she commanded forlornly, remembering that the front door didn’t even have a lock on it—for security reasons she had been told, but more for the convenience of civil servants as they came to and fro bearing papers and dispatches, she suspected. “And they call this home,” she wailed, burying her head theatrically in her hands.

She brightened as she looked up to examine her visitor. He was in his late thirties, lean with razor-cropped hair.

“Mrs. Urquhart. I’m Inspector Robert Insall, Special Branch,” he announced in a thick London accent. “I’ve been in charge of your husband’s protection detail during the leadership election and now they’ve been mug enough to make me responsible for security here in Downing Street.” He had a grin and natural charm to which Mortima Urquhart warmed, and a build she couldn’t help but admire.

“I’m sure we shall be in safe hands, Inspector.”

“We’ll do our best. But things are going to be a bit different for you, now you’re here,” he continued. “There are a few things I need to explain, if you’ve got a moment.”

“Come and cover up some of this hideous furniture, Inspector, and tell me all about it...”

Landless waved as the crowd applauded. The onlookers had no idea who sat behind the darkened glass of the Silver Spur, but it was a historic day and they wanted a share in it. The heavy metal gates guarding the entrance to Downing Street drew back in respect, and the duty policemen offered a smart salute. Landless felt good, even better when he saw the pavement opposite his destination crowded with cameras and reporters.

“Is he going to offer you a job, Ben?” a chorus of voices sang out as he pried himself from the backseat of the car.

“Already got a job,” he growled, showing off his well-known proprietorial glare and enjoying every minute of it. He buttoned up the jacket flapping at his sides.

“A peerage, perhaps? Seat in the House of Lords?”

“Baron Ben of Bethnal Green?” His fleshy face sagged in disapproval. “Sounds more like a music hall act than an honor.”

There was much laughter, and Landless turned to walk through the glossy black door into the entrance hall but he was beaten to the step by a courier bearing a huge assortment of flowers. Inside, the hallway was covered with a profusion of bouquets and baskets, all still unwrapped, with more arriving by the minute. London’s florists, at least temporarily, could forget the recession. Landless was directed along the deep red carpet leading straight from the front door to the Cabinet Room on the other side of the narrow building, and he caught himself hurrying. He slowed his step, relishing the sensation. He couldn’t remember when he had last felt so excited. He was shown directly into the Cabinet Room by a solicitous and spotty civil servant who closed the door quietly behind him.

“Ben, welcome. Come in.” Urquhart waved a hand in greeting but didn’t rise. The hand indicated a chair on the other side of the table.

“Great day, Francis. Great day for us all.” Landless nodded toward Stamper, who was leaning against a radiator, hovering like a Praetorian Guard, and Landless found himself resenting the other man’s presence. All his previous dealings with Urquhart had been one-on-one; after all, they hadn’t invited an

audience as they'd laid their plans to exhaust and overwhelm the elected head of government. On those earlier occasions Urquhart had always been the supplicant, Landless the power, yet as he looked across the table he couldn't help but notice that things had changed, their roles reversed. Suddenly ill at ease, he stretched out a hand to offer Urquhart congratulation, but it was a clumsy gesture. Urquhart had to put down his pen, draw back his large chair, rise and stretch, only to discover that the table was too wide and all they could do was to brush fingers.

"Well done, Francis," Landless muttered sheepishly, and sat down. "It means a lot to me, your inviting me here on your first morning as Prime Minister. Particularly the way you did. I thought I'd have to sneak in round the back by the dustbins, but I have to tell you I felt great as I passed all those cameras and TV lights. I appreciate the public sign of confidence, Francis."

Urquhart spread his hands wide, a gesture meant to replace the words he couldn't quite find, while Stamper jumped in.

"*Prime Minister*," he began, with emphasis. It was meant as a rebuke at the newspaperman's overfamiliarity, but it slid off the Landless hide without making a dent. "My apologies, but the new Chancellor will be here in five minutes."

"Forgive me, Ben. Already I'm discovering that a Prime Minister is not a master, only a slave. Of timetables, mostly. To business, if you don't mind."

"That's how I like it." Landless shuffled forward on his chair in expectation.

"You control the *Chronicle* group and have made a takeover bid for United Newspapers, and it falls to the Government to decide whether such a takeover would be in the public interest." Urquhart was staring at his blotter as if reading from a script, rather like a judge delivering sentence. Landless didn't care for this sudden formality, so unlike their previous conversations on the matter.

Urquhart's hands were spread wide again as he sought for elusive words. Finally, he clenched his fists. "Sorry, Ben. You can't have it."

The three men turned to effigies as the words circled the room and settled like birds of prey.

"What the 'ell do you mean I can't bloody have it?" The pronunciation was straight off the streets, the veneer had slipped.

"The Government does not believe it would be in the national interest."

“Crap, Francis. We agreed.”

“The Prime Minister was careful throughout the entire leadership campaign to offer no commitments on the takeover, his public record on that is clear,” Stamper interposed. Landless ignored him, his attention rigidly on Urquhart.

“We had a deal! *You* know it. *I* know it.”

“As I said, Ben, a Prime Minister is not always his own master. The arguments in favor of turning the bid down are irresistible. You already own more than thirty percent of the national press; United would give you close on forty.”

“My thirty percent supported you every step of the way, as will my forty. That was the deal.”

“Which still leaves just over sixty who would never forgive or forget. You see, Ben, the figures simply don’t add up. Not in the national interest. Not for a new Government that believes in competition, in serving the consumer rather than the big corporations.”

“Bullshit. We had a deal!” His huge fists crashed down on the bare table.

“Ben, it’s impossible. You must know that. I can’t in my first act as Prime Minister let you carve up the British newspaper industry. It’s not good business. It’s not good politics. Frankly it would make pretty awful headlines on every other front page.”

“But carving me up will make bloody marvelous headlines, is that it?” Landless’s head was thrust forward like a charging bull, his jowls shaking with anger. “So that’s why you asked me in by the front door, you bastard. They saw me coming in, and they’ll see me going out. Feet first. You’ve set up a public execution in front of the world’s cameras. Fat capitalist as sacrificial lamb. I warn you, Frankie. I’ll fight you every step of the way, everything I’ve got.”

“Which only leaves seventy percent of the newspapers plus every TV and radio program applauding a publicly spirited Prime Minister,” Stamper interjected superciliously, examining his fingernails. “Not afraid to turn away his closest friends if the national interest demands. Great stuff.”

Landless was getting it from both sides, both barrels. His crimson face darkened still further, his whole body shook with frustration. He could find no words with which to haggle or persuade, he could neither barter nor browbeat,

and he was left with nothing but the physical argument of pounding the table with clenched fists. “You miserable little sh—”

Suddenly the door opened and in walked Mortima Urquhart in full flow. “Francis, it’s impossible, completely impossible. The apartment’s appalling, the decorations are quite disgusting, and they tell me there’s not enough money left in the budget...” She trailed off as she noted Landless’s fists trembling six inches above the table.

“You see, Ben, a Prime Minister is not master even in his own house.”

“Spare me the sermon.”

“Ben, think it through. Put this one behind you. There will be other deals, other interests you will want to pursue, in which I can help. It would be useful to have a friend in Downing Street.”

“That’s what I thought when I backed you for Prime Minister. My mistake.” Landless was once again in control of himself, his hands steady, his gaze glacial and fixed upon Urquhart, only the quivering of his jowls revealing the tension within.

“I’m sorry if I’ve interrupted,” Mortima said awkwardly.

“Mr. Landless was just about to leave, I think,” Stamper cut in from his guard post beside the radiator.

“I am sorry,” Mortima repeated.

“Don’t worry,” replied Landless, eyes still on her husband. “I can’t stay. I just learned of a funeral I have to attend.”

Six

A monarch lives in a gilded cage. Happiness depends on whether he spends more time looking at the depth of the gilding or the size of the bars.

“I won’t hear of it, David.”

It was ludicrous. Mycroft was in turmoil; there were so many unformed doubts, half fears he could not or dared not realize, which he needed to talk through with the King, for both their sakes. Yet he was reduced to snatching a few words along with mouthfuls of chlorinated water as they plowed through the waves of the Palace swimming pool. The King’s only concession to the interruption in his daily exercise schedule was to switch from the crawl to the breaststroke, enabling Mycroft more easily to match his pace. It was his rigid discipline that enabled the King to maintain his excellent physical shape and kept all those who served him struggling to keep up.

The King was a fierce defender of the forms of marriage—it came with the job, he would say—and Mycroft had felt it necessary to make the offer. “It’s for the best, sir,” he persisted. “I can’t afford to let you become embroiled in my personal difficulties. I need some time to sort myself out. Better for all of us if I resign.”

“I disagree.” The King spat out a mouthful of water, finally resolving to finish the conversation on dry land, and headed for the marbled poolside. “We’ve been friends since university and I’m not going to throw away the last thirty years simply because some reptilian gossip columnist might hear of your private problems. I’m surprised you should think I would consider it.” He ducked his shiny head one last time beneath the water as he reached for the

steps. “You’re part of the management board of this firm, and that’s how it’s going to stay.”

Mycroft shook his head like a dog, trying to clear his vision. It wasn’t just the marriage, of course; it was all the other pressures he felt crowding in on him that made him feel so apprehensive and wretched. If he couldn’t be completely honest even with himself, how could he expect the King to understand? But he had to try.

“Suddenly everything looks different. The house. The street. My friends. Even I look different, to myself. It’s as if my marriage was a lens that gave the world a particular perspective over all these years, and now that it’s gone nothing seems quite the same. It’s a little frightening...”

“I’m sorry, truly, about Fiona. After all, I’m godfather to your eldest, I’m involved.” The King reached for his towel. “But, dammit, women have their own extraordinary ways and I can’t profess to understand them. What I do know, David, is that it would make no sense for you to try to get through your problems on your own, to cut yourself off not only from your marriage but also from what you have here.” He placed a hand on Mycroft’s dripping shoulder. The contact was very close, his voice concerned. “You understand me, David, you always have. I am known by the whole world yet understood by so few. You do, you understand. I need you. I will not allow you to resign.”

Mycroft stared into his friend’s angular face. He found himself thinking the King’s leanness made him look drawn and older than his years, particularly with his hair grown so thin. It was as if a furnace inside was burning the King up too quickly. Perhaps he cared too much.

Care too much—was it possible? Fiona had tossed Mycroft back into the pool and he was struggling in the deep waters, unable to touch bottom. It dawned on him that he had never touched bottom, not once in his life. Far from caring too much, he realized he had never really cared at all and the sudden understanding made him panic, want to escape before he drowned. His emotional life had been shapeless, without substance or roots. Except here at the Palace, which now provided his only support. The man he had once tossed fully clothed through the ice of the college fountain and who had come up spitting bindweed and clutching a lavatory seat was saying, in the only way a lifetime of self-control

allowed, that he cared. Suddenly it mattered, very much.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I don’t know a single marriage, Royal, common or just plain vulgar, which hasn’t been through the wringer; it’s so easy to think you’re on your own, to forget that practically everyone you know has jumped through the same hoops.”

Mycroft remembered just how many nights of their marriage he and Fiona had spent apart, and imagined what she had been up to on every one of those nights. There really had been a lot of hoops. He didn’t care, not even about that. So what did he care about?

“I need you, David. I’ve waited all my life to be where I am today. Don’t you remember the endless nights at university when we would sit either side of a bottle of college port and discuss what we would do when we had the opportunity? *We*, David, you and me. Now the opportunity has arrived, we can’t throw it away.” He paused while a liveried footman deposited a silver tray with two mugs of herbal tea on the poolside table. “If it’s really over with Fiona, try to put it behind you. Look ahead, with me. I can’t start on the most important period of my life by losing one of my oldest and most trusted friends. There’s so much to do, for us both.” He began toweling himself vigorously as though determined to start that very minute. “Don’t make any decisions now. Stick with it for a couple of months and, if you still feel you need a break, we’ll sort it out. But trust me, stay with me. All will be fine, I promise.”

Mycroft was unconvinced. He wanted to run, but he had nowhere and no one he wanted to run to. And the thought of what he might find if he ran too far overwhelmed him. After so many years he was free, and he didn’t know if he could handle freedom. He stood, water dripping from the end of his nose and through his mustache, weighing his doubts against the Sovereign’s certainty. He could find no sense of direction, only his sense of duty.

“So, what do you feel, old friend?”

“Bloody cold, sir.” He managed a weak smile. “Let’s go and have a shower.”

Seven

Of course I have principles. I like to dust them down regularly. With a trowel.

“Circulate, Francis. And smile. This is supposed to be a celebration, remember.”

Urquhart acknowledged his wife’s instruction and began forcing his way slowly through the crowded room. He hated these occasions. It was supposed to be a party to thank those who had helped him into Downing Street, but inevitably Mortima had intervened and turned it into another of her evenings for rubbing shoulders with anyone from the pages of the social columns she wanted to meet. “The voters love a little glamour,” she argued, and like any self-respecting Colquhoun she had always wanted to preside over her own Court. So instead of a small gathering of colleagues he had been thrust into a maelstrom of actresses, opera stars, editors, businessmen, and assorted socialites, and he knew his small talk couldn’t last the evening.

The guests had clattered through the dark December night into the narrow confines of Downing Street, where they found a large Christmas tree outside the door of Number Ten, placed at Mortima Urquhart’s instructions to give TV viewers the impression that this was simply another family eagerly waiting to celebrate Christmas. Inside Number Ten the glitterati had crossed the threshold, unaware they had already been scanned by hidden devices for weapons and explosives. They handed over their cloaks and overcoats in exchange for a smile and a cloakroom ticket, and waited patiently in line on the stairs that led to the Green Room where the Urquharts were receiving their guests. As they wound their way slowly up the stairs and past its walls covered in portraits of previous

Prime Ministers, they tried not to stare too hard at the other guests or their surroundings. Staring implied you hadn't done this a hundred times before. Most had little to do with politics, some were not even supporters of the Government, but the enthusiasm with which they were greeted by Mortima Urquhart left them all impressed. The atmosphere was sucking them in, making them honorary members of the team. If power were a conspiracy, they wanted to be part of it too.

For ten minutes Urquhart struggled with the confusion of guests, his eyes never resting, darting rapidly from one fixed point to another as if always on guard, or on the attack, forced to listen to the complaints of businessmen and the half-baked social prescriptions of chat-show hosts. At last he reached gratefully for the arm of Tim Stamper and dragged him into a corner.

“Something on your mind, Francis?”

“I was just reflecting on how relieved Henry must be not to have to put up with all this any longer. Is it really worth it?”

“Ambition should be made of more solid stuff.”

“If you must quote Shakespeare, for God's sake get it right. And I'd prefer it if you chose some other play than *Julius Caesar*. You'll remember they'd had him butchered well before the interval.”

“I am suitably reproached. In future in your presence I shall quote only from *Macbeth*.”

Urquhart smiled grimly at the cold humor, wishing he could spend the rest of the evening crossing swords with Stamper and plotting the next election. In less than a week the polls had already placed them three points ahead as the voters responded to the fresh faces, the renewed sense of urgency throughout Whitehall, the public dispatch of a few of the less acceptable faces of Government. “They like the color of the honeymoon bed linen,” Stamper had reported. “Fresh, crisp, with just enough blood to show you're doing your job.” He had a style all his own, did Stamper.

Across the chatter of the crowded room they could hear Mortima Urquhart laughing. She was immersed in conversation with an Italian tenor, one of the more competent and certainly the most fashionable opera star to have arrived in London in recent years. She was persuading him through a mixture of flattery

and feminine charm to give a rendition later in the evening. Mortima was nearing fifty yet she was well preserved and carefully presented, and already the Italian was acquiescing. She rushed off to inquire whether there was a piano in Downing Street.

“Ah, Dickie,” Urquhart chanted, reaching out for the arm of a short, undersized man with a disproportionately large head and serious eyes who had thrust purposefully through the crowd toward him. Dickie was the new Secretary of State for the Environment, the youngest member of the new Cabinet, a marathon runner, an enthusiast and an intervener, and he had been deeply impressed by Urquhart’s admonition that he was to be the defender of the Government’s green credentials. His appointment had already been greeted with acclaim from all but the most militant pressure groups, yet at this moment he was looking none too happy. There were beads of moisture on his brow; something was bothering him.

“Was hoping to have a word with you, Dickie,” said Urquhart before the other had a chance to unburden himself. “What about this development site in Victoria Street? Had a chance to look into it yet? Are you going to cover it in concrete, or what?”

“Good heavens, no, Prime Minister. I’ve studied all the options carefully, and I really think it would be best if we dispense with the more extravagant options and go for something traditional. Not one of these steel and glass air-conditioning units.”

“Will it provide the most modern office environment?” Stamper intervened.

“It’ll fit into the Westminster environment,” Dickie continued a little uneasily.

“Scarcely the same thing,” the Party Chairman responded.

“We’d get a howl of protest from the heritage groups if we tried to turn Westminster into downtown Chicago,” Dickie offered defensively.

“I see. Planning by pressure group.” Stamper gave a cynical smile.

The Environment Secretary looked flustered at the unexpected assault but Urquhart came quickly to his rescue. “Don’t worry about Stamper, Dickie. Only a week at party headquarters and already he can’t come into contact with a pressure group without raising his kneecap in greeting.” He smiled. This was

considerably greater fun than being preached at by the two large female charity workers who were hovering behind Dickie, waiting to pounce. He drew Dickie closer for protection. "So what else was on your mind?"

"It's this mystery virus along the North Sea coast that has been killing off the seals. The scientific bods thought it had disappeared, but I've just had a report that seal carcasses are being washed up all around Norfolk. The virus is back. By morning there will be camera crews and newshounds crawling over the beaches with photos of dying seals splashed across the news."

Urquhart grimaced. "Newshounds!" He hadn't heard that term used in years. Dickie was an exceptionally serious and unamusing man, exactly the right choice for dealing with environmentalists. They could bore each other for months with their mutual earnestness. As long as he kept them quiet until after March... "Here's what you do, Dickie. By the time they reach the beaches in the morning, I want you there, too. Showing the Government's concern, being on hand to deal with the questions of the...newshounds." From the corner of his eye he could see Stamper smirking. "I want your face on the midday news tomorrow. Alongside all those dead seals." Stamper covered his mouth with a handkerchief to stifle the laugh, but Dickie was nodding earnestly.

"Do I have your permission to announce a Government inquiry, if I feel it necessary?"

"You do. Indeed you do, my dear Dickie. Give them whatever you like, as long as it's not money."

"Then if I am to be there by daybreak, I'd better make tracks immediately. Will you excuse me, Prime Minister?"

As the Environment Secretary hustled self-importantly toward the door, Stamper could control himself no longer. His shoulders shook with mirth.

"Don't mock," reproached Urquhart with an arched eyebrow. "Seals are a serious matter. They eat all the damned salmon, you know."

Both men burst into laughter, just as the two charity workers decided to draw breath and swoop. Urquhart spied their heaving bosoms and turned quickly away to find himself looking at a young woman, attractive and most elegantly presented with large, challenging eyes. She seemed a far more interesting contest than the elderly matrons. He extended a hand.

“Good evening. I’m Francis Urquhart.”

“Sally Quine.” She was cool, less gushing than most guests.

“I’m delighted you could come. And your husband...?”

“Beneath a ton of concrete, I earnestly hope.”

Now he could detect the slightly nasal accent and he glanced discreetly but admiringly at the cut of her long Regency jacket. It was red with large cuffs, the only decoration provided by the small but ornate metal buttons that made the effect both striking and professional. The raven hair shimmered gloriously in the light of the chandeliers.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs....? Miss Quine.” He was picking up her strong body language, her independence, and couldn’t fail to notice the taut expression around her mouth; something was bothering her.

“I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

“To be frank, not a lot. I get very irritated when men try to grope and pick me up simply because I happen to be an unattached woman.”

So that’s what was bothering her. “I see. Which man?”

“Prime Minister, I’m a businesswoman. I don’t get very far by being a blabbermouth.”

“Well, let me guess. He sounds as if he’s here without a wife. Self-important. Probably political if he feels sufficiently at ease to chance his hand in this place. Something of a charmer, perhaps?”

“The creep had so little charm he didn’t even have the decency to say please. I think that’s what riled me as much as anything. He expected me to fall into his arms without even the basic courtesy of asking nicely. And I thought you English were gentlemen.”

“So...Without a wife here. Self-important. Political. Lacking in manners.” Urquhart glanced around the room, still trying to avoid the stares of the matrons who were growing increasingly irritated. “That gentleman in the loud three-piece pinstripe, perhaps?” He indicated a fat man in early middle age who was mopping his brow with a spotted handkerchief as he perspired in the rapidly rising warmth of the crowded room.

She laughed in surprise and acknowledgment. “You know him?”

“I ought to. He’s my new Minister of Housing.”

“You seem to know your men well, Mr. Urquhart.”

“It’s my main political asset.”

“Then I hope you understand your women just as well, and much better than that oaf of a Housing Minister...In the political rather than the biblical sense,” she added as an afterthought, offering a slightly impertinent smile.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Women. You know, fifty-two percent of the electorate? Those strange creatures who are good enough to share your beds but not your clubs and who think your Government is about as supportive and up-to-the-mark as broken underwear elastic?”

In an Englishwoman her abruptness would have been viewed as bad manners, but it was normal to afford Americans somewhat greater license. They talked, ate, dressed differently, were even different in bed so Urquhart had been told, although he had no firsthand experience. Perhaps he should ask the Housing Minister. “It’s surely not that bad...”

“For the last two months your Party has been pulling itself apart while it chose a new leader. Not one of the candidates was a woman. And according to women voters, none of the issues you discussed were of much relevance to them, either. Particularly to younger women. You treat them as if they were blind copies of their husbands. They don’t like it and you’re losing out. Badly.”

Urquhart realized he was relinquishing control of this conversation; she was working him over far more effectively than anything he could have expected from the charity representatives, who had now drifted off in bitter disappointment. He tried to remember the last time he had torn apart an opinion poll and examined its entrails, but couldn’t. He’d cut his political teeth in an era when instinct and ideas rather than psephologists and their computers had ruled the political scene, and his instincts had served him very well. So far. Yet this woman was making him feel dated and out of touch. And he could see a piano being wheeled into a far corner of the huge reception room.

“Miss Quine, I’d like very much to hear more of your views, but I fear I’m about to be called to other duties.” His wife was already leading the tenor by the hand toward the piano, and Urquhart knew that at any moment she would be searching for him to offer a suitable introduction. “Would you be free at some

other time, perhaps? It seems I know a great deal less about women than I thought.”

“I appear to be in demand by Government Ministers this evening,” she mused. Her jacket had fallen open to reveal an elegantly cut but simple dress beneath, secured by an oversized belt buckle, which for the first time afforded him a glimpse of her figure. She saw he had noticed, and had appreciated. “I hope at least you will be able to say please.”

“I’m sure I will.” He smiled as his wife beckoned him forward.

Eight

Royal palaces are dangerous places in which to sleep or serve. They have far too many windows.

December: The Second Week

The signs of festive celebration were muted this year. Mycroft, with the pressure of work easing as journalists forsook word processors for the crush of Hamleys' toy counter and the karaoke bars, trudged aimlessly through the damp streets in search of...he knew not what. Something, anything, to keep him out of the tomb-like silence of his house. The sales had started early, even before Christmas, yet instead of customers, the shop doorways seemed full of young people with northern accents and filthy hands asking for money. Or was it simply that he'd never had time to notice them before? He made a pretense at Christmas shopping along King's Road, but quickly became frustrated. He hadn't the slightest idea what his children might want, what they were interested in, and anyway they would be spending Christmas with their mother. "Their mother," not "Fiona." He noticed how easily he slipped into the lexicon of the unloved. He was staring into the window of a shop offering provocative women's lingerie, wondering if that was really what his daughter wore, when his thoughts were interrupted by a young girl who, beneath the makeup and lipstick, looked not much older than sixteen. It was cold and drizzling, yet the front of her plastic raincoat was unbuttoned.

"Ullo, sunshine. Merry Christmas. Need anything to stick on top of your tree?" She tugged at her raincoat, revealing an ample portion of young, pale flesh. "Christmas sale special. Only thirty quid."

He gazed long, mentally stripping away the rest of the raincoat, discovering a woman who, beneath the plastic, imitation leather, and foundation, retained all the vigor and appealing firmness of youth, with even white teeth and a smile he could almost mistake as genuine. He hadn't talked to anyone about anything except business for more than three days, and he knew he desperately missed companionship. Even bickering with his wife about the brand of toothpaste had been better than silence, nothing. He needed some human contact, a touch, and he would feel no guilt, not after Fiona's performance. A chance to get back at her in some way, to be something other than a witless cuckold. He looked once again at the girl and even as he thought of revenge he found himself overcome with revulsion. The thought of her nakedness, her nipples, her body hair, the scratchy bits under her armpits, the very smell of her suddenly made him feel nauseous. He panicked, at the embarrassment of being propositioned—what if someone saw?—but more in surprise at the strength of his own feelings. He found her physically repellent—was it simply because she was the same sex as Fiona? He found a five-pound note in his hand, thrust it at her, and spat, “Go away! God sake...go away!” He then panicked more, realizing that someone might have seen him give the tart money, turned and ran. She followed, calling after him, anxious not to forgo the chance of any trick, particularly one who gave away free fivers. He'd run seventy yards before he realized he was still making a fool of himself out on the street and saw a door for a drinking club. He dashed in, lungs and stomach heaving.

He ignored the sardonic look of the man who took his coat and went straight to the bar, ordering himself a large whiskey. It took a while before he had recovered his breath and his composure sufficiently to look around and run the risk of catching someone's eye. The club itself was nothing more than a revamped pub with black walls, lots of mirrors, and plentiful disco lights. There was a raised dance floor at one end, but neither the lights nor juke box were working. It was still early; there was scarcely a handful of customers who gazed distractedly at one of the plentiful television monitors on which an old Marlon Brando film was playing, the sound turned off so as not to clash with the piped Christmas music the staff had turned on for their own entertainment. There were large photos of Brando on the walls, in motorcycle leathers from one of his early

films, along with posters of Presley, Jack Nicholson, and a couple of other younger film stars he didn't recognize. It was odd, different, a total contrast to the gentlemen's clubs of Pall Mall to which Mycroft was accustomed. There were no seats; this was a watering hole designed for standing and moving, not for spending all evening mooning over a half pint. He rather liked it.

"You entered in something of a hurry." A man, in his thirties and well presented, a Brummie by his accent, was standing next to him. "Mind if I join you?"

Mycroft shrugged. He was still dazed from his encounter and lacked the self-confidence to be rude and turn away a friendly voice. The stranger was casually but very neatly dressed, his stone-washed jeans immaculately pressed, as was his white shirt, sleeves rolled up narrow and high and with great care. He was obviously fit, the muscles showed prominently.

"You looked as if you were running from something."

The whiskey was making Mycroft feel warmer, he needed to ease up a little. He laughed. "A woman actually. Tried to pick me up!"

They were both laughing, and Mycroft noted the stranger inspecting him carefully. He didn't object; the eyes were warm, concerned, interested. And interesting. A golden shade of brown.

"It's usually the other way round. Women running from me," he continued.

"Makes you sound like something of a stud."

"No, that's not what I meant..." Mycroft bit his lip, suddenly feeling the pain and the humiliation of being alone at Christmas. "My wife walked out on me. After twenty-three years."

"I'm sorry."

"Why should you be? You don't know her, or me..." Once more the confusion flooded over him. "My apologies. Churlish of me."

"Don't worry. Shout if it helps. I don't mind."

"Thanks. I might just do that." He extended a hand. "David."

"Kenny. Just remember, David, that you're not on your own. Believe me, there are thousands of people just like you. Feeling alone at Christmas, when there's no need. One door closes, another opens. Think of it as a new beginning."

“Somebody else I know said something like that.”

“Which must make it right.” He had a broad, easy smile that had a lot of life to it and was drinking straight from a bottle of exotic Mexican beer with a lime slice stuffed in the neck. Mycroft looked at his whiskey, and wondered whether he should try something new, but decided he was probably too old to change his habits. He tried to remember how long it had been since he had tried anything or met anyone new, outside of work.

“What do you do, Kenny?”

“Cabin crew. Fly-the-fag BA. And you?”

“Civil servant.”

“Sounds horribly dull. Then my job sounds horribly glamorous, but it’s not. You get bored fending off movie queens in first class. You travel a lot?”

Mycroft was just about to answer when the piped strains of “Jingle Bells” were replaced by the heavy thumping of the jukebox. The evening was warming up. He had to bend close to hear what Kenny was saying and to be heard. Kenny had a freshly scrubbed smell with the slightest trace of aftershave. He was bawling into Mycroft’s ear to make himself heard, suggesting they might find a place to eat, out of the din.

Mycroft was trembling once again. It wasn’t just the prospect of going back out alone onto the cold streets again, perhaps finding the tart waiting to accost him, or returning home to an empty house. It wasn’t just the fact that this was the first time for years someone had been interested in him as a person, rather than as someone who was close to the King. It wasn’t even that he felt warmed by Kenny’s easy smile and already felt better than he had done all week. It was the fact that, however much he tried to hide from it or explain it away, he wanted to get to know Kenny very much better. Very much better indeed.

Nine

His royal mind progresses by a series of afterthoughts. He treads the tightrope that stretches between the Constitution and his conscience with the blinding sense of purpose of a pilchard.

The two men were walking around the lake, one dressed warmly in hacking jacket and gum boots while the other shivered inside his cashmere overcoat and struggled to prevent his hand-stitched leather shoes slipping in the damp grass. Near at hand a domestic tractor was plowing up a substantial section of plush lawn marked off inside guide ropes while, beyond, a pair of workmen maneuvered saplings and young trees into holes that further disfigured the once gracious lawn, already scarred by the tire marks of earthmoving equipment. The effect was to spread dark winter mud everywhere, and even the enthusiasm of the King couldn't persuade Urquhart that the gardens of Buckingham Palace would ever recover their former glories.

The King had suggested the walk. At the start of their first weekly audience to discuss matters of state, the King had clasped Urquhart with both hands and thanked him fervently for the decision on the Westminster Abbey site, announced that morning, which had been hailed as a triumph by heritage groups as vehemently as it had been attacked by the luminaries of the architects' profession. But as Urquhart had concluded at Cabinet Committee, how many votes had the architects? The King inclined to the view that his intervention had probably been helpful, perhaps even crucial, and Urquhart chose not to disillusion him. Prime Ministers were constantly surrounded by the complaints of the disappointed and it made a refreshing change to be greeted with genuine,

unaffected enthusiasm.

The King was ebullient and, in the characteristically Spartan fashion that often made him oblivious to the discomfort of others, had insisted on showing Urquhart the work that had begun to transform the Palace gardens. “So many acres of barren, closely cropped lawn, Mr. Urquhart, with not a nesting place in sight. I want this to be made a sanctuary right in the heart of the city, to re-create the natural habitat of London before we smothered it in concrete.”

Urquhart was picking his way carefully around the freshly plowed turf, trying unsuccessfully to avoid the cloying earth and divots while the King enthused about the muddy tract. “Here, this is where I want the wildflower garden. I’ll sow it myself. You can’t imagine what a sense of fulfillment it gives me, dragging around a bucket of earth or manhandling a tree.”

Urquhart decided it would be ill-mannered to mention that the last recorded instance of someone with such an upbringing manhandling a tree had been the King’s distant ancestor, George III, who in a fit of clinical madness had descended from his coach in Windsor Great Park and knighted an oak. He also lost the American colonies, and had eventually been locked away.

“I want to bring more wildlife into the garden; there’s so much that can be done, so simply. Choosing the right mix of trees, allowing some areas of grass to grow to their natural height so they can provide cover. Look, I’m putting up these nesting boxes.” He indicated a workman halfway up a ladder, fixing wooden boxes to the high brick wall that ran all the way around the gardens.

The King was walking, head down and fingers steepled, in the prayer posture he so often adopted when engrossed in thought. “This could be done in every park and large garden in London, you know. It would transform the wildlife of our city, of cities all round the country. We’ve wasted so many opportunities in the past...” He turned toward Urquhart. “I want to put an idea to you. I would like to make our weekly meetings an opportunity to discuss what the Government might do to promote such matters. And how I might help.”

“I see,” Urquhart mused, the creeping cold sending his left leg into spasm while a pair of ducks splashed their way into flight from the lake. Wonderful targets, he thought. “That’s a kind offer, of course, sir. But I wouldn’t want the Environment Secretary to feel in any way that we were undermining his

authority. I have to keep a happy team around me...”

“You are absolutely right, I do agree. That’s why I took the precaution of chatting about this with the Environment Secretary myself. I didn’t want to put any proposal to you that might be an embarrassment. He said he would be delighted, offered to brief me himself.”

Bloody Dickie. He’d no sense of humor, that was clear; now it appeared as if he had no other sense either.

“Today this is just a muddy field,” the King continued. “But in the years to come this could be a new way of life for us all. Don’t you see?”

Urquhart couldn’t. He could see only piles of mud spread around like newly turned graves. Damp was seeping through the welts of his shoes and he was beginning to feel miserably uncomfortable. “You must take care, sir. Environmental matters are becomingly increasingly the stuff of party politics. It’s important that you remain above such sordid matters.”

The King laughed. “Fear not, Prime Minister. If I were meant to become involved in party politics the Constitution would have allowed me a vote! No, such things are not for me; in public I shall stick strictly to matters of the broadest principle. Simply to encourage, to remind people that there is a better way ahead.”

Urquhart was growing increasingly irritable. His socks were sodden, and the thought of the public being told from on high that there was a better way ahead than the one presently being pursued, no matter how delicately phrased, smacked of grist to the Opposition’s mill and filled him with unease, but he said nothing in the hope that his silence would bring an end to the conversation. He wanted a warm bath and a stiff whiskey, not more regal thoughts on how to do his job.

“In fact, I thought I might pursue the point in a speech I have to make in ten days’ time to the charitable foundations...”

“The environment?” The irritation and impatience were beginning to show in Urquhart’s tone, but the King appeared not to have noticed.

“No, no, Mr. Urquhart. An address intended to bring people together, to remind them how much we have achieved, and can continue to achieve, as a nation. Broad principles, no specifics.”

Urquhart felt relieved. An appeal to motherhood.

“The charitable foundations are making such prodigious efforts, when there are so many forces trying to divide us,” the King continued. “Successful from the less well-off. Prosperous South from the Celtic fringe. Suburbs from the inner cities. No harm in encouraging families secure in their own homes this Christmas to spare a thought for those forced to sleep rough in the streets. In the rush, so many seem to have been left behind, and at this time of year it’s appropriate to reach out to the less fortunate, don’t you think? To remind us all that we must work toward being one nation.”

“You’re intending to say that?”

“Something on those lines.”

“Impossible!”

It was a mistake, a rash outburst brought on by frustration and the growing cold. Since there was no book of rules, no written Constitution to order their conduct, it was vital to maintain the fiction of agreement, of discussing but never disputing, no matter how great their differences, for in a house of cards that lean one upon the other each card has its place. A King must not be seen to disagree with a Prime Minister, nor a Prime Minister with a King. Yet it had happened. One impatient word had undermined the authority of one and threatened both.

The King’s complexion colored rapidly; he was not used to being contradicted. The scar on his left cheekbone inflicted in a fall from a horse showed suddenly prominent and purple while his eyes carried an undisguised look of annoyance. Urquhart sought refuge in justification.

“You can’t talk of one nation as if it didn’t exist. That implies there are two nations, two classes, a divide which runs between us, top dogs and the downtrodden. The term reeks of unfairness and injustice. It’s not on, sir!”

“Prime Minister, you exaggerate. I’m simply drawing attention to the principle—exactly the same principle as your Government has just endorsed in my Christmas address to the Commonwealth. North and South, First World and Third, the need to secure advancement for the poor, to bring the different parts of the world community closer together.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Because...”

“Because they’re black? Live in distant corners of the world? Don’t have votes, Prime Minister?”

“You underestimate the power of your words. It’s not what the words mean; it’s how others will interpret them.” He waved his arms in exasperation and sought to pummel life back into his frozen limbs. “Your words would be used to attack the Government in every marginal constituency in the country.”

“To read criticism of the Government into a few generalized Christmastime sentiments would be ridiculous. Christmas isn’t just for those with bank accounts. Every church in the country will be ringing to the stories of Good King Wenceslas. Would you have him banned as politically contentious? Anyway, marginal seats, indeed... We’ve only just had an election. It’s not as if we have to worry about another just yet.”

Urquhart knew it was time to back down. He couldn’t reveal his election plans—Palace officials were notoriously gossipy—and he had no taste for a personal dispute with the Monarch. He sensed that danger lay therein. “Forgive me, sir. Perhaps the cold has made me a little too sensitive. Just let me say there are potential dangers with any subject as emotive and complex as this. Perhaps I could suggest you allow us to see a draft of the speech so that we can check the detail for you? Make sure the statistics are accurate, that the language is unlikely to be misinterpreted? I believe it is the custom.”

“Check my speech? Censorship, Mr. Urquhart?”

“Heavens, no. I’m sure you would find our advice entirely helpful. We would take a positive attitude, I can guarantee.” His politician’s smile was back, trying to thaw the atmosphere, but he knew it would take more than flattery. The King was a man of rigid principles; he’d worked hard for many years developing them, and he wasn’t going to see them smothered by a smile and a politician’s promise.

“Let me put it another way,” Urquhart continued, his leg once more going into spasm. “Very soon, within the next few weeks, the House of Commons must vote on the new Civil List. You know how in recent years the amount of money provided for the Royal Family has become increasingly a subject of dispute. It would help neither you nor me if you were engaged in a matter of political controversy at a time when the House wanted to review your finances in

a cool, constructive manner.”

“You’re trying to buy my silence!” the King snapped. Neither man was renowned for his patience, and they were goading each other on.

“If you want a semantic debate then I put it to you that the whole concept of a constitutional monarchy and the Civil List is precisely that—we buy your silence and active cooperation. That’s part of the job. But really...” The Prime Ministerial exasperation was undisguised. “All I’m offering is a sensible means for us both to avoid a potential problem. You know it makes sense.”

The King turned away to gaze across the bedraggled lawns. His hands were behind his back, his fingers toying irritably with the signet ring on his little finger. “What has happened to us, Mr. Urquhart? Just a few moments ago we were talking of a bright new future, now we haggle over money and the meaning of words.” He looked back toward Urquhart, who could see the anguish in his eyes. “I am a man of strong passion, and sometimes my passion runs ahead of what I know is sensible.” It was as close to an apology as Urquhart was going to get. “Of course you shall see the speech, as Governments have always seen the Monarch’s speeches. And of course I shall accept any suggestion you feel you must make. I suppose I have no choice. I would simply ask that you allow me to play some role, however small and discreet, in pushing forward those ideals I hold so deeply. Within the conventions. I hope that is not too much to ask.”

“Sir, I would hope that in many years to come you and I, as Monarch and Prime Minister, will be able to look back on today’s misunderstanding and laugh.”

“Spoken like a true politician.”

Urquhart was uncertain whether the words implied compliment or rebuke. “We have our principles, too.”

“And so do I. You may silence me, Prime Minister; that is your right. But you will not get me to deny my principles.”

“Every man, even a monarch, is allowed his principles.”

The King smiled thinly. “Sounds like an interesting new constitutional concept. I look forward to discussing it with you further.” The audience was over.

Urquhart sat in the back of his armored Jaguar, trying vainly to scrape mud

from his shoes. He remembered that George III, finished with the oak tree, had also made a general of his horse. His mind filled with visions of a countryside turned over once again to the yoke and plow and city streets smothered in decaying horse manure, By Royal Appointment. His feet were frozen, he thought he was developing a cold, his Environment Secretary was a complete dolt, and it was scarcely nine weeks before he wanted to call an election. He could take no chances; there was no time for cock-ups. There could be no suggestion of a Two Nation debate with the Government inevitably on the receiving end. It was impossible; he couldn't take the risk. The King would have to be stopped.

Ten

Political principles are like the women of a harem. You need to dress them up, put them on display frequently, and occasionally pick one out for special attention. But never spend too much time or money on them; otherwise, they may come to possess you.

The taxi picked her up from home seven minutes late, which made her furious. She decided it would be for the last time; they'd been late three times this week. Sally Quine didn't want to be mistaken for other women, the kind who arrive for client meetings habitually late, flash a leg in excuse, and laugh a lot. She didn't mind showing off a leg but she hated having to offer excuses and always ensured she arrived anywhere five minutes before the rest so she would be fully prepared and in charge of proceedings. The early bird always hijacks the agenda. She would fire the taxi firm first thing in the morning.

She closed the door to her home behind her. It was a terraced house in a highly fashionable part of Islington with small rooms and reasonable overheads. It represented all that she'd been able to squeeze out of the wreckage she had left behind in Boston, but in the banks' view it was good collateral for the loans on her business, and at the moment that was more important than running the sort of gin palace and entertainment lounge preferred by most of her larger competitors. It had two bedrooms, one of which had come set up as a nursery. It had been the first room to be ripped apart; she couldn't bear the sight of any more bears bouncing across the wallpaper and the memories they brought with them. The room was now covered in impersonal filing cabinets and shelves carrying thick piles of computer printout rather than talcum powder and tubs of Vaseline. She

didn't think of her baby too often, she couldn't afford to. It hadn't been her fault, no one's fault really, but that hadn't dammed the flood of guilt. She had sat and watched the tiny hand clutching her little finger, the only part of her body small enough for him to cling to, his eyes closed, struggling for each breath, all but submerged beneath the impersonal tubes and anonymous surgical paraphernalia. She had sat and sat and watched, and watched, as the struggle was gradually lost and the strength and spirit of the tiny bundle had faded away, to nothing. Not her fault, everyone had said so. Everyone, that is, except that slimehound of a husband.

"Downing Street, you say," commented the cab driver, ignoring a barbed rejoinder about his timing. "You work there, do you?" He seemed relieved to discover she was simply another ordinary sufferer and began a steady monologue composed of complaints and observations about their political masters. It was not that he was ill-disposed toward the Government, which seemed one stage removed from his daily life since he took all his fares in cash and therefore paid practically no income tax. "It's just the streets are looking grim, luv. A week before Christmas and it's not really happening. Shops half empty, fewer people needing cabs and those what do are skimping on the tips. Dunno what your pals in Downing Street are saying, but tell 'em from me the tough times are right around the corner. Old Francis Urquhart better pull his socks up or he won't be long in following what's-his-name...er, Collingridge."

Less than a month out of office and already the memory was beginning to slip inexorably from the mind.

She ignored his chatter as they meandered through the dark, drizzly streets of Covent Garden, past the restored monument of Seven Dials that marked what had been some of the worst slums of Dickensian London with its typhoid and footpads and that now presided over the heart of London's Theatreland. They passed a theater that stood dark and empty; the show had closed, in what should have been the busiest time of year. Straws in the wind, she thought, remembering Landless's warning, or maybe great armfuls of hay.

The taxi dropped her off at the top of Downing Street and in spite of his blunt hints she refused to sign for a tip. The policeman at the wrought-iron gate consulted the personal radio tucked away beneath his rain cape, there was a

crackle in response and he let her through. A hundred yards away loomed the black door, which swung open even before she had put her foot on the step. She signed a visitors' book in the entrance hall, which was deserted except for a couple of policemen. There was none of the bustle and activity she had expected and none of the crowds of the evening she had met Urquhart. It seemed as if Christmas had arrived early.

Within three minutes she had passed through as many sets of hands, each civil servant contriving to appear more important than the last, as she was led upstairs, through corridors, past display cases full of porcelain until she was shown into an inner office and the door closed behind her. They were on their own.

"Miss Quine. So good of you to come." Francis Urquhart stubbed out a cigarette and held out his hand, guiding her toward the comfortable leather chairs placed in the corner of his first-floor study. The room was dark, book-lined, and very masculine, with no overhead light and the sole illumination coming from a desk lamp and two side lights. It was reminiscent of the timeless, smoky atmosphere of the gentlemen's club on Pall Mall she had visited one ladies' night.

As he offered her a drink she studied him carefully. The prominent temples, the tired but defiant eyes that never seemed to rest. He was thirty years older than she. Why had he brought her here? What sort of research was he truly interested in? As he busied himself with two glasses of whiskey she noted he had soft hands, perfectly formed, with slender fingers and nails that were carefully manicured. So unlike those of her former husband. She couldn't imagine those hands clenched and balled, thrusting into her face or pounding her belly into miscarriage, the final act of their matrimonial madness. Damn all men!

Her memories bothered her as she took the proffered crystal tumbler and sipped the whiskey. She spat in distaste. "Do you have any ice and soda?"

"It's a single malt," he protested.

"And I'm a single girl. My mother always told me never to take it neat."

He seemed amused by her outspokenness. "Of course. But let me ask you to persevere, just for a little. It really is a very special whiskey distilled near my birthplace in the Highlands, and would be ruined by anything other than a little

water. Try a few sips to acquire the taste and, if not, I'll drown you in as many club sodas and ice cubes as I can find."

She sipped again; it was a little less fiery. She nodded. "That's something I've learned this evening."

"One of the many benefits of getting older is that I have learned a lot about men and whiskey. About women, however, it seems I am still quite ignorant. According to you."

"I've brought some figures..." She stretched down for her bag.

"Before we look at that, I have another topic." He settled back in his chair, a reflective mood on his face as he held his glass in both hands, like a don quizzing one of his charges. "Tell me, how much respect do you have for the Royal Family?"

Her nose wrinkled as she savored the unexpected question. "Professionally, I'm completely uncommitted. I'm not paid to respect anything, only to analyze it. And personally...?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm American, from Paul Revere country. Used to be when we saw one of the King's men, we shot him. Now it's just another kind of show business. Does that upset you?"

He ducked the question. "The King is keen to make a speech about One Nation, about pulling together the divisions in the country. A popular theme, do you think?"

"Of course. It's a sentiment expected of a nation's leaders."

"A powerful theme, too, then?"

"That depends. If you're running for Archbishop of Canterbury then it's bound to help. The nation's moral conscience and all that." She paused, waiting for some sign that she was moving in the right direction. All she got was the arched eyebrow of a professor in his lair; she would have to fly this one entirely on instinct. "But politics, that's a different matter. It's expected of politicians, but rather like background music is expected in a lift. What matters to the voters is not the music but whether the lift they're traveling in is going up or down—or more accurately, whether they *perceive* the lift to be going up or down."

"Tell me about perceptions." He studied her with more than academic interest. He liked what he heard, and what he saw. As she talked and particularly when she became animated, the point of her nose bobbed up and down as if she

were conducting an orchestra of thoughts. He found it fascinating, almost hypnotic.

“If you were brought up on a street where no one could afford shoes, yet now you’ve got a sackful of shoes but are the only family in the street without a car and a continental holiday, you feel as if you’ve gotten poorer. You look back on your childhood as the good old days, the fun of running to school in bare feet, while you resent not being able to drive to work like all the rest.”

“And the Government gets the blame.”

“Certainly. But what matters politically is how many others in the street feel the same way. Once they’re locked behind their front doors, or in a polling booth come to that, their conscience about their neighbor down the street matters much less than whether their own car is the latest model. You can’t feed a family or fill up a gas tank on moral conscience.”

“I’ve never tried,” he mused. “So what about the other divisions? Celtic fringe versus prosperous South. Homeowners versus homeless.”

“Bluntly, you’re down to less than twenty percent support in Scotland anyway, you don’t have many seats there left to lose. And as for the homeless, it’s difficult to get onto the electoral register with an address like Box Three, Row D, Cardboard City. They’re not a logical priority.”

“Some would say that’s a little cynical.”

“If you want moral judgments, call a priest. I analyze, I don’t judge. There are divisions in every society. You can’t be all things to all men and it’s a waste of time trying.” The nose wobbled aggressively. “What’s important is to be something to the majority, to make them believe that they, at least, are on the right side of the divide.”

“So, right now, and over the next few weeks, which side will the majority perceive themselves to be?”

She pondered, remembering her conversations with Landless and the taxi driver, the closed theater. “You’re gaining a small lead in the polls, but it’s finely balanced. Volatile. They don’t really know you yet. The debate could go either way.”

He was staring at her directly across the rim of his glass. “Forget debate. Let’s talk about open warfare. Could your opinion polls tell who would win such

a war?”

She leaned forward in her chair, as if to get closer to him in order to share a confidence. “Opinion polls are like a cloudy crystal ball. They can help you look into the future, but it depends what questions you ask. And on how good a gypsy you are.”

His eyes fired with appreciation.

“I couldn’t tell you who would win such a war. But I could help wage it. Opinion polls are weapons, mighty powerful weapons at times. Ask the right question at the right time, get the right answer, leak it to the press...If you plan a campaign with expertise, you can have your opponent pronounced dead before he realizes there’s a war on.”

“Tell me, O Gypsy, why is it that I don’t hear this from other opinion pollsters?”

“First, because most pollsters are concerned with what people are thinking right now, at this moment in time. What we are talking about is moving opinion from where it is now to where you want it to be in the future. That’s called political leadership, and it’s a rare quality.”

He knew he was being flattered, and liked it. “And the second reason?”

She took a sip from her glass, recrossed her legs and took off her glasses, shaking her dark hair as she did so. “Because I’m better than the rest.”

He smiled in return. He liked dealing with her, both as a professional and as a woman. Downing Street could be a lonely place. He had a Cabinet full of supposedly expert Ministers whose duty it was to take most of the decisions, leaving him only to pull the strings and carry the can if the rest of them got it horribly wrong. Few Government papers came to him unless he asked for them. He was protected from the outside world by a highly professional staff, a posse of security men, mortarproof windows and huge iron gates. And Mortima was always off taking those damned evening classes...He needed someone to confide in, to gather his ideas and sort them into coherent order, who had self-confidence, who didn’t owe their job to him, who looked good. Who believed she was the best.

“And I suspect you are.”

Their eyes enjoyed the moment.

“So you think there will be war, Francis? Over One Nation? With the Opposition?”

He rested back in his chair, staring into a distance, struggling to discern the future. This was no longer the energetic exchange of academic ideas, nor the intellectual masturbation of cynical old men around a Senior Common Room dining table. The horrid stench of reality clung to his nostrils. When he answered his words were slow, carefully considered. “Not just with the Opposition. Maybe even with the King—if I let him make his speech.” He was pleased to see no trace of alarm in her eyes, only intense interest.

“War with the King...?”

“No, no...Not if I can avoid it. I want to avoid any confrontation with the Palace, truly I do. I have enough people to fight without taking on the Royal Family and every blue-rinsed loyalist in the country. But...” He paused. “Let us suppose. If it did come to that. I should need plenty of gypsy craft, Sally.”

Her lips were puckered, her words equally deliberate. “If that’s what you want, remember—you only have to say please. And anything else I can help you with.”

The gyrations of the end of her nose had become almost animalistic and, for Urquhart, exquisitely sensuous. They remained looking at each other in silence for a long moment, careful not to say a word in case either of them should destroy the magic of innuendo both were relishing. He had only ever once—no, twice—combined tutorials with sex. He would have been drummed out had he been discovered, yet the risk was what had made it some of the best sex of his life, not only rising above the lithe bodies of his students but in the same act rising above the banality and pathetic pettiness of the university establishment. He was different, better, he had always known it, and no more clearly than on the huge overstuffed Chesterfield in his college rooms overlooking the Parks.

The sex had also helped him rise above the memory of his considerably older brother, Alastair, who had died defending some scrappy bit of France during the Second World War. Thereafter, Urquhart had lived in his dead brother’s shadow. He had not only to fulfill his own substantial potential but, in the eyes of his mourning mother, to fulfill that of the lost firstborn, whom time and grief had imbued with almost mythical powers. When Francis passed exams, his mother

reminded him that Alastair had been Captain of the school. Where Francis became one of the fastest-traveling dons of his age, in his mother's eyes Alastair would already have arrived. As a small boy he would climb into his mother's bed, for comfort and warmth, but all he found were silent tears trickling down her cheeks. He could remember only the feeling of rejection, of being somehow inadequate. In later life he could never completely expel from his mind his mother's look of misery and incomprehension, which seemed to haunt any bedroom he entered. While a teenager he had never taken a girl to bed; it only served to remind him that for his mother he had always been second-born and second-best. There had been girls, of course, but never in bed—on floors, in tents, standing up against the walls of a deserted country house. And, eventually, on Chesterfields, during tutorials. Like this one.

“Thank you,” he said softly, breaking the moment and his lurid reminiscence by swirling the whiskey around in his glass and downing it in a gulp. “But I must deal with this speech.” He took a sheaf of papers from a coffee table and waved them at her. “Head him off at the pass, or whatever it is you say.”

“Drafting speeches isn't exactly my line, Francis.”

“But it is mine. And I shall treat it with the greatest respect. Like a surgeon. It will remain a fine and upstanding text, full of high sentiment and ringing phrases. It simply won't have any balls left when I send it back...”

Eleven

The three most destructive forces in a political life are consensus, compromise, and copulation.

December: The Third Week

The Detective Constable squirmed in his seat as he tried to regain some of the feeling he had lost in his lower limbs. He'd been stuck in the car for four hours, the drizzle prevented him from taking a walk around the car, and his mouth felt like a mouse nest from sucking at the cigarettes. He'd give the weed up. Again. Tomorrow, he vowed, just as he always did. *Mañana*. He reached for a fresh thermos of coffee and poured a cup for himself and the driver beside him.

They sat gazing at the small house in the exotically named Adam and Eve Mews. It stood behind one of London's most fashionable shopping thoroughfares, but the mews was well protected from the capital's bustle and stood quiet, secluded and, for onlookers, unremittingly dull.

"Christ, I should think her Italian's perfect by now," the driver muttered mindlessly. They had exchanged similar sentiments on all five trips to the mews over the last fortnight, and the Special Branch DC and driver found their conversation going round in circles.

The DC broke wind in response. The tide of coffee was getting to him and he desperately wanted to take a leak. His basic training had provided instruction in how to take an unobtrusive leak beside the car while pretending to make running repairs so that he never left his vehicle and its radio, but he would get soaked in the steady drizzle. Anyway, last time he'd tried it the driver had driven off, leaving him kneeling in full flow in the middle of the bloody street. Funny

bastard.

He had been enthusiastic when they offered him a job as a Protection Officer in Downing Street. They hadn't told him it would be for Mortima Urquhart and her endless round of shopping, entertaining, socializing. And Italian lessons. He lit another cigarette and cracked the window to allow in some fresh air, coughing as it hit his lungs. "Naw," he offered in reply. "I reckon we've got weeks of this. I bet her teacher's one of the really slow, methodical types."

They sat gazing at the mews house with the leafless ivy clinging to its walls, the dustbin in its neat little alcove and in the front window a miniature Christmas tree, complete with lights and decorations, £44.95 from Harrods. Inside, behind the drawn curtains, Mortima Urquhart was lying on a bed, naked and sweating, taking yet another slow, methodical lesson from her Italian opera star with the beautiful tenor voice.

It was still dark when Mycroft woke, stirred by the clatter of milk bottles being deposited on doorsteps. Outside a new day was beginning, dragging him back to some semblance of reality. He was a reluctant captive. Kenny was still asleep, one toy bear from his immense collection propped precariously beside his pillow, the rest tumbled to the floor beside the Kleenex, victims of a long night's loving. Every corner of Mycroft's body ached, and still cried out for more. And somehow he would ensure he would get it, before he returned to the real world waiting beyond Kenny's front door. The last few days had been like a new life for him, getting to know Kenny, getting to know himself, becoming lost in the mysteries and rites of a world he scarcely knew. There had been times at Eton and university, of course, during those days of the hash-smoking, free-for-all, do-everything-screw-anything sixties, but that had proved to be a limited voyage of self-discovery that had been all too self-indulgent and lacking in direction ever to be complete. He had never fallen in love, never had the chance, his affairs had been all too brief and hedonistic. With time he might have gotten to know himself better, but then had come the call from the Palace, a summons that did not allow for exhaustive and, at that time, illegal sexual experimentation. And so for more than twenty years he had pretended. Pretended he didn't look at

men as anything other than colleagues. Pretended that he was happy with Fiona. Pretended that he wasn't who he knew he was. It had been a necessary sacrifice but now, for the first time in his life, he had begun to be completely honest with himself, to be his own person. At last his feet had touched bottom. He was in at the deep end, not knowing whether he had been pushed by Fiona or had jumped, but it didn't matter. He was there. He knew he might drown in the depths, but it was better than drowning in corrupt respectability.

He wished Fiona could see him now and hoped she would be hurt, disgusted even; it was like shitting all over their marriage and everything she stood for. But she probably wouldn't give a damn. He'd found more passion in the last few days than he had experienced during the entire course of his marriage, enough to last him a lifetime perhaps, though he hoped there would be more. Much more.

The real world was waiting for him outside and he knew he would have to return to it soon. Leave this Kenny-Come-Lately, perhaps for good. He had no illusions about his new lover, with a teddy in every port "and a Franky and a Miguel too," he had bragged. Once the adrenaline of initiation had worn off Mycroft doubted whether he would have the physical stamina to keep hold of a man twenty years his junior with a velvet skin and a tongue that was both inexhaustible and utterly uninhibited, but it would be fun trying. Before he returned to the real world...

Could an incorrigible air steward with the inhibitions of a Calcuttan street dog coexist beside the duties and obligations of his other world? He wanted it to be, but he knew others would not let him, not if they knew, not if they found him here amid the clutter of teddy bears, underpants, and dirty towels. They would say he was failing the King. But if he ran away now, he would be failing himself, and wouldn't that be far worse?

He was still confused but happy, more elated than he could remember, and he would remain that way so long as he stayed beneath this duvet and didn't venture outside that front door. Kenny was stirring now, his long-haul tan stretching all the way from the stubble on his chin to the trunk line just above his white buttocks. Damn it, let Kenny decide. He leaned over, ran his lips across Kenny's neck just where the vertebrae protruded, and started working his way down.

As he waited, Benjamin Landless gazed at the barrel-vaulted ceiling, illuminated by six great chandeliers, where Italianate plaster cherubs with pouting cheeks chased each other through an abundance of clouds, gilded stars, and spectacular plasterwork squiggles. He hadn't been to a carol service in more than thirty years and he'd never before been inside St. Martin-in-the-Fields but, as he always mused, life is full of new experiences. Or at least new victims.

She had a reputation for being late for everything except meals, and this evening was no exception. The drive was less than three miles, complete with police motorcycle escort, from Kensington Palace to the fine Hanoverian church overlooking Trafalgar Square, but presumably she would make some asinine excuse like getting stuck in the traffic. Or perhaps as a Royal Princess she no longer bothered making excuses.

Landless did not know Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte well. They had only met twice before, at public receptions, and he wanted to meet her more informally. He was not a man who accepted delay or excuses, particularly from the chinless and indigent son of minor nobility he paid twenty grand a year for "consulting services"—which meant fixing private lunches or soirées with whomever he wanted to meet. Even Landless had to compromise this time, however; the Princess's Christmas schedule was so hectic as she prepared for seasonal festivities and the Austrian piste that sharing a private box at a carol service was as good as he was going to get, and even that had cost him a hefty donation to the Princess's favorite children's charity. Still, charitable donations came from a private trust set up by his accountants to mitigate his tax position and he had found that a few carefully targeted donations could bring him, if not acceptability, then at least access and invitations. And they were worth paying for, particularly for a boy from Bethnal Green.

At last she was there; the organist struck up the strains of Handel's *Messiah* and the clergy, choristers, and acolytes processed down the aisle. As they peeled off to occupy their allotted positions, in the Royal Box above their heads Landless nodded respectfully while she smiled from beneath the broad brim of a matador's hat, and the service began. Their seating was, indeed, private, at

gallery level and beneath a finely carved eighteenth-century canopy affording them a view of the choir but keeping her at some distance from most of the congregation, who in any event were largely Christmas tourists or refugees from the cold streets. She leaned across to whisper as the choir struck up their interpretation of “O Come O Come Emmanuel.”

“I’m dying for a pee. Had to rush here straight from lunch.”

Landless had no need to consult his watch to know that it was already past five thirty. Some lunch. He could smell stale wine on her breath. The Princess was renowned for her bluntness: putting people at their ease, as her defenders argued; displaying her basic coarseness and congenital lack of authentic style, according to her rather greater number of detractors. She had married into the Royal Family, the daughter of an undistinguished family who counted more actuaries than aristocrats among their number, a fact of which the less respectful members of the press never ceased to remind their readers. Still, she had done her job, allowing her name to be used by endless charities, opening new hospital wings, cutting the ribbons, feeding the gossip columns and providing the nation with a daughter and two sons, the elder of whom would inherit the throne if some dozen of his more senior royal relatives all suddenly succumbed. “A disaster waiting for a disaster,” as the *Daily Mail* had once ungraciously described her after a dinner during which she had been overheard suggesting that her son would make an excellent monarch.

She looked at Landless quizzically. There were small, fragile creases underneath and at the corners of her slate-green eyes that became more prominent when she frowned, and the flesh at the bottom of her neck was beginning to lose its elasticity, as happened with women of her age, but she still retained much of the good looks and appeal for which the Prince had married her all those years ago, ignoring the advice of his closest friends.

“You’ve not come here to write some scandalous nonsense about me, have you?” she demanded roughly.

“There are enough journalists in the gutter taking advantage of your family without my joining in.”

She nodded in agreement, the brim of her hat bobbing up and down in front of her face. “Occupational hazard. But what can one do about it? You can’t lock

an entire family away, even a Royal one, not in this day and age. We've got to be allowed to participate like other people."

It was her endless refrain of complaint and justification: Let us be an ordinary family. Yet her desire to be ordinary had never stopped her embracing the paparazzi, dragging all the First Women of Fleet Street backstage behind the royal footlights to write gushing tributes, being seen eating at London's most fashionable restaurants and sedulously ensuring she received more column inches than most other members of the Royal Family, including her husband. With each passing year her desire not to fade from the spotlight had grown more apparent. It was part of being a modern Monarchy, she had contended, not getting oneself cut off, being able to join in. It was an argument borrowed from the King before he ascended the throne, but it was one she had never understood. He had been seeking to find a concrete but constitutional role for the heir, while she saw it in terms of being able to find some form of personal fulfillment and excitement to take the place of a family life that had largely ceased to exist.

They nodded deferentially through a prayer before picking up the conversation during the reading of the lesson from Isaiah—"For a boy has been born for us, a son given to us, to bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder; and he shall be called..."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, the gutter press."

She leaned closer and he tried to shift his bulk around in the narrow chair, but it was an unequal struggle.

"There's a story going around that I'm afraid could do you harm."

"Not counting the empty liquor bottles in my dustbin again?"

"A story that you're getting designer clothes worth thousands of pounds from leading fashion houses and somehow forgetting to pay for them."

"That old rubbish! Been floating around for years. Look, I'm the best advertisement those designers have. Why else would they still keep sending me clothes? They get so much free publicity, it's me who ought to be charging them."

"As they offered gifts most rare, At Thy cradle rude and bare," the choir rang out.

"That's only part of it, Ma'am. The story goes that you are then taking these

clothes that have been...donated, shall we say, and selling them for cash to your friends.”

There was a moment of guilty silence before she responded, deeply irritated. “What do they know? It’s nonsense. Can’t possibly have any evidence. Who, tell me who. Who’s supposed to have these bloody clothes?”

“Amanda Braithwaite. Your former flatmate, Serena Chiselhurst. Lady Olga Wickham-Fumess. The Honorable Mrs. Pamela Orpington. To name but four. The last lady received an exclusive Oldfield evening dress and an Yves St. Laurent suit, complete with accessories. You received one thousand pounds. According to the report.”

“There’s no evidence for these allegations,” the Princess snapped in a strangulated whisper. “Those girls would never—”

“They don’t need to. Those clothes are bought to wear, to show off. The evidence is all in a series of photographs of you and these other ladies taken over the last few months, quite properly, in public places.” He paused. “And there’s a check stub.”

She considered in silence for a moment, finding reassurance lacking as the choir sang sentiments of bleak midwinter and frosty winds.

“Won’t look too good, will it. There’ll be a bloody stink.” She sounded deflated, the self-confidence waning. She studied her gloves intently for a moment, distractedly smoothing out the creases. “I’m expected to be in five different places a day, never wearing the same outfit twice. I work damned hard to make other people happy, to bring a little Royal pleasure into their lives. I help to raise millions, literally millions, every year for charity. For others. Yet I am expected to do it all on the pittance I get from the Civil List. It’s impossible.” Her voice had become a whisper as she took in the inevitability of what Landless had said. “Oh, stuff it all,” she sighed.

“Don’t worry, Ma’am. I think I’m in a position to acquire these photographs and ensure they never see the light of day.”

She looked up from the gloves, relief and gratitude swelling in her eyes. Not for a moment did she realize that Landless already had the photographs, that they had been taken on his explicit instructions after a tip-off from one of the women’s disgruntled Spanish au pair who had overheard a telephone

conversation and stolen the check stub.

“But that’s not really the point, is it,” Landless continued. “We need to find some way of ensuring you don’t run into this sort of trouble ever again. I know what it’s like to be the victim of constant press sneering. I feel we’re in this together. I’m British, born and bred and proud of it, and I’ve no time for those foreign creeps who own half our national press yet who don’t understand or care a fig about what makes this country great.”

Her shoulders stiffened under the impact of his bombastic flattery as the vicar began an appeal for help to the homeless built heavily around images of insensitive innkeepers and quotations from the annual report of a housing action charity.

“I’d like to offer you a consultancy with one of my companies. Entirely confidential, only you and me to know about it. I provide you with a suitable retainer, and in return you give me a few days of your time. Open one or two of our new offices. Meet some of my important foreign business contacts over lunch. Perhaps host an occasional dinner at the Palace. And I’d love to do something like that on the Royal Yacht, if that’s possible. But you tell me.”

“How much?”

“A dozen times a year, perhaps.”

“No. How much money?”

“A hundred thousand. Plus a guarantee of favorable coverage and exclusive interviews in my newspapers.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“The chance to get to know you. Meet the King. Get some great PR support for me and my business. Get the sort of exclusive Royal coverage that sells newspapers. Do you need more?”

“No, Mr. Landless. I don’t particularly care for my job, it’s brought me no great personal happiness, but if I do something I like to do it properly. Without making too much of the matter, I need more money than the Civil List makes available. In the circumstances, so long as it remains an entirely private arrangement and requires nothing that will demean the Family, I’d be delighted to accept. And thank you.”

There was more, of course. Had she known Landless better she would have

known there was always more. A Royal connection would have its uses, filling the gap left by his withered line to Downing Street, a tool to impress those who still thought majesty mattered. But this was a particularly versatile connection. He knew the Princess was usually indiscreet, occasionally unwise, frequently uninhibited—and unfaithful. She was despair waiting to be exposed at the heart of the Royal Family, and when at last the despair became too large to contain, as eventually he was sure it would, his newspapers would be at the front of the jackal pack, armed with their exclusive insights, as they tore her to pieces.

Twelve

An editor will usually take matters into his own hands, particularly the law and the reputation of other men's wives.

The room had a hushed, almost reverential atmosphere. It was a place of contemplation, of escape from the outside world with its persistent telephones and interruptions, a haven where businessmen could repair after a heavy lunch to collect their thoughts. At least, that was what they told their secretaries, unless, of course, their secretaries were waiting in one of the simple bedrooms upstairs. The Turkish Bath of the Royal Automobile Club on Pall Mall is one of those many London institutions that never advertise their blessings. It is not a case of English modesty, simply that if the institution is good enough its reputation will circulate sufficiently without causing an influx of what is called "the wrong type of people." It is impossible to define what is the wrong type of people, but gentlemen's clubs have generations of experience in spotting it as soon as it walks through the door, and assisting it straight back out. Such people do not normally include politicians or newspaper editors.

The politician, Tim Stamper, and the editor, Bryan Brynford-Jones, sat in a corner of the steam room. It was still morning and the after-lunch crush had not yet developed; in any event, the denseness of the steamy atmosphere made it impossible to see further than five feet. It clouded the dim wall lights like a London fog and muffled any sound. They would be neither seen, nor overheard. A good place to share confidences. The two men leaned forward on their wooden bench, working up a sweat, the perspiration dripping off their noses and trickling down their bodies. Stamper had draped a small crimson towel across

himself while BBJ, as he liked to be known, sat completely naked. He was as overweight and fleshy as Stamper was gaunt, his stomach practically covering his private parts as he leaned forward. He was extroverted, opinionated, insecure, midforties, and very menopausal, beginning to turn that delicate corner between maturity and physical decrepitude.

He was also deeply disgruntled. Stamper had just given him a flavor of the New Year's Honors list soon to be announced, and he wasn't on it. What was worse, one of his fiercest rivals among the national editors' club was to get a knighthood, joining two other Fleet Street K's.

"It's not so much I feel I deserve one, of course," he had explained. "But when all your competitors are in on the act it makes people point their fingers at you, as if you're second rate. I don't know what the hell I have to do to establish my credentials with this Government. After all, I've turned *The Times* into your biggest supporter among the quality press. You might not have scraped home at the last election had I turned on you, like some of the rest."

"I sympathize, really I do," the Party Chairman responded, looking less than sincere as he offered condolence while perusing a copy of the *Independent*. "But you know these things aren't entirely in our hands."

"Bullshit."

"We have to be evenhanded, you know..."

"The day a Government starts being evenhanded between its friends and its enemies is the day it no longer has any friends."

"All the recommendations have to go before the Scrutiny Committee. You know, checks and balances, to keep the system smelling sweet. We don't control their deliberations. They often recommend against..."

"Not that ancient crap again, Tim." Brynford-Jones was beginning to feel increasingly indignant as his ambitions were brushed aside without Stamper even lifting his eyes from the newspaper. "How many times do I have to explain? It was years ago. A minor offense. I only pleaded guilty to get rid of it. If I'd fought it the whole thing would have been dragged out in court and my reputation smeared much more badly."

Stamper looked up slowly from his newspaper. "Pleading guilty to a charge of flashing your private parts at a woman in a public place is not designed to

recommend you to the good and the great of the Scrutiny Committee, Bryan.”

“For Chrissake, it wasn’t a public place. I was standing at the window of my bathroom. I didn’t know I could be seen from the street. The woman was lying when she said I made lewd gestures. It was all a disgusting stitch-up, Tim.”

“You pleaded guilty.”

“My lawyers told me to. My word against hers. I could’ve fought the case for a year and still lost with every newspaper in the country having a field day at my expense. As it was it only got a couple of column inches in some local rag. Christ, a couple of column inches is probably all that prying old bag wanted. Maybe I should have given it to her.”

Stamper was struggling to fold the pages of the *Independent*, which had become flaccid in the damp atmosphere, his apparent lack of concern infuriating Brynford-Jones further.

“I’m being victimized! I’m paying for the lies of some shriveled old woman almost fifteen years ago. I’ve worked my balls off trying to make up for all that, to put it behind me. Yet it seems I can’t even rely on the support of my friends. Maybe I should wake up and realize they’re not my friends after all. Not the people I thought they were.”

The bitterness, and the implied threat to withdraw his editorial support, were impossible to misunderstand, but Stamper did not respond immediately, first carefully attempting to refold his newspaper, but it was pointless: the *Independent* was beginning to disintegrate amid the clouds of steam, and Stamper finally thrust it soggily to one side.

“It’s not a matter of just friends, Bryan. To override the objections of the Scrutiny Committee and be willing to put up with the resulting flak would require a very good friend. To be quite honest, Henry Collingridge was never that sort of friend for you, he’d never stick his neck out.” He paused. “Francis Urquhart, however, is a very different sort of dog. Much more of a terrier. And right now, with a recession around the corner, he’s a strong believer in friendship.”

They paused as, through the murk, the door opened and a shadowy figure appeared, but the cloying atmosphere was evidently too much and after two deep breaths he coughed and left.

“Go on.”

“Let’s not beat about the bush, Bryan. You don’t have a cat in hell’s chance of getting your gong unless you find a Prime Minister willing to fight in the last ditch for you. A Prime Minister isn’t going to do that unless you’re willing to reciprocate.” He wiped a hand over his forehead to clear his line of vision. “Your unstinting support and cooperation all the way up to the next election. In exchange for informed briefings, exclusive insights, first shot at the best stories. And a knighthood at the end of it. It’s a chance to wipe the slate clean, Bryan, and put the past behind you. No one argues with a K.”

Brynford-Jones sat, his elbows on his knees and the folds of his belly piled one upon the other, staring straight ahead. A smile began to etch its way across his damp face like a beam of light through this murky, misting world of fallen chests and sagging scrota.

“You know what I think, Tim?”

“What?”

“I think you may have just rekindled my faith.”

Thirteen

Royalty is an institution that, in the end, is based on little more than semen and sycophancy.

• • •

Buckingham Palace

16 December

My dear son,

You will soon be back with us for Christmas, but I felt I needed someone with whom to share. There are so few people to trust.

My life, and yours to come, are beset by frustration. We are expected to be examples—but of what! Apparently of servility. At times I despair.

As we discussed when last you came down from Eton, I had planned to make a speech drawing the country's attention to the growing divisions within the country. Yet the politicians have "redrafted" some of my thoughts, so I no longer recognize them as my own. They are trying to make me a eunuch and force me to deny my own manhood.

Is the role of the King to reign mute over a nation being led to dissolution and division? There seem to me to be few clear rules, except that of caution. My anger at the Government's treatment of my speech must remain private. But I cannot be a Monarch without also retaining my self-respect as a man—as you will find when your time comes.

If we have not the freedom to defend those things in which we believe

passionately, then at least we can avoid colluding in those actions we oppose and feel dangerously inappropriate. Never let them put words into your mouth. I have simply omitted large chunks of the Government's draft.

My task, and yours to come, is a heavy burden. We are meant to be figureheads, to symbolize the virtues of the nation. To do so grows increasingly difficult in a modern world that surrounds us with many temptations but so few occupations. But if our role is to mean anything, then it must at very least allow us our conscience. I would sign a bill proclaiming a republic tomorrow if it were put to me approved by Lords and Commons, but I will not speak politicians' nonsense and bless it as my own.

Everything I do, every blunder I make, every morsel of respect I gather, will in time be passed on to you. I have not always been able to be the sort of father I would want. Formality, convention, distance too often come between a King and his son—me and you, as they did between me and my own father. But I will not betray you and your inheritance, on that you have my word. In previous times they have taken our forefathers to a public place and chopped off their heads! At least they had the dignity of dying with their conscience intact.

The world seems dark to me at the moment. I eagerly await the light that your return for the seasonal holiday will bring.

With my warmest affection to you, my son.

Father

Fourteen

He has two qualities. I can't remember the first, and it's a very long time since he bumped into the other.

Mycroft had spent the evening pacing disconsolately around his cold, empty house, searching for distraction. It had been a miserable day. Kenny had been called off at short notice for a ten-day tour to the Far East that would keep him away over the holiday. Mycroft had been with the King when Kenny called, so all he got was a message left with his secretary wishing him Happy Christmas. As Mycroft gazed at the four walls, he imagined Kenny already cavorting along some sun-kissed beach, laughing, enjoying himself, enjoying others.

The King hadn't helped, either, spitting incandescence at the Government's redraft of his speech. For some reason Mycroft blamed himself. Wasn't it his job to ensure that the King's views got across? He felt as if he had failed. It was another pang of the guilt that plagued him whenever he was away from Kenny and out from under his spell.

The house was so neat, orderly, and impersonal that he longed for the sight of some of Fiona's clutter, but there wasn't even a dirty dish in the sink. He'd paced all evening, unable to settle, feeling ever more alone, drinking too much in a vain attempt to forget, drowning once again. Thoughts of Kenny only made him jealous. When he tried to distract himself by thinking of his other life, all he could feel was the force of the King's passion and his bitterness at the Prime Minister. "If only I hadn't been so open with him, thought he might be different from the rest. It's my fault," he had said. But Mycroft held himself to blame.

He sat at his desk, the King's emasculated draft in front of him, the photo of

Fiona in the silver frame still not removed, his diary open with a ring around the date of Kenny's return, his refilled glass leaving rings of dampness on the leather top. God, but he needed someone to talk with, to remind himself there was a world out there, to break the oppressive silence around him and to distract from his feeling of guilt and failure. He felt confused and vulnerable, and the drink wasn't helping. He was still feeling confused and vulnerable when the phone rang.

"Hello, Trevor," he greeted the *Chronicle's* Court Correspondent. "I was hoping someone would ring. How can I help? Good God, you've heard what...?"

"I am not an 'appy man. I am not an 'appy bloody man." The editor of the *Sun*, an undersized and wiry man from the dales of Yorkshire, began swearing quietly to himself as he read the lead item in the *Chronicle* first edition. The profanity became louder as he read down the copy until he could contain his frustration no longer. "Sally. Get me that bastard Incest."

"He's in the hospital. Just had his appendix out," a female voice floated through his open door.

"I don't care if he's in his bloody coffin. Dig him up and get him on the phone."

Roderick Motherup, known as Incest throughout the newspaper world, was the paper's Royal Correspondent, the man paid to know who was doing what to whom behind the discreet facades of any of the Royal residences. Even while he lay flat on his back.

"Incest? Why the hell did we miss this story?"

"What story?" a weak voice sounded down the line.

"I pay you a whole truckful of money to spread around enough Palace servants, chauffeurs, and snitches so we know what's going on. Yet you've bloody gone and missed it."

"What story?" the voice chimed in again, more weakly.

The editor began reading the salient facts. The extracts from the King's draft speech excised by the Government. The replacement sections suggested by the

Government, full of economics and optimism, which the King had refused to use. The conclusion that behind the King's recent address to the National Society of Charitable Foundations lay one hell of a row.

"So I want the story, Incest. Who's screwing who? And I want it for our next edition in forty minutes." He was already scribbling draft headlines.

"But I haven't even seen the story," the correspondent protested.

"Have you got a fax?"

"I'm in the hospital!" came the plaintive protest.

"I'll bike it round. In the meantime get on the phone and get back to me with something in ten."

"Are you sure it's true?"

"I don't care if the damned thing's true. It's a fantastic ball-breaking story and I want it on our front page in forty minutes!"

In editorial offices all around London similar words of motivation were being relayed to harassed Royal-watchers. There was the sniff of a downturn in the air, advertising revenues were beginning to fall, and that meant nervous proprietors who would more happily sacrifice their editors than their bottom lines. Fleet Street needed a good circulation-boosting story. This would put many tens of thousands on tomorrow's sales figures and had the promise of being a story that would run and run. And run.

Fifteen

He lies every day in luxury. I lie, very occasionally, in the House of Commons—or at least I distribute the truth a little unevenly. It gives me a much better idea of where my vulnerable parts are located.

A long time ago, at a point lost in the mists of time, an incident took place during a war fought in Canada between the British and the French. At least, it was probably in Canada, although it could have taken place at almost any point on the globe where the two fiercely imperialist nations challenged each other, if indeed it took place at all. According to the reports two armies, one British and the other French, marched up opposite sides of the same hill, discovering unexpected confrontation on the brow. Heavily packed ranks of infantrymen faced each other, readying themselves for battle, hastily preparing their muskets in a deadly race to shed first blood.

But the troops were led by officers who were also gentlemen. The English officer, seeing his counterpart but a few feet away, was quick to see the demands of courtesy and, taking off his hat with a low sweep, invited the French to shoot first.

The Frenchman could be no less gallant than his English enemy and, with a still deeper bow, offered: “No, sir. I insist. After you.”

At which the English infantrymen fired and blew the French apart.

Prime Minister’s Question Time in the House of Commons is much like that confrontation in Canada. All MPs are addressed as “honorable” and all in trousers as “gentlemen,” even by their fiercest enemy. They are drawn up facing each other in ranks only two sword lengths apart and, in spite of the apparent

purpose of asking questions and seeking information, the real intent is to leave as many of your opponents' bodies as you can manage bleeding on the floor of the Chamber. But there are two crucial differences with the confrontation on the hilltop. It is the one who strikes second, the Prime Minister with the last word, who normally has the advantage. And MPs on all sides have learned the lesson that the midst of battle is no place for being a gentleman.

The news of the dispute over the King's speech hit the newspapers on the last full day of business before the Christmas recess. There was little seasonal goodwill to be found anywhere as His Majesty's Loyal Opposition sensed its first good opportunity of testing the mettle of the new Prime Minister. At three fifteen p.m., the hour appointed for the Prime Minister to take questions, the Chamber of the House of Commons was packed. Opposition benches were strewn with copies of that morning's newspapers and their graphic front-page headlines. During the course of the previous night editors had worked hard to outbid each other, and headlines such as "A Right Royal Rumpus" had given way to "King's Draft Daft Says PM," eventually becoming simply "King of Cardboard City." It was all richly amusing and luridly speculative.

The Leader of the Opposition, Cordon McKillin, rose to put his question amid a rustle of expectation on all sides. Like Urquhart he had been born north of the border but there the resemblance ceased. He was considerably younger, his waistline thicker, his hair darker, his politics more ideological, and his accent much broader. He was not noted for his charm but had a barrister's mind, which made his words always precise, and he had spent the morning with his advisers wondering how best to circumvent the rules of the House, which forbid any controversial mention of the Royal Family. How to raise the topic of the King's speech, without touching on the King?

He was smiling as he reached out to lean on the polished Wooden Dispatch Box that separated him from his adversary by less than six feet. "Will the Prime Minister tell us whether he agrees"—he looked theatrically at his notes—"it is time to recognize that more people than ever are disaffected in our society, and that the growing sense of division is a matter for grave concern?"

Everyone recognized the direct quote from the King's forbidden draft.

"Since the question is a very simple one, which even he should be able to

understand, a simple yes or no will suffice.” Very simple indeed. No room for wriggling away from this one.

He sat down amid a chorus of approval from his own backbenchers and a waving of newspaper headlines. When Urquhart rose from his seat to respond he, too, wore an easy smile, but some thought they saw a distinct reddening of his ears. No wriggling. The only sensible course of action was direct avoidance, not to risk a cacophony of questions about the King’s views, yet he didn’t like to be seen running away from it. But what else could he do?

“As the Right Honorable Gentleman is aware, it is not the custom of this House to discuss matters relating to the Monarch, and I do not intend to make it my custom to comment on leaked documents.”

He sat down, and as he did so a roar of mock anger arose from the benches in front of him. The bastards were enjoying this one. The Opposition Leader was already back on his feet, his smile broader still.

“The Prime Minister must have thought I asked a different question. I don’t recall mentioning His Majesty. It is entirely a matter between him and the Palace if the Prime Minister chooses to censor and cut to ribbons His Majesty’s remarks. I wouldn’t dream of raising such matters in this place.” A howl of mockery was hurled toward Urquhart from along the Opposition benches. Beneath her long judicial wig Madam Speaker shook her head in disapproval at such obvious circumvention of the rules of the House, but decided not to intervene. “So can the Prime Minister get back to the question actually asked, rather than the one he wishes had been asked, and give a straight question a straight answer?”

Opposition MPs were pointing fingers at Urquhart, trying to get under his skin. “He’s chicken, running away!” exclaimed one. “Can’t face up to it,” said another. “Happy Christmas, Francis,” mocked a third. Most simply rocked back and forth on the leather benches in delight at the Prime Minister’s discomfort. Urquhart glanced at the Speaker, hoping she might slap down such conduct and with it the entire discussion, but she had suddenly found something of great interest to study on her Order Paper. Urquhart was on his own.

“The purpose of the question is clear. My answer remains the same.”

There was pandemonium now as the Opposition Leader rose for the third

time. He leaned with one elbow on the Dispatch Box for many long moments without speaking, savoring the state of passion of his audience, waiting for the din to die, enjoying the sight of Urquhart impaled on his hook.

“I have no way of knowing what passed between the Prime Minister and the Palace. I know only what I read in the newspapers”—he waved a copy of the *Sun* for the benefit of the television cameras—“and I have long ceased to believe anything I read there. But the question is simple. Such concerns about the growth of division within our society are shared by millions of ordinary people, whether or not they are held by those, shall we say, somewhat less than ordinary. But if the Prime Minister is having trouble with the question, let me rephrase it. Does he agree”—McKillin glanced down, a copy of the *Chronicle* now in his hand—“with the sentiment that we cannot rest content while tens of thousands of our fellow citizens sleep rough on our streets, through no fault of their own? Does he accept that in a truly United Kingdom the sense of belonging of unemployed crofters in the Scottish Highlands is just as vital as that of homeowners in the southern suburbs? Would he support the view that it is a sign for concern rather than congratulation if more people drive our streets in Rolls-Royces while the disabled in their wheelchairs are left in the gutters, still unable to catch a Number 57 bus?” Everyone recognized the words that had been hijacked from the censored speech. “And if he doesn’t like those questions, I’ve got lots more.”

They were baiting Urquhart now. They didn’t want answers, just blood, and in parliamentary terms they were getting it. Yet Urquhart knew that once he responded to any point concerning the King’s speech he would lose all control of the matter, that he would be open to attack without restraint.

“I will not be drawn. Particularly by a pack of jackals.” From the Government backbenches, which had grown increasingly quiet during the exchanges, came a growl of support. This was more like the exchanges they were used to handling, and insults began to fly freely across the Chamber as Urquhart continued, shouting to make himself heard above the din. “Before he takes his pretense of interest in the plight of the homeless and unemployed too far, perhaps the Right Honorable Gentleman should have a word with his trade union paymasters and tell them to stop pushing through inflationary pay claims that only force decent

citizens out of their jobs and out of their homes.” The roar was almost deafening. “He greets the problems of others with all the relish of a grave digger!”

It was an adept attempt at self-preservation. The insults had at last dragged attention away from the question and a tide of protest swept across the Chamber, creating waves of heaving arms and invective that crashed like surf on either side. The Opposition Leader was back on his feet for a fourth attempt but Madam Speaker, conscious that perhaps she should have done more to curtail the questioning and protect the Prime Minister, decided that enough was enough and handed the floor over to Tony Marples, a prison officer elected to represent the marginal constituency of Dagenham at the last election who regarded himself as a savior of “the ordinary chap” and who made no secret of his ambition to get a Ministerial job. He wouldn’t get one, of course, not simply because he probably wouldn’t last long in the House nor because he was homosexual, but because an estranged boyfriend had recently retaliated by wrecking the MP’s Westminster flat before being carted away by the police. Disaffected lovers had dragged down many finer men than Marples, and no Prime Minister was going to give him the chance to follow in their footsteps, no matter how well trodden. But in Madam Speaker’s eyes his ambition made Marples just the man to lob the PM an easy ball to hit and so provide the House with an opportunity to regain its composure.

“Wouldn’t the Prime Minister agree with me,” Marples began in strong Cockney tones; he hadn’t prepared a question in advance, but he thought he knew how to help his beleaguered leader, “that this Party stands second to none in its respect for the institutions of this country, and in particular in its respect, love, and devotion to our wonderful Royals?”

He paused for a second. Once on his feet he was suddenly uncertain how to finish. He coughed, hesitated, too long, exposing a gap like a chink in medieval armor. The Opposition lunged. Interventions were hurled at him from across the Chamber, throwing him even further off stride until his mind jammed in second and stalled. His jaw sagged and his eyes grew wide with the terror of those who wake from a dream to find that nightmare has become reality and they are naked in a public place. “Our wonderful Royals,” he was left repeating, ever more feebly.

It was left to an Opposition MP to deliver the final blow, putting him out of his misery with a stage whisper that carried to all parts of the House.

“Particularly our queens!”

Even many on Marples’s own side failed to restrain their smug grins. Marples saw an Opposition member blow a silent kiss of mockery in his direction, his confidence drained from him for all to see, and he sank miserably back into his seat as the Opposition once more reached a state of euphoria.

Urquhart closed his eyes in despair. He had hoped he’d staunched the flow of blood; now he would need a tourniquet. He thought he would apply it to Marples’s neck.

Sixteen

A king cannot shop for his principles at the supermarket. How can he bleed for the people in monogrammed slippers?

The King was standing, as was his custom, near the window of his sitting room. He was toying self-consciously with the crested signet ring on his left hand, and made no move toward Urquhart. The Prime Minister had been kept waiting outside for a period not actually discourteous but noticeably longer than usual; now he was forced to pace across the full length of the room before the King extended his hand. Once again Urquhart was surprised at the limp handshake, remarkable for someone who took such pride in his physical fitness. A sign of inner weakness? Or an occupational injury? At the King's silent direction they sat in the two chairs by the fireplace.

"Your Majesty, we must put an end to this open sore."

"I do so agree, Prime Minister."

The informality of their earlier meetings had been replaced by an almost theatrical precision, like two chess players taking patient turns with the pieces. They sat just a few feet apart, knees together, waiting for the other to begin. Eventually Urquhart was forced to make his move.

"I must ask that this never happens again. Such material emanating from the Palace makes my task impossible. And if the leak came from a Palace servant, then he should be disciplined as an example to others for the future—"

"Confound your insolence!"

"I beg—?"

"You come here to impugn my integrity, to suggest that I or one of my staff

leaked these wretched documents!”

“You don’t for one moment think that *I* leaked them, not for all the damage they have done...”

“That, Mr. Urquhart, is politics, which is your game and *not* mine. Downing Street is notorious for leaking documents when it serves their purpose. I am not in that game!”

The King’s head was thrust forward, his balding temples glowing with indignation and the bony bridge of his long and much broken nose showing prominently, like a bull about to charge. The limp handshake had been deceptive. Urquhart couldn’t fail to mistake the sincerity of the other man’s anger, and knew he had misjudged the situation. He flushed and swallowed hard.

“I...apologize, sir. I can assure you I played no part in the leaking of these documents, and I had assumed that, perhaps, a Palace servant...? I misconstrued.” The knuckles of his tightly clenched hands were cracking with frustration, while the King snorted through his nose several times, banging a hand down upon his right knee as if to expend his anger and to regain control of his temper. They both sat silent for several moments, gathering their wits.

“Sir, I am at a loss as to which devil is responsible for the leak and our misunderstanding.”

“Prime Minister, I am well aware of my constitutional duties and restraints. I have made a deep study of them. Open warfare with my Prime Minister is not within my prerogative and it is not my desire. Such a course of action can only be damaging, perhaps disastrous, for us both.”

“The damage has already been inflicted for the Government. After this afternoon’s Question Time, I have no doubt that tomorrow’s newspapers will be full of coverage supporting what they believe to be your view and attacking what they will describe as an insensitive and heavy-handed Government. They will say it is censorship.”

The King smiled grimly at Urquhart’s recognition of the balance of popular sentiment.

“Such coverage will only do us both harm, sir. Drive a wedge between us, expose those parts of our Constitution best left in the privacy of darkness. It would be a grave error.”

“On whose part?”

“On all our parts. We must do whatever we can to avoid that.” Urquhart left the statement hanging in the air while he tried to judge the other man’s reaction, but all he could see was the continuing puffiness of exasperation around the eyes. “We must try to prevent the newspapers ruining our relationship.”

“Well, what do you expect that I can do? I didn’t start this public row, you know.”

Urquhart took a deep breath to blunt the edge of his tongue. “I know, sir. I know you didn’t start it. But you can stop it.”

“Me? How?”

“You can stop it, or at least minimize the damage, here from the Palace. Your press secretary must phone round the editors’ offices this evening to tell them that there is no dispute between us.”

The King nodded as he considered the proposal. “Maintain the constitutional fiction that the King and his Government are as one, eh?”

“Precisely. And he must suggest that the press leaks have gotten it wrong, that the draft does not represent your views. Perhaps implying that it was prepared for you by some adviser or other?”

“Deny my words?”

“Deny that there is any difference between us.”

“Let me be clear about this. You want me to disown my own beliefs.” A pause. “You want me to lie.”

“It’s more a smoothing over the cracks. Repairing the damage...”

“Damage I did not cause. I have said nothing in public to dispute your position and I shall not. My views are entirely private.”

“They are not private when they are spread all over the front pages of the newspapers!” Urquhart could not control his exasperation; winning this argument was crucial.

“That is your problem, not mine. I discussed my ideas only with a small circle of my own family, around the dinner table. No Palace servants. No journalists. Certainly no politicians.”

“Then you did discuss it.”

“In private. As I must, if my advice to my Government is to be of any use.”

“There are some types of advice the Government can do without. We are elected to run this country, after all.”

“Mr. Urquhart!” The blue eyes were ablaze with indignation, his hands white as they gripped the arm of his chair. “May I remind you that you have not been elected as Prime Minister, not by the people. You have no mandate. Until the next election you are no better than a constitutional caretaker. Meanwhile I am the Monarch with the right accorded by tradition and all the constitutional law books ever damn well written to be consulted by you and to offer advice.”

“In private.”

“There is no constitutional duty on me to lie publicly to save the Government’s skin.”

“You must help with the editors.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Because if he didn’t, Urquhart would be stranded and done to death by a dribble of by-elections. “Because you cannot be seen to dispute matters of policy with the Government.”

“I will not repudiate my own beliefs. It would be offensive to me not only as a Monarch, but as a man. And you have no damned right to ask!”

“In your capacity as Monarch you have no right to personal beliefs, not on politically sensitive matters.”

“You deny me my rights as a man? As a father? How can you look your children in the eye—”

“On such matters you are not a man, you are a constitutional tool...”

“A rubber stamp for your folly? Never!”

“...who must support the duly elected Government on all matters in public.”

“Then I suggest, Mr. Urquhart, that you go get yourself elected, by the people. Tell them you have no care for their future. Tell them that you are content to see the Scots drift away in discontent and despair. That you don’t find it obscene for thousands of Englishmen to have no concept of home other than a cardboard box in some pestilential urban underpass. That large swathes of our inner cities are no-go areas for either police or social workers. Tell them you don’t give a damn about anything except trying to line the pockets of your own supporters. Tell them all that, get yourself elected, and then you come back here

and issue me with your orders. But until then, I will not lie for you!”

The King was on his feet, propelled upwards more by the energy of his uncontrollable rage than any conscious desire to finish the audience. But Urquhart knew there was no point in continuing. The King was unshakable, he would not agree to bend, not, at least, until after Urquhart had won an election in his own right as Prime Minister. And as Urquhart strode slowly out of the room, he knew the King’s intransigence had torn to shreds any chance of holding that early election, and winning.

Seventeen

Those who wish to ride a princess should use a long rein.

The telephone rang in the private apartments of Kensington Palace. It was past eight o'clock in the evening and Landless hadn't expected to find the Princess at home. Her husband was away in Birkenhead opening a gas terminal and he thought she would either be with him or out on the town celebrating her freedom, but she answered the phone herself.

"Good evening, Your Royal Highness. I'm delighted to find you in."

"Benjamin, this is a pleasant surprise." She sounded reserved, slightly distracted, as though she was holding something back. "I'm recuperating from the rigors of a day spent with two thousand members of the Women's Institute. You can't imagine how tired one gets after shaking all those hands and listening to all that sincerity. I'm in the middle of a massage."

"Then I apologize for disturbing you, but I have some good news."

He had spent the afternoon pondering how she might react to the furor caused by the speech she had passed to him as the first fruit of their new arrangement. Her intention had been to illustrate the integrity and deep concerns of the private King; she'd less than half an idea it would be published and no idea of the storm it would cause. There might even be an inquiry. Had she now taken fright?

"I just wanted you to know that the newspapers tomorrow will be overflowing with articles in praise of the King. It's remarkable, done him a huge amount of good. And all because we handled matters the right way. You've done a fine job."

She stretched out on the massage table in search of a glass of champagne.

“Great team, eh, Benjamin?”

“Yes, Ma’am. A great team.” She was still standing off; had he ruined it already? “And I’ve been thinking, doing some recalculation. You know, now I’ve had the chance to meet you and see how capably you handle yourself, I think the value of your help is going to be even greater than I originally thought. Another fifty thousand pounds. How does that sound?”

“Benjamin, you serious? Sounds brill.”

He winced at the garble of slang, the cultural product of an endless diet of gossip columns, fashion magazines, and adult comics. He’d left school at fifteen and had fought his way through life burdened with all his uncut edges, his rough tongue and even rougher accent. It had given him a sense of self-esteem yet it was a brutal road, not one he had wanted for his three daughters who had found their own paths littered with the finest in educational opportunities. As he listened to the Princess he could neither understand nor abide those who, having been born with every advantage, proceeded to disgrace them. Still, he knew he had found his woman. He chuckled amiably down the phone.

After she replaced the receiver she took another sip from her glass. She wondered if she were getting herself in too deep. She had long ago learned that there was no such thing as a free lunch for any member of the Royal Firm, let alone a free fifty thousand pounds. There were strings to everything, and she suspected that Ben Landless would pull hard.

“You’re tensing up, Ma’am.”

She rolled over, the towel slipping from her body as she examined her newly tightened breasts.

“Forget the shoulder muscles, Brent. Time to take care of the inner woman.”

Lieutenant Brentwood Albery-Hunt, a six-foot-three Guards Officer on secondment to the Palace as the Princess’s personal equerry, gave a sharp salute and stood to attention as his own towel fell to the floor and the Princess cast a critical eye over him in mock inspection. He knew from past form that she was a demanding Colonel of the regiment, and that night duty under her supervision would be arduous.

Eighteen

Elections are meant to weed out the half-wits. They don't always succeed. A hereditary monarchy doesn't even bother to try.

December: Christmas Week

“It can't be done, Francis.”

I don't appoint Ministers to tell me things can't be done, Urquhart raged inside. But the Chancellor of the Exchequer was insistent, and Urquhart knew he was right.

They were huddled in the corner of a reception room at party headquarters where the good and the great of the party had gathered to save money and time by celebrating Christmas and bidding farewell to a long-serving official. The pay of such officials was appalling, their working conditions usually pitiable, and they were expected to show independence neither of mind nor manner. In return they expected, after the passage of many years, recognition, in the form either of an invitation to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party, a modest mention in the Honors List, or a farewell reception at which busy Ministers gathered to drink sweet German wine and nibble cocktail sausages while the retiring and frequently unrecognizable servant was feted. But Urquhart had been pleased to attend this function, for an elderly but ebullient tea lady named Mrs. Stagg. No one else was sufficiently senior to remember how long she had been there. Her tea was poisonous and her coffee indistinguishable from her tea, but her sense of fun had cut through the pomposity that so frequently befogs politicians and her bustling presence in a room usually managed to defuse even the most somber of occasions. Urquhart had fallen for her when, as an aspiring MP more than thirty

years ago, he had watched transfixed as she had spotted a button loose on Ted Heath's jacket and had insisted on stripping the bachelor party leader to his shirt sleeves while she repaired the damage on the spot. Urquhart was aware that this was her third attempt at retirement but, at the age of seventy-two, it seemed likely to be her very last and he had looked forward to the escape from official business. But it was not to last.

"It simply cannot be done," the Chancellor repeated. "Christmas has scarcely happened in the shops and the recession is going to be here earlier than we expected. We can massage the statistics a bit, explain them away for a month or two as rogues, but we won't be able to massage away the school leavers who'll be flooding into the workforce at Easter. Most of them are going to go straight from the classroom to the unemployment line, and there's sod all you or I can do about it."

The four men standing with heads bowed in their huddle drew closer together, as if to protect a great secret. Urquhart had asked the Chancellor what he thought of the chances of putting off the impact of recession for a month or two, squeezing out a little more time. But the Treasury Minister only confirmed what he already knew.

Stamper was next to speak, very briefly. There was no use in making a feast of bad news. "Four points, Francis."

"In front?"

"Behind. This aggravation with the King has shot our lead to hell. Four points and moving in the wrong direction."

Urquhart ran his tongue along thin lips. "And what of you, Algy? What bucketful of sorrows do you bring to drench me?"

As Urquhart turned to the Party Treasurer they had to huddle still closer, for the financier was scarcely more than five feet tall and listening to him in a room full of the buzz of conversation was an effort. Unlike the Chancellor and Stamper, he'd not been told of the plans for an early election, but he was no fool. When a Treasurer is asked how a party living on an overdraft might raise ten million pounds in a hurry, he knows that mischief is afoot. His well-lunched face was flushed as he craned his neck to look at the others.

"Can't be done. So soon after an election, immediately after Christmas and

just about to go into recession...I couldn't raise ten million pounds this year, let alone this month. Let's be realistic: Why would anyone want to lend that sort of money to a party with a slim majority about to get slimmer?"

"What do you mean?" Urquhart demanded.

"Sorry, Francis," Stamper explained. "The message must be waiting on your desk. Freddie Bancroft died this morning."

Urquhart contemplated the news about one of his backbenchers from the shires. It was not entirely unexpected. Bancroft had been a political corpse for many years, and it was time the rest of him caught up. "That's a pity, what's his majority?" Urquhart had to struggle to provide any form of punctuation or pause between the two thoughts. They were all too aware of his concern, how the lurid headlines of a by-election campaign had a habit of creating a new national mood, usually at the Government's expense as their candidate was put to ritual slaughter.

"Not enough."

"Bollocks."

"We'll lose it. And the longer we delay the worse it will be."

"The first by-election with me as Prime Minister. Not a great advertisement, eh? I was rather hoping I'd be riding the bandwagon, not being shoved under its wheels."

Their deliberations were interrupted by a sallow-faced youth in a much-creased suit and crooked tie, whose reluctance to invade what was clearly a very private confabulation had been overcome by the Liebfraumilch and a bet made with one of the lissome secretaries, who had wagered her bed against his bashfulness. "Excuse me, I've just joined the party's research department. Can I have your autographs?" He thrust a piece of paper and grubby pen into their midst.

The others waited for Urquhart to move, to instruct that the youth be keelhailed for impudence and dismissed for ill-judgment. But Urquhart smiled, welcoming the interruption. "You see, Tim, somebody wants me!" He scribbled on the paper. "And what are your ambitions, young man?"

"I want to be Chancellor, Mr. Urquhart."

"No vacancy!" the Chancellor insisted.

“Yet...” the Prime Minister warned.

“Try Brunei,” Stamper added, in less frivolous tones.

There was more merriment as the piece of paper did its round, but as the banter died away and the youth retreated in the direction of a deeply blushing secretary, Urquhart found himself staring into the humorless, uncompromising eyes of Stamper. Unlike the others they both knew how important was an early election. If recession and overdraft were the brush of the noose around their necks, then the news of the by-election had come as the sound of the trapdoor bolt beginning its final slide. There had to be a way out, or else.

“Merry Christmas, Tim?”

Stamper’s words sighed with the edge of perpetual Arctic night. “Not this year, Francis. It can’t be done. You must recognize the fact. Not now, not after the King. It simply cannot be done.”

PART TWO

Nineteen

New Year

• • •

Buckingham Palace

31 December

My dearest son,

Today I begin my first full year as the King, and I am filled with foreboding.

Last night I had a dream. I was in a room, all white, in soft focus as things sometimes are in dreams, a hospital I think. I was standing beside a bath, white like everything else, in which two nurses were bathing my father, old and wasted, as he was before he died. They were treating him with such tenderness and care, floating him in the warm water, he was at peace, and so was I. I felt a calm, a serenity I have not felt for many months.

Then there appeared another nurse. She was carrying a bundle. A baby. You! Wrapped in a white shawl. But even as I reached so eagerly for you, the nurse and the two others attending my father, were gone. I held on to you but without support my father was no longer floating but suddenly submerged in the bath, water washing over his face, his eyes closed. I reached for him with one arm, but you began to fall. To help him, save him, I had to allow you to fall. I could not save you both. I had not a moment longer to decide, he was drowning, you were falling from my arms...Then I awoke.

It is all too clear to me. The Royal Family is intended to symbolize the continuity between the past and the future; I no longer think this possible. A King can cling to the past, the traditions, the decay. Or choose to reach out for the future, with all its uncertainties, its dangers, and its hopes. We must choose.

I am at a crossroads, both as a man and as a Monarch. I know I am well loved, but I take no pleasure in the fact. When that popularity is claimed in part at the expense of the Prime Minister, it can bring neither any good. Mr. Urquhart is a man of great resolution and, I believe, little scruple. He lays exclusive claim to the future—perhaps any Prime Minister would—but he does so with an unstinting lack of reserve. Yet if I can have no part in building that future, either as man or Monarch, then I have no manhood, no soul, nothing.

I shall not seek confrontation, because in the end I will lose. But I will not become merely a silent cipher for an unscrupulous and unwise Government. Watch carefully how this great dispute develops. And learn, for your own time will come.

*Your devoted,
Father*

Twenty

It is not important in politics to be able to recognize everyone. What is important, however, is that everyone recognizes you.

It was supposed to be a masked ball to welcome in the New Year, but Stamper had refused to cooperate. For the first time in his political career people had begun to recognize him, to make all those fawning motions that suggested he was important and to blame only themselves if they became bored talking to him. He was damned if he were going to wrap it all up behind some ludicrous headgear just to please his hostess. Lady Susan “Deccy” Kassar was the wife of the governing chairman of the BBC. He spent his year trying to ensure that the Corporation’s increasingly meager budget eked out sufficiently to cover his commitments, while she spent it planning how to destroy half his salary in one go at her renowned and monumental New Year’s Eve bash. The extravagance of the hospitality was matched by that of the guest list, compiled on computer over the course of the year to ensure none but the most powerful and notorious were included. It was said to be insufficient simply to be a spy master or bank robber in order to gain inclusion, you had to be caught and very publicly identified as such, preferably by the BBC. Stamper had been included only after a second recount. “Deccy”—named after the décolleté for which she had been justifiably famed ever since passing from her teens to the first of three husbands—had decided the invitation was a mistake as soon as she saw Stamper arrive in nothing more elaborate than a dinner jacket. She had a passion for masked balls, which hid her eyes and enabled her to be on constant lookout for still more glittering victims while concentrating the guests’ attention undistractedly upon

her neckline. She didn't care for mutineers at her parties, particularly ones who greased their hair. Deliberately and as publicly as possible she had mistaken Stamper for a television soap star who had recently emerged from a drying-out clinic, while privately vowing not to invite him next year unless he was by then at least Home Secretary. She was soon off in search of more cooperative prey, fluttering her mask aggressively to carve a passage through the crowd.

It was shortly before midnight when Stamper spied the ample figure of Bryan Brynford-Jones holding forth from within the folds of a Laughing Cavalier's uniform, and passed in front of him.

"Tim! Great to see you!"

"Hello, BBJ. Didn't see you there."

"This is one for the Diary. Chairman of the Party come disguised as a human being."

"Should be worth at least a mention on the front page."

"Not unless you leak the information, old chap. Sorry, forgot. Leaks not the favorite vocabulary in Government circles at the moment."

The other guests enjoyed the banter, although Stamper had the distinct feeling he'd come off second best. It was not a sensation he relished. He drew the editor to one side.

"Talking of leaks, old friend, tell me. Who was the bastard who leaked the King's speech? Always wondered."

"And wonder you shall. You know I couldn't possibly reveal journalistic sources." Brynford-Jones chuckled mischievously, but there was a nervous corner to his smile.

"Yes, of course. But our informal inquiry ran into the sand, bound to over Christmas, never had a chance. This would be just between friends. Very close friends, remember. Who was it?"

"Never! Trade secret, you know."

"I'm very good with trade secrets. Or had you forgotten?"

The editor looked perplexed. "Look, Tim, I'll support you in every way I can, you know that. But sources...They're the crown jewels. Journalistic integrity, and all that."

Stamper's dark eyes burned bright. The pupils were small, almost unnaturally

so, which gave Brynford-Jones the impression they were carving at him.

“Just so we don’t misunderstand each other, BBJ...” The hubbub around them had fallen to an expectant hush as a voice over the radio announced the chimes of Big Ben were about to strike. Stamper had to lower his voice to a whisper, but not so low that Brynford-Jones could be sure others would not hear. “Integrity comes in many shapes and sizes, but not in your size and not through an open bathroom window. Don’t go coy on me now.”

There was dead silence as the wheels of the great clock began to turn and engage. The editor wriggled in discomfort.

“Truth is, I can’t be sure. Seriously. *Chronicle* got it first. We only followed up in the later editions.”

“But—”

Brynford-Jones’s eyes darted nervously around the room, not settling. The introductory peal of the bells had begun giving him a little cover. The bastard wasn’t going to let go. “But. The story was written by their Court Correspondent, good contacts with the Palace. When we inquired in Downing Street and other Government departments, all we got were squawks of outrage and confusion.”

“And from the Palace?”

“Nothing. No denial, no outrage. No confirmation, either. I spoke to the King’s pressman, Mycroft, myself. Said he’d check it out and get back if he could, but he never did. He knew we’d have to print without a pretty authoritative denial.”

“So.”

“It came from the Palace. The King, or one of his merry men. Must’ve been. They could have stopped it. They didn’t.” He was sweating, wiping his pink brow with a handkerchief he had lodged beneath the lace ruffles of his cavalier’s sleeve. “Christ, Tim. I don’t know for certain.”

Big Ben struck and the room echoed with the sound of renewed revelry. Stamper leaned close, forced to shout into the other’s ear. “So you’ve told me nothing but gossip and your integrity’s intact. See how easy it was, old friend?” Stamper squeezed the editor’s arm tightly, with surprising force for one whose frame seemed so narrow and pinched.

“Peace and goodwill to all men, eh, Tim?”

“Don’t be a bloody fool.”

In a bar not more than two miles from Lady Susan’s party, Mycroft was also welcoming in the New Year. It would have been easy, too easy, to have moped. At this time of year, alone. Kenny away. An empty, cheerless house. But Mycroft didn’t feel sorry for himself. To the contrary, he felt better, more at ease with himself, cleaner than he could remember ever feeling. His feelings had surprised him, but there could be nothing grubbier than going through the motions of sex while pretending it was love, when in truth there was no love to be shared, and he realized he had felt grubby all his married life. Yet with Kenny, Mycroft felt surprised, astonished at some of the things he had been asked to do, but totally untainted. He had wandered around Kenny’s flat all afternoon, reading his postcards, playing his records, flopping about in Kenny’s slippers and one of his favorite jumpers, trying to touch him in any way he could. He’d never been in love and he was far too old to be misty-eyed, but he felt about Kenny as he had done for no other person. He didn’t know if it was love but what the hell, at very least it was immense gratitude for Kenny’s sharing, his understanding, for putting him straight. Straight! Mycroft smiled as he enjoyed his own joke.

The desire to share something of Kenny’s on New Year’s Eve had driven him back to the place where they had first met. This time the club was packed, with lights flashing and a DJ with mustache dyed party purple keeping up a steady patter on the disco. He had propped himself quietly in the corner, enjoying the spectacle. Three very athletic young men provided a floor show, doing something with balloons that necessitated taking off most of their clothing, with “more to come” as the DJ eagerly promised. Mycroft had been anxious that someone would bother him, try to pick him up—“those queers are such tarts,” Kenny had once teased. He didn’t know if he would be able to handle it, but no one tried. He was clearly at ease with himself and his bottle of Mexican beer with lime twist and, anyway, Mycroft mused, he was probably ten years older than anyone else in the bar. Grandfather deserved his bit of peace.

As the evening progressed the noise level had grown and the company became more boisterous. Men were queuing to have provocative photographs taken with one of the floor show artistes, a drag queen who was promised for the after-midnight cabaret. Almost out of sight on the far side of the room, men disappeared into the scrum of the dance floor, to reappear many minutes later glowing with heat and often with rumpled clothing. He suspected he would not care for all he might find going on beneath the pulsating lights of the disco's laser system, deciding he was content with his ignorance. There were some doors he wasn't yet ready to pass through.

Midnight approached. The crush grew. Everyone else was jostling, dancing, stealing kisses, waiting. The radio was on. Big Ben. One man was already overcome, the tears cascading down his cheeks and onto his T-shirt, but they were obviously tears of happiness. The atmosphere was warm and emotional as all around couples held hands. He imagined Kenny's. Then the hour struck, a cheer went up, and the whole bar became a confusion of balloons, streamers, "Auld Lang Syne," and passionate embraces. He smiled in contentment. Quickly the embraces became less passionate and more freewheeling as everyone in the room seemed to be kissing each other in a game of musical lips. One or two tried it on with Mycroft but with a smile he waved them coyly away. There was another shadow beside him, bending for a kiss, a portly man in a leather waistcoat with one hand on Mycroft's shoulder and the other attached to an unhealthy looking youth with a bad case of barber's rash.

"Don't I know you?"

Mycroft froze. Who the hell could know him in here?

"Don't worry, old man. No need to look so alarmed. Name's Marples, Tony Marples. Lady Clarissa to my friends. We met at the Garden Party during the summer. You obviously don't recognize me in my party frock."

It began to come back. The face. The bristles at the top of the cheek he habitually missed while shaving. The thick lips and crooked front tooth, the sweat gathered along the crease in his chin. Now he remembered. "Aren't you...?"

"MP for Dagenham. And you're Mycroft, the King's press secretary. Didn't know you were one of the girls."

The youth with pimples looked scarcely sixteen with unpleasant yellow stains between his teeth. Mycroft felt sick.

“Don’t worry, old love. I’m not from the News of the Screws or anything. If you want to lock it away, your dark and dreadful secret’s safe with me. All girls together now, aren’t we? Happy New Year!” A gurgle began in the back of Marples’s throat that passed as a chuckle and he leaned to kiss Mycroft. As two thick wet lips extended toward him Mycroft knew he was on the verge of vomiting and gave a lunge of desperation, pushing the MP away as he made a dash for the door.

Outside it was pouring with rain and he’d left his mohair overcoat inside. He was freezing and would soon be soaked. It didn’t matter. As he fought to rid himself of the taste of bile and to cleanse his lungs with fresh air, he decided the overcoat was the least of his concerns. With creatures like Marples inside, he would rather die of pneumonia than go back to collect it.

Twenty-One

His Highness is a man whose only mental exercise is to jump to conclusions. A life of mumbling and marmalade. But if we got rid of him, whose face would we put on all those mugs?

She studied his face meticulously. It had lost its brightness and energy. The eyes sagged, looked older, the high forehead was ruttled, the lips dry and inelastic, the jaw set. The atmosphere was heavy with cigarette smoke.

“You arrive in this place, believing you’ll remold the world to your will. And all it does is to close in around you until you feel there’s no way out. Reminds you how mortal you are.”

He was no longer a Prime Minister, an elevated figure above the rest. All she saw was a man, like any other, with troubles piled high upon his shoulders.

“Mrs. Urquhart not here...?”

“No,” he responded, brooding, until he seemed to realize he might have given the wrong impression. He looked up at her from his glass of whiskey. “No, Sally. It’s not that. It’s never quite like that.”

“Then what?”

He shrugged slowly, as if his muscles ached from the unseen burden. “Normally I’m not prone to self-doubt. But there are times when all you’ve planned seems to slip like sand between your fingers, the more you scrabble for it the more elusive and intangible it becomes.” He lit another cigarette, sucking the harsh smoke down hungrily. “It has, as they say, been one of those fortnights.”

He looked at her silently for a long moment through the fresh blue haze that

hung like incense in a cathedral. They were seated in the two leather armchairs of his study, it was past ten and the room was dark except for the light of two standard lamps that seemed to reach out and embrace them, forming a little world of their own and cutting them off from what lay in darkness beyond the door. She could tell he'd already had a couple of whiskeys.

"I'm grateful for the distraction."

"Distraction from what?"

"Ever the businesswoman!"

"Or gypsy. What's bothering you, Francis?"

His eyes, rims red, held her, wondering how far he should trust her, trying to burrow inside to discover what thoughts hid behind the coyness. He found not pools of feminine sentimentality but resilience, toughness. She was good, very good, at hiding the inner core. They were two of a kind. He took another deep lungful of nicotine; after all, what did he have to lose? "I was thinking of holding an election in March. Now I'm not. I can't. It will all probably end in disaster. And God save the King."

There was no hiding the bitterness, or the genuine anguish of his appraisal. He had expected her to be taken aback, surprised by the revelation of his plans, but she seemed to show no more emotion than if she were studying a new recipe.

"The King's not standing for election, Francis."

"No, but the Opposition are walking in his shadow, which is proving to be exceptionally long. What are we...eight points behind? And all because of one naive ribbon cutter."

"And you can't deal with the Opposition without dealing with the King?"

He nodded.

"Then what's the problem? You were willing to have a crack at him before Christmas."

His gaze was rueful. "I was trying to silence him, not slaughter him. And I lost. Remember? Over a simple, silly speech. Now his words have become weapons on the field of parliamentary battle and I can't discredit them without discrediting the King."

"You don't have to kill him, just kill off his popularity. A public figure is only as popular as his opinion poll ratings, and they can be fixed. At least

temporarily. Wouldn't that do?"

He swilled another mouthful of whiskey, staring hard at her body. "O Gypsy, there is fire in your breast. But I have already taken him on once, and lost. I couldn't afford to lose a second time."

"If what you say about the election is true, it seems to me you can't afford not to take him on. He's only a man," she persisted.

"You don't understand. In a hereditary system the man is everything. You are all George Washingtons, you Americans." He was dismissive, deep into his glass.

She ignored the sarcasm. "You mean the same George Washington who grew to be old, powerful, rich—and died in his bed?"

"A Monarch is like a great oak beneath which we all shelter..."

"Washington was cutting down trees when he was a boy."

"An attack on the Monarchy would turn the electorate into a lynch mob. Bodies—my body—swinging from the highest branches."

"Unless you lopped off the branches."

They were engaged in a verbal duel, thrust and parry, parry and thrust, automatic responses, using the honed edges of their intellects. Only now did Urquhart pause to reflect, and as his eyes ran over her she could feel the tension begin to drain from him, the malt beginning to dissolve the shards of glass grating inside. She felt his gaze wandering up from her ankles, over her knees, admiring the waist. Then he was lingering at her breasts, oh, and how he lingered, peeling off layer after layer, and she knew the mellowness had already been replaced by a renewed tightening inside. He was changing from victim to hunter. It brought back a sense of boldness, of command, as the energy of fresh ideas began to flow through his veins and wipe away the lines of despondency that had crowded in around his eyes. In their small world of the armchairs, he began to rise above his troubles and to feel once more in control. As if he were back on his Chesterfield. When, finally, his thoughts had traveled up her body and their eyes met, she was smiling, slightly mocking, reproachful but not discouraging. Her body had been massaged by his imagination, and responded. He brightened.

"To do battle with the Monarch would be..."

“Constitutionally improper?” She was goading.

“Bad politics. As I have already learned, to my cost. The King’s speech gave him the high ground and I cannot afford to be seen once again in public dispute with him...” He arched an eyebrow, exquisitely. She had never known an eyebrow to express such passion. “But perhaps you are right. If I am denied the high ground, then there is always the low ground.” Once more he was alive, tingling; she could feel the energy and renewed hope. “A hereditary Monarchy is an institution that defies all logic. An opiate we sprinkle on the masses from time to time to reassure them, to fill them full of pride and respect, to extract their allegiance without them asking too many questions.”

“Isn’t that what tradition is all about?”

“Yet once they start asking questions about a hereditary system there is little logic left to sustain it. All inbreeding and isolation, palaces and princely privilege. It is not the stuff of a modern world. Or of a debate about the underprivileged. Of course, I couldn’t possibly be seen to lead such an attack. But if such an attack were to be mounted...”

“The King is Dead, Long Live the Prime Minister!”

“No, you go too far! You’re talking revolution. If you start hacking away at the greatest tree in the forest, there’s no telling how many others will be brought down with it.”

“But maybe that’s not necessary,” she continued, picking up his thought. “Perhaps simply cut it down to size. No shadow for the Opposition to hide in.”

“No branches from which to lynch me.”

“No more Royal bark?” She smiled.

“You might say that.” He nodded in appreciation.

“Not so much off with his head as...off with his limbs?”

“*You* might say that, Sally. But as Prime Minister I couldn’t possibly comment.”

He spread his hands wide and they both began to laugh. She thought she heard the sound of an ax being gently honed.

“Did you have any specific limbs in mind?”

“There are many branches to our beloved Royal Family. Some easier to reach than others.”

“The King and his kind embarrassed, harassed, and on the defensive. A public spotlight probing the darker corners of the Palace. The shine knocked off him and his words, his motives discredited. And all backed by an opinion poll or two? The right questions, eh?”

Suddenly his face went rigid. He leaned across and placed his hand firmly above her knee. Considerably higher above her knee than was necessary. The fingers were stiff with tension and she could smell the whiskey on his breath. “By God, but it would be dangerous. We would be taking on hundreds of years of history. A tussle behind the scenes over a simple speech left me humiliated. If this were to turn into a public battle, me and the King, there would be no going back. If I were to lose, it would be the end for me. And for all who were with me.”

“But unless you have your election in March, you’re dead anyway.” She placed her own hand upon his, warming it gently, massaging away the tension with her palm and the caress of her own fingers, welcoming his closeness.

“You would take such risks? For me?”

“Just say please, Francis. I told you, anything you want. Anything. Just say please.” She turned his hand over so that it was palm up, and began to stroke it with the tips of her fingers. Her nose was quivering. “And you know how to say ‘please,’ don’t you?”

He brought his other hand across to still the sensuousness of her fingers. Theirs couldn’t be solely a professional relationship, not if he were to tilt full at the King. There was too much at stake. He knew he would have to make her commitment deeper, more personal, tie her to him.

“There are civil servants just beyond that door. And no lock...”

She took off her glasses and shook her hair. It glowed like midnight in the light of the lamps. “Life is full of risks, Francis. I find risk makes it all the better.”

“Makes life better?”

“Certain parts of it. What risks are you willing to take, Francis?”

“With the King? As few as possible. With you...?”

And already she was in his arms.

Twenty-Two

If it's a choice between blind courage and cowardice, let me choose money every time.

Urquhart didn't care for opera, but being Prime Minister involved him in so many things he had no liking for. Attending the Slaughter House twice a week for Question Time. Being affable to visiting presidents, smiling black faces who, calling themselves colonial freedom fighters, had brought their countries to impoverishment and dictatorship, and who Urquhart could remember in their youth having been nothing but murderous thugs. Listening to the front door of the so-called private apartment in Downing Street, the door with no lock, bounce on its hinges as civil servants cascaded still more red boxes and ministerial papers down upon him. As Prime Minister, he had discovered, there was no hiding place.

Mortima had insisted he come to the opening night of a new opera and had been so persistent he had been forced to succumb, even though he had no ear for Janacek or forty-member choruses who seemed intent on singing from forty different scores, all at the same time. Mortima sat transfixed, her attention upon the tenor who was battling to drag his beloved back from the dead. Rather like the leader of the Liberal Party, Urquhart mused.

Stamper had also encouraged him to come and had secured the private box. Anyone who can afford three hundred pounds a seat for the stalls, he had said, must be worth bumping into. He'd arranged with the management to swap the publicity of Urquhart's presence for the address list of the Opera House patrons, all of whom within a week would be hit with an invitation to a Downing Street

reception, a vaguely worded letter about future support for the arts, and a telephone call asking for cash.

And there was Alfredo Mondelli, a man with a face like a lightbulb, round, solid, all bone and no hair, with eyes that bulged as if the bow tie of his evening dress had been secured too tightly. The Italian businessman sat with his wife alongside Stamper and the Urquharts—judging by the fidgeting that could be heard coming from his direction, he was equally filled with tedium. For several endless minutes Urquhart tried to find distraction from the music in the procession of gilded female figures who chased plaster cherubs around the domed ceiling, while beside him the creaking of Mondelli's chair grew more persistent. When finally the interval came it was a release for them all; a clearly exulted Mortima and Signora Mondelli rushed off to the powder room, permitting the three men to take refuge in a bottle of vintage Bollinger.

“A pity to spoil business with so much pleasure, don't you think, Signor Mondelli?”

The Italian rubbed life back into his buttocks and thighs. “When God was giving out 'is gifts, Prime Minister, 'e was a little short on musical appreciation when it came to my turn.” His English was proficient, his pronunciation slow and distinctly Soho bistro.

“Then let us make sure we use the interval well before we get drenched in another dose of culture. Straight to it. How can I help you?”

The Italian nodded in gratitude. “As I think Mr. Stamper 'as told you, I am proud to be one of my country's leading manufacturers of environmentally friendly products. To 'alf of Europe I am Mr. Green. I employ tens of thousands of people, 'ole communities depend upon my business. A big research institute in Bologna named after me...”

“Very commendable.” Urquhart recognized the Latin exaggeration. Mondelli ran a company that, though significant by Italian standards, was not in the same league as the far more powerful multinationals.

“But now, now it is all threatened, Your Excellence. Bureaucrats who understand nothing about business, about life. They terrorize everything I 'ave built.” Champagne washed over the side of his glass and spilt as the passion built in his voice. “Those foolish *bambini* at the European Community and their draft

regulations. You know, in two years' time they wish to change the 'ole way we dispose of chemical waste."

"Why does that concern you?"

"Mr. Akat..." He made it sound as if he were clearing his throat. "These are the chemicals I spend my life taking out of my products. What you wrap your food in, wash in, dress in, the paper you write on. I make them environmentally friendly by taking the wretched"—he gesticulated with his stubby fingers and screwed up his face as if performing on the stage—"wretched chemicals out of them. What the 'ell am I supposed to do with them now? Governments, you run your nuclear power stations and you bury all your nuclear waste, but that's not good enough for businessmen. We shall no longer be allowed to bury the by-products, or simply burn them, or dispose of them deep in the ocean. Those *bastardi* in Brussels even want to stop me exporting them to store in the deserts of the Third World, no matter that the people of those countries are starving and are in desperate need for the income. Africans will starve, Italians will starve, my family will starve. It is madness!" He took a huge draught of champagne, emptying the glass.

"Forgive me, Signor Mondelli, but aren't all your competitors in the same position?"

"My competitors are mainly German. They 'ave the Deutschmarks for such 'uge investments to dispose of the chemicals 'ow the bureaucrats want. I do not. It is a conspiracy by the Germans to force the competition out of business."

"So why come to me? Why not your own Government?"

"Oh, Mr. Akat, do you not know Italian politics? My Government will not 'elp because they 'ave done a deal with the Germans over the wine lake. Italian farmers to carry on producing subsidized wine that nobody wants, in exchange for the new regulations on chemical dumping. There are three 'undred thousand Italian wine producers and only one Mondelli. You are a politician, you know 'ow such numbers add up."

Mondelli refrained from adding that he had complicated matters notoriously by running off with a young television actress from Naples while still married to the sister of the Italian Minister of Finance. He was now greeted in Rome with as much warmth as a coachload of English football fans.

“Very sad, Signor Mondelli, I feel for you. But surely this is an Italian matter.”

“It is a European matter, Signor Akat. The bureaucrats act in the name of Europe. They overstretch themselves. And you and the British are well known for being the best and most strong opponents of interfering bureaucrats in Brussels. So I ask you, for consideration. For ’elp. Stop the directive. The Environment Commissioner in Brussels. ’E is English. Your friend, eh?”

“You might say that...”

“A nice man—a little weak, perhaps. Too easily led astray by ’is officials. But nice.”

“You might say that, too...”

“I understand ’e wishes you to reappoint ’im when ’is term of office expires. ’E will listen to you.”

It was true, of course, every word.

“You might conclude that, Signor Mondelli, but I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“Prime Minister, I could not describe ’ow grateful I would be.”

This was not accurate. Urquhart knew from his Party Chairman that Mondelli had described precisely how grateful he wished to be. He had suggested one hundred thousand pounds, paid to party funds. “In recognition of a great internationalist,” as he had put it. Stamper had thought himself very skillful in bringing such a prize to the party; Urquhart was about to disillusion him.

“I’m afraid I cannot help you, Signor Mondelli.”

“Ah, your British sense of ’umor.” He did not sound as if he appreciated it.

Urquhart’s expression suggested he’d been weaned on pickles. “Your personal problems are really something for the Italian authorities to sort out. You must understand that.”

“I will be ruined...”

“A great pity.”

“But I thought...” The Italian threw a beseeching look at Stamper, who shrugged his shoulders. “I thought you could ’elp me.”

“I cannot help you, Signor Mondelli, not as an Italian citizen. Not directly.”

Mondelli was tearing at his black tie and his eyes seemed to bulge still further

in consternation.

“However, in the serious circumstances perhaps I can share something with you. The British Government, too, is unenthusiastic about the Brussels proposals. In our own interest, you understand. If it were left entirely up to me, I would veto the whole scheme.” The orchestra was beginning to reassemble in the pit, and a buzz of expectation began to rise around the opera house.

“Unfortunately,” Urquhart continued, “this is one of but a number of issues we have to negotiate with our European partners and with the Commissioners, even the British ones. There will be give and take. And we have so many distractions on the home front. Times are likely to get tough, very distracting.”

“My entire business is at stake, Prime Minister. Either the regulations go under, or I do.”

“As serious as that?”

“Yes!”

“Well, it would be a happy coincidence if my Government’s interests were to coincide with your own.”

“I would be so grateful...”

“If I were in your position, Signor Mondelli, facing ruin...” He paused to sniff the air, like a prowling wolf. “I think I should be tenfold grateful.”

Urquhart gave a perfunctory laugh to suggest lightheartedness, but the Italian had understood. Urquhart had led him to the edge of the cliff and made him peer over; now he offered a lifeline. Mondelli stopped to consider for a few moments, and when he spoke there was no alarm left in his voice. They were no longer talking lifeline, but business. The sum represented around two percent of his annual profit—significant, but affordable. And his accountants might find a way to write it off against tax as an overseas investment. He nodded his head slowly.

“As you say, Signor Akat, I would indeed be grateful. Tenfold.”

Urquhart appeared not to have heard, as if he were pursuing his own idea quite separately from the Italian. “You know, it’s about time we had another shot at putting Brussels back in its box. I think this might be just the issue to do it on. There are several British companies who would suffer...”

“I would like to ’elp your campaigning activities.”

“Oh, really? Talk to Stamper, he’s the man. Nothing to do with me.”

“I ’ave already told ’im that I think you are a great internationalist.”

“Most kind. It really has been a splendid evening.”

“Yes. But I am not a great lover of opera, Prime Minister.” He was massaging his thighs again. “You would excuse me if I did not stay for the second ’alf?”

“But Stamper here has paid for the tickets.”

“’E ’as paid for the tickets, but I believe I ’ave paid for my freedom.” The bow tie hung limply down his chest.

“Then good night to you, Signor Mondelli. It has been a pleasure.”

Stamper offered words of rueful admiration as the bulk of the Italian benefactor disappeared through the door, then Mortima Urquhart was with them once more, wafting perfume and muttering something about attending a reception for the cast after the opera was finished. Urquhart heard scarcely a word. His fighting fund had been opened and the wind had started blowing in his direction yet again. But even as he felt the satisfaction wash over him, he dared not forget that winds in politics rarely blow fair for long. He mustn’t let this one blow out of control; if he did it would form a whirlwind of destruction, probably his own. But if they blew strong enough, and long enough, perhaps it was possible after all. By March. As the cymbals clashed to announce the commencement of the second act, he sat back in his seat and gazed at the ceiling. The cherub bottoms reminded him of someone, an undergraduate, on a Chesterfield. He couldn’t recall her name.

Twenty-Three

There is no need to outrun the lion. All that is necessary for a man to do in order to survive is to outrun his friends.

The Leader of the Opposition was an earnest man, the son of a crofting family from the Western Isles of Scotland. He was not noted for his sense of humor, the peat moors of the Western Isles being too dour to encourage frivolity, but even his rivals acknowledged his dedication and hard work. Government Ministers privately acknowledged he made an excellent Leader of the Opposition, while in public providing every assistance to ensure he continued in this well-fitting job. At times it appeared as if the inevitable pressure on him came more from within his own ranks than from his political opponents; there had been several press stories in recent days suggesting that, following the narrow election defeat of the previous year and the arrival of a fresh face in Downing Street, his party was getting restless and his position coming under threat. The stories were vague and thin, tending to feed off each other as much as on hard views, but *The Times* seemed to have a particularly strong handle on it and had quoted one “senior party source” as suggesting that “the party leadership is not a retirement job for losers.” It was more a rumble than a revolution, the polls still pointed to the Opposition having a four-point lead, yet political parties always find difficulty in containing the swirling personal ambitions of its also-rans and, as one editorial had put it, there was no smoke without someone lighting a few matches. So Gordon McKillin had welcomed the opportunity to clear the air on a popular current affairs program that pitted politician against three leading journalists.

For most of the forty minutes the program had been uneventful, a little dull

even, certainly unsuccessful from the point of view of the producer, whose own job security depended on the regular spillage of someone else's blood. McKillin had parried every thrust with skill and patience—none of the supposed opponents had been identified, he suggested, the real issue was not his leadership but the looming recession that threatened millions of jobs. It was the Prime Minister's job under threat, not his. The story of his troubles had been whipped up by the press, he argued, casting a baleful eye in the direction of Bryan Brynford-Jones, whose journal had published the first and most dramatic report. "Are you able to name a single one of your sources for this story?" he challenged. The editor, unaccustomed to being in the firing line, quickly moved the discussion on.

Scarcely two minutes remained before the wrap and, much to the producer's despair, the discussion had become stranded in the marshy fields of the Opposition's environmental credentials. It was Brynford-Jones's turn once again. McKillin smiled—generously, as a farmer might eye a prize hog on market day. He was enjoying it.

"Mr. McKillin, let me turn in the short time we have left to a more personal question." Brynford-Jones was toying with some form of brochure. "You are an elder of the Wee Free Church of Scotland, are you not?"

The politician nodded sagely.

"Now the Chinch has just published a pamphlet—I have it here—which is entitled 'Toward the Twenty-First Century: A Moral Guide for Youth.' It's fairly wide-ranging and contains, in my view, some excellent prescriptions. But there is one section that intrigued me. On page...fourteen, it reaffirms its attitude to homosexuality, which it describes as 'a pernicious sin.' Do you, Mr. McKillin, believe homosexuality is a pernicious sin?"

The politician swallowed. "I'm not sure this is the right time to get into this sort of complex and difficult discussion. This is, after all, a program on politics rather than the Church—"

"But it's a relevant question, nonetheless," Brynford-Jones interrupted. "A simple one, too. Do you hold homosexuality to be a sin?"

A small bead of sweat had begun to gather in the politician's sideburn, only just perceptible to the professional eye of the producer, who began to brighten.

“I find it difficult to imagine how to respond to such a broad-ranging question as that on a program like this—”

“Let me help you, then. Imagine your dreams have been fulfilled and you are Prime Minister, at the Dispatch Box, and I’m the Leader of the Opposition. I’m asking you a direct question. Do you believe homosexuality to be evil, a sin? I think the accepted parliamentary phrase goes: ‘Since the question is a very simple one, which even he should be able to understand, a simple “yes” or “no” will suffice.’”

All those present and several million viewers recognized the phrase, McKillin’s own, which he had used so frequently in taunting Urquhart at Question Time. It was his own hook. The bead of sweat was beginning to trickle.

“Let me rephrase it, if you like,” the editor encouraged. “Do you believe your kirk’s moral guidance is wrong?”

McKillin struggled for his words. How could he explain, in an atmosphere like this, that it had been his kirk’s guidance that since his earliest days had fueled the desire to help others and to mount his own crusade, giving him a clear personal creed on which he had based his political beliefs and guiding him through the moral cesspits around Westminster, that as an elder he had to accept his kirk’s teachings with an open heart and without question or compromise. He understood sin and others’ weaknesses and could accept them, but his faith would not permit him to deny them.

“I am an elder of the Kirk, Mr. Brynford-Jones. Of course I accept my church’s teachings, as an individual soul. But as a politician such matters can be more complicated—”

“Let me be clear, *absolutely* clear. You accept your church’s edict on this matter?”

“As an individual, I must. But allow me to—”

It was too late. The end credits were already rolling and the signature music beginning to flood the studio. Several million viewers had to struggle to discern Brynford-Jones’s sign-off. “Thank you, Mr. McKillin. I’m afraid that’s all we have time for. It’s been a fascinating forty minutes.” He smiled. “We are grateful to you.”

Kenny and Mycroft had watched the evening news in silence. It had contained a factual report of McKillin's interview, and also of the volcanic response. The Opposition Leader's office was said to be in the process of issuing a statement of clarification, but it was inevitably too late. Leaders of rival church groups had already opined, gay campaigners had assailed, his own Front Bench transport spokesman had stated boldly that on this issue his leader was utterly, miserably, and inexcusably wrong. "Is there a leadership crisis?" he had been asked. "There is now," had been his response.

There was no need for the newspapers to keep their sources anonymous any longer; the protesters were tripping over themselves in the rush to denounce bigotry, medieval morality, and cant. Even those who agreed with McKillin had been of no help, a leading antigay campaigner being dragged from obscurity to demand in venomous tones that McKillin sack all homosexual MPs in his party or be branded a hypocrite.

Kenny switched off the television. Mycroft sat silently for some time, slumped among bean bags piled in front of the screen, while Kenny quietly prepared two mugs of hot coffee, laced with brandy out of miniatures smuggled back from one of his trips. He had seen it all before, the outrage, the alarm, the invective, the inevitable suspicion it brought. He could also see how upset was Mycroft. The older man had seen none of this before, not from this angle.

"God, I'm confused," Mycroft eventually muttered, biting his lip. He was still staring at the blank screen, unwilling to look directly into Kenny's eyes. "All this fuss, this talk about rights. I just can't help remembering that odious man Marples dragging along the young boy. Didn't the boy have rights, too?"

"All queers tarred with the same brush, eh?"

"I sometimes ask myself what the hell I'm doing. What does it all mean for my job, for me? You know, I still can't identify, join the club, not when I see men like Marples and some of those militants jumping up and down on the screen."

"I'm gay, David. A queer. A faggot. A fairy queen. Nancy boy. Poof. Call it what you like, that's what I am. You saying you can't identify with me?"

“I’m...not very good at this, am I? All my life I’ve been brought up to conform, to believe that such things are...Christ, Kenny, half of me agrees with McKillin. Being a queer is wrong! Yet, and yet...” He raised troubled eyes to look directly at his partner. “I’ve had more happiness in the last few weeks than I ever thought possible.”

“That’s gay, David.”

“Then I suppose I must be, Kenny. I must be. Gay. Because I think I love you.”

“Then forget about all that crap.” Kenny waved angrily in the direction of the television. “Let the rest of the world go mount their own soapboxes and get splinters in their dicks, we don’t have to join them in slagging off everybody else. Love’s meant to be inside, private, not open bloody warfare on every street corner.” He looked earnestly at Mycroft. “I don’t want to lose you, David. Don’t go getting guilty on me.”

“If McKillin is right, we may never get to heaven.”

“If heaven’s full of people who are so utterly stinking miserable, who can’t even accept what they are or what they feel, then I don’t think I want to join. So why don’t we just stick with what we’ve got here, you and me, and be happy.”

“For how long, Kenny?”

“For as long as we’ve got, old love.”

“For as long as they leave us alone, you mean.”

“Some people come to the edge of the cliff and they look over, then run away in fear. They never realize it’s possible to fly, to soar away, to be free. They spend their lives crawling along cliff tops without ever finding the courage. Don’t spend your life crawling, David.”

Mycroft gave a weak smile. “I’m not sure if I have much of a head for heights.”

Kenny put his coffee aside. “Come here, you daft bugger. Let’s go jump off a cliff.”

Twenty-Four

All politics involves a little larceny. I try to steal a constituency or two, while he tries to steal the entire country.

The rifle lined up on its target exactly twenty-five yards away. The head of Gordon McKillin stared back unflinching. A breath, a moment, a tightened finger. There was a sharp retort as the .22-caliber bullet sped on its way. A perfect hole appeared on the old campaign poster exactly where the Opposition Leader's mouth had been, before the badly peppered target disintegrated and fluttered like orphaned pieces of tissue to the floor.

“Don't make posters like they used to.”

“Nor Leaders of the Opposition.”

Urquhart and Stamper enjoyed their joke. Directly beneath the dining room of the House of Lords in a low, wood-lined cellar strewn with the piping, conduits, and other architectural entrails of the Palace of Westminster, the two men lay side by side in the narrow rifle range where parliamentarians retreat to vent their murderous instincts on paper targets rather than each other. It was where Churchill had practiced his gunnery in preparation for the expected German invasion, vowing to fight it personally and to the last from behind the sandbags at the top of Downing Street. And it was where Urquhart practiced for Question Time, freed from the inhibitions of Madam Speaker's censorious stare.

“A stroke of luck yours, coming up with that church pamphlet,” Stamper acknowledged somewhat grudgingly, adjusting the leather wrist sling that supported the heavy bolt-action target rifle. He was a much less experienced shot than Urquhart, and had never beaten him.

“The Colquhouns are a rather exotic tribe, members of which descend upon Mortima from time to time bearing all sorts of strange gifts. One of them thought I would be interested in the morality of youth, strange man. It wasn’t luck, Tim. Simply good breeding.”

The former estate agent glowered. “You want to shoot any more?” he inquired, placing another bullet in the chamber.

“Tim, I want a veritable war.” Urquhart raised the rifle to his well-padded shoulder once more, peering fixedly down the sight. “I’ve decided. It’s on again.”

“Another of your campus jokes.”

Urquhart obliterated a further paper portrait before turning to Stamper. His smile was withering.

“McKillin’s in trouble. He went out on a limb, and it broke. So sad.”

“We’re not ready, Francis. It’s too soon,” Stamper objected, deeply unconvinced.

“The Opposition will be even less well prepared. Parties facing an election are like tourists being pursued by a man-eating lion. You don’t have to outrun the lion—you can’t. All you have to do is make sure you run faster than the other bastard.”

“The country might be buried under a foot of snow at this time of year.”

“Great! We’ve got more vehicles with four-wheel drive than they have.”

“But we’re still four points behind in the polls,” the Party Chairman protested.

“Then there’s no time to lose. Six weeks, Tim. Let’s get a grip on them. A major policy announcement every week. A high profile foreign trip, the new PM taking Moscow or Washington by storm. Let’s have a row in Europe, demand some money back. I want dinner with every friendly editor in Fleet Street, on his own, while you tickle the political correspondents. And, if we can get away with it, a cut in interest rates. Castrate a few criminals. Get a bandwagon rolling. We’ve got McKillin on the floor, let’s be sure to kick hell out of him while he’s down. No prisoners, Tim. Not for the next six weeks.”

“Let’s hope His Majesty decides to cooperate this time.” Stamper couldn’t hide his skepticism.

“You’re right. I’ve been thinking we should take a new approach to the Palace. Build a few bridges. Put your ear to the ground, find out what the gossip is. What’s going on in the dark places.”

Stamper cocked an ear, as if he heard the sound of prey lumbering through the forest.

“And we need foot soldiers, Tim. Loyal, dedicated. Not too bright. Men who would be happy to charge across those bridges, should the need arise.”

“That does sound like war.”

“Better win it, old boy. Or they’ll be putting us up there as targets. And I’m not talking about paper images, either.”

Twenty-Five

Being a member of the House of Commons is often like being buried alive. At least in the House of Lords they have the grace to wait until you are almost dead.

January: The Second Week

The gravel of the long drive leading from the gate lodge to the front of the old manor house rattled against the bodywork of the car as it drew up alongside the other vehicles. The polished dark-blue Rolls-Royce seemed out of place alongside the battered Land Rovers and muddy estate cars, and Landless already knew he would not fit in. He didn't mind, he was used to it. The manor house was the ancestral home of Mickey, Viscount Quillington, and commanded magnificent views over the rolling countryside of Oxfordshire, although a gray January afternoon was not the best of settings. The fabric of the building charted the chaotic progress of an ancient aristocratic family and was mostly William and Mary or Victorian with a hint of Tudor in the wing nearest the tiny chapel, but of the twentieth century there was little sign.

The damp seemed to follow him into the rough and tumble of the large entrance hall filled with tangled hunting dogs, mucky Wellington boots, and a variety of anoraks and outer garments all struggling to dry. The floor tiles were badly chipped and there was not a hint of central heating anywhere. It was the type of house that in many other parts had been rescued from decay by an expanding Japanese hotel group or golf course consortium, but not here, not yet. He was glad he had declined the invitation to stay the night.

The Quillingtons traced their line back to the time when one of their ancestors

had traveled to Ireland with Cromwell, collected his estates for bloody services rendered, and returned to England at the time of the Restoration to make a second fortune. It was a fine history, on which the current generation of Quillingtons, impoverished by time, misfortune, and inadequate tax planning, reflected with awe. The estates had gradually been whittled away, the ties with Ireland finally broken, many of the paintings sold, the best pieces of furniture and silver auctioned, the large staff pared. This was old money, and it was growing increasingly short.

Meeting the other guests proved something of a trial for the businessman. They were all old friends, some dating from nursery days and displaying the type of public school clannishness boys from Bethnal Green find impossible to penetrate. His clothes hadn't helped. "Country casual" he'd been told. He had turned up in a check two-piece with waistcoat and brown shoes; they were all wearing jeans. Not until Princess Charlotte greeted him warmly did he begin to feel less defensive.

The weekend had been built around the Princess. Arranged by Quillington's younger brother, David, it was an opportunity for her to relax among old friends away from the petty intrigues of London's socialites and gossip columnists. Here they were almost all scions of old families, some older than the Windsors, and to them she was a friend with a job to do, still the "Beany" of childhood squabbles in the swimming pool and costume parties organized by po-faced nannies. She had insisted on a private bedroom well away from other guests and David had seen to all the arrangements, tidying the two detectives and chauffeur of the Royal Protection Group well away at the back of the house. The Princess had the Chinese Room, not so much a suite but more a single vast room on the first floor of the East Wing, with David occupying the only other bedroom on the floor. Her privacy was ensured.

There was a certain sadness in surveying the house with its ancient wiring, frayed edges, dank corners, and one wing almost completely closed down, yet it had character and a great sense of history, and the dining room was magnificent. Fifty feet long, oak-paneled, lit by two fernlike chandeliers whose lights shone deep into a burnished table constructed from the timbers of an old Man o' War and crafted by prisoners from Napoleon's navy. The silver was old and

monogrammed, the crystal assorted, the effect timeless. Old money, even in short supply, certainly knew how to eat. Quillington presided at the head of the table, on his right the Princess and on his left Landless, with others further down, and they listened politely to the publisher's stories of City life as their ancestors might have listened to explorer's tales of the South Sea islands.

After dinner they took their port and cognac into the Old Library, where the ceiling was high and the winter air clung tenaciously to the far corners, where leather-clad books were piled along endless shelves and smoke-darkened oil paintings covered the one free wall. Landless thought he could see marks on the wall where paintings had been removed, presumably for auction, with the remainder spread around a little more thinly. The furniture seemed as old as any part of the house. One of the two large sofas crowding around the roaring log fire was covered in a car rug to hide the ravages of age, while the other stood battered and naked, its dark green fabric torn by the insistent scratching of dogs, with its stuffing of horsehair dribbling out like candle wax from underneath one of the cushions. Within the embrace of the Library, dinner guests became almost family and the conversation grew more relaxed and uninhibited.

"Shame about today," Quillington muttered, kicking the fire with the heel of his leather boot. The fire spat back, sending a shower of sparks up the broad chimney. He was a tall, streaky figure much used to wandering around in tightly tailored jeans, high boots, and a broad kangaroo-skin fedora, which looked eccentric if not vaguely ridiculous on a fifty-year-old. Eccentricity was a useful cover for encroaching impoverishment. "Damned hunt-saboteurs, buzz like flies around horse shit. There they are, on my land, and the police refuse to arrest them or even move them on. Not unless they actually attack someone. God knows what this country is coming to when you can't even prevent layabouts like that rampaging all over your own land. Home a man's damned castle, 'n' all that."

It had not been a successful day's hunting. The animal rights protesters had waved their banners and spread their pepper and aniseed, unsettling the horses, confusing the hounds, and outraging the huntsmen. It had been a soggy morning overflowing with drizzle, not good for picking up trails, and they had lumbered through the heavy clay of the countryside to find nothing more enthralling than

the carcass of a dead cat.

“You can’t throw them off your own land?” inquired Landless.

“Not bloody likely. Trespass isn’t criminal; police’ll do damn all about it. You can ask them politely to move on; they tell you to piss off. You so much as lay a finger on them and you find yourself in court on assault charges. For protecting your own bloody property.”

“Chalked up one of the yobs, I did,” the Princess intervened gaily. “Saw him hovering close behind my horse so I backed the beast up. Scared all hell out of him when he saw sixteen hands shunting straight toward him. He jumped back, stumbled, and fell straight into a pile of fresh crap!”

“Bravo, Beany. Filled his pants, I hope,” David Quillington interjected. “You hunt, Mr. Landless?”

“Only in the City.”

“You should try it sometime. See the countryside at its best.”

Landless doubted that. He had arrived in time to find the stragglers returning from the hunt, faces red and blotched, covered in mud and thoroughly soaked. Mix in the sight of a fox being torn apart, its entrails smeared over the ground and squelched beneath horses’ hooves, and he thought he could well do without such pleasures. Anyway, boys born and brought up in concrete tower blocks surrounded by broken street lamps and derelict cars tend to have a naive empathy for the countryside and the things that live in it. He hadn’t seen any of England’s green and pleasant pastures until a school day-trip when he was thirteen and, in truth, he held an undemanding admiration for the fox.

“Foxes are vermin,” the younger Quillington continued. “Attack chickens, ducks, newborn lambs, even sick calves. Scrounge off city rubbish dumps and spread disease. It’s too easy to knock the landowners but, I tell you, without their work in protecting the countryside, keeping it clear of pests like foxes, rebuilding the walls and hedgerows, planting woodlands for fox and pheasant cover—all at their own expense—those protesters would have a lot less countryside to protest about.”

Landless noticed that the younger Quillington, seated on the sofa next to the Princess, was moderate both in his language and his drinking. That could not be said of his brother, leaning against the Adam fireplace, glass in hand. “Under

threat. Everything under threat, you know. They trample over your land, shouting, screaming like Dervishes, waving their banners and blowing their bloody horns, trying to pull the hounds onto busy roads and railway lines. Even when they manage to get themselves arrested some damned fool magistrate takes pity on them. And me, because I've got land, because my family has worked it for generations, devoted themselves to the local community, done their bit for the country in the House of Lords, because I've tried so hard and got no bloody money left and nothing but bills and bank letters to read, I'm supposed to be a parasite!"

"There's no sense of proportion anymore," the Princess agreed. "Take my family. Used to be held in respect. Nowadays journalists are more interested in what goes on in the bedroom than the State Room."

Landless noticed the exchange of looks between the Princess and the younger Quillington. It was not their first. They had begun the evening sitting well apart at opposite ends of the sofa, but they seemed to have drawn ever closer, like magnets.

"Absolutely, Beany. They know you can't defend yourself so they lay into you without pity," Mickey continued from his position by the fire. "We've all worked damned hard for what little we have. Yet they get at the foxhunting, they attack the landowners, they undermine the hereditary principle, and the next thing you know we're a sodding republic. It's about time we started sticking up for ourselves, stopped taking it on the chin and turning the other cheek."

Charlotte had finished her glass and was holding it out toward the younger Quillington for a refill. "But, Mickey, I can't, none of my lot can. The Family's supposed to be the silent service." She turned to Landless. "What do you think, Benjamin?"

"I'm a businessman, not a politician," he protested coyly, but checked himself. She had offered him a chance to break into their tight circle of concerns; there was no point in turning it down. "Very well, take a lesson from the politician's book. If a Minister wants something said but finds it injudicious to say it himself, he gets somebody else to do the talking. A fellow MP, a business leader, a newspaper editor even. You have friends, influential friends. Like Lord Quillington here, with a voice and seat in the House of Lords."

“Slave labor, rowing the Government’s galley, that’s all they reckon we are,” Quillington sniffed.

“And so you shall remain if you don’t speak up for yourselves,” Landless warned.

“Sounds like mutiny,” his brother said from the drinks table, “taking on the Government.”

“So what? You’ve got nothing to lose. Better than staying silent simply in order to be abused. Remember what they tried with the King’s speech? You’re in the same firing line.”

“Never did have any time for that Urquhart,” Quillington muttered into his brandy balloon.

“The press wouldn’t report it anyway,” his brother commented, handing a full glass back to the Princess. When he sat down, Landless noticed he had drawn even closer to her. Their hands were side by side on the car rug.

“Some press would,” Landless interjected.

“Benjamin, of course, *you’re* a darling,” Charlotte said soothingly, “but all the rest of them are interested in is a photograph of me with my dress blown up around my ears so they can gossip about where I buy my underwear.”

It was not an entirely accurate picture, mused Landless. The press was mostly interested in where she left her underwear, not where she bought it.

“Shouldn’t give honors to pressmen,” Mickey continued. “Particularly peerages. Clouds their objectivity. Makes them too damned self-important.”

Landless didn’t feel insulted; rather, he felt as if slowly they were beginning to offer him acceptance, setting aside the fact that he was born to a different world.

“You know, perhaps you’re right,” Quillington continued. “Hell, about the only right they allow us nowadays is to get on our hind legs in the Lords, and it’s about time we started using it properly. You know, making the Lords and the hereditary principle the first line of defense for you and yours, Beany.”

“If you’ve anything you want to say, I’ll make sure it gets an outing,” Landless offered. “Just like we did with the Christmas speech.”

“I think we’ve hit on a damned fine idea, Beany,” Quillington said. Already he was beginning to expropriate the idea for his own. “Anything you want said,

I'll say it for you. If the King can't make a public speech, then I'll make it for him. Into the public record on the floor of the Lords. We mustn't let them gag us." He nodded in self-approval. "Sorry you can't stay the night, Landless," he continued. "Plenty of other ideas I'd like to try on you." The conversion was complete. "Some other time, eh?"

Landless understood the hint and glanced at his watch. "Time I was going," he offered, and rose to his feet to make his rounds of farewell.

He would be glad to get out into the fresh air. He didn't belong here, not with these people: no matter how polite they were and no matter how successful he became, he would never belong. They wouldn't allow it. He might have purchased a ticket to the dinner table, but he could never buy his way into the club. He didn't mind, he didn't care to join. This was yesterday, not tomorrow. Anyway, he'd look ridiculous on a horse. But he had no regrets. As he glanced behind him from the door, he could see his host standing by his fireplace, dreaming of chivalrous battles yet to come on the floor of the House of Lords. And he could see the Princess and the younger Quillington, already anticipating the disappearance of the outsider, holding hands on the sofa. There were stories here aplenty, with patience.

Twenty-Six

A royal conscience is like a wind upon a field of corn. It might cause a ripple but usually passes to no lasting effect.

The House of Commons attendant entered the gentlemen's lavatory in search of his quarry. He had an urgent message for Tom Worthington, a Labor MP from what used to be a mining constituency in Derbyshire before they closed the mines, who prided himself on his working-class origins in spite of the fact that it had been more than twenty years since anything other than ink and ketchup had stained his hands. The lavatory was inescapably Victorian with fine antique tiles and porcelain, sullied only by an electric hot-air drier at which Jeremy Colthorpe, an aging and notoriously pompous Member from the pretentious shires, was drying his hands. "By chance seen Mr. Worthington, sir?" the attendant inquired.

"Can only handle one shit at a time in here, my man," Colthorpe responded through his nose. "Try one of the bars. In some corner under a table, most likely."

The attendant scurried off as Colthorpe was joined at the wash basins by the only other man in the room, Tim Stamper.

"Timothy, dear boy. Enjoying party headquarters? Making an excellent job of it, if you don't mind my saying."

Stamper turned from the basin and lowered his head in appreciation, but there was no warmth. Colthorpe was known for his airs, purporting to be a leader of local society, yet he'd married into every penny, which only made him still more condescending toward former estate agents. Classlessness was a concept

Colthorpe would never support, having spent most of his life trying to escape from its clutches.

“Glad for a chance to speak with you actually, old chap,” Colthorpe was saying, his smile more a simper as he searched keenly in the corners of the mirror for reassurance that he and Stamper were alone in the echoing room. “Confidentially, man to man,” he continued, trying to glance surreptitiously beneath the doors of the cubicles.

“What’s on your mind, Jeremy?” Stamper responded, mindful that during all of his years in the House, Colthorpe had never done more than pass the time of day with him.

“Lady wife. Getting on a bit, seventy next year. And not in the best of health. Brave gal, but finding it more than ever difficult to help in the constituency—it’s damned large, forty-three villages, don’t you know, takes some getting round, I can tell you.” He moved over toward Stamper at the basins and started washing his hands for the second time, trying to evince confidentiality but clearly ill at ease. “Owe it to her to take off some of the pressure, spend a little more time together. No way of telling how long she may have.” He paused while he worked up a considerable lather as if he were always meticulous about hygiene and to emphasize the depth of his concern for his wife. Both effects were wasted on Stamper who, when Deputy Chief Whip, had seen Colthorpe’s private file, which included reference to the regular payments he made to a single mother who used to tend bar in his local pub.

“To be frank, I’m thinking of giving up my seat at the next election. For her sake, of course. But it’d be a damnable pity to see all that experience I’ve gained over the years go to waste. Would love to find some way of...still being able to contribute, don’t you know. To go on doing my bit for the country. And the party, of course.”

“What did you have in mind, Jeremy?” Stamper already knew precisely where the conversation was headed.

“Open to suggestion. But obviously the Lords would seem a sensible option. Not for me, so much, but for the little lady. Mean a lot to her after all these years. Particularly when...you know, she might not have very long to enjoy it.”

Colthorpe was still splashing water around to make a pretense at casualness

and had succeeded in drenching the front of his trousers. He realized he was beginning to make a fool of himself and turned the taps off with a savage twist, turning directly toward Stamper, hands by his side, water dripping from his soaked cuffs. “Would I have your support, Tim? The backing of the party machine?”

Stamper turned away and headed for the electric hand drier, its harsh noise forcing Colthorpe to follow him across the room, and them both to raise their voices.

“There will be quite a few colleagues retiring at the next election, Jeremy. I expect a number of them will want a seat in the Lords.”

“Wouldn’t press my own case, but for the wife. I’d work hard at the job, wouldn’t skive off like so many of the others.”

“Ultimately, of course, it’s up to Francis. He’ll have a tough job deciding between the various claims.”

“I voted for Francis.” That was a lie. “I’d be loyal.”

“Would you?” Stamper threw over his shoulder. “Francis does value loyalty above everything.”

“Absolutely. Anything the two of you want, rely on me!”

The hand drier suddenly ceased its raucous huffing and in a moment the atmosphere had grown hushed, almost confessional. Stamper turned to stare at Colthorpe from only a few inches away.

“Can we really rely on you, Jeremy? Loyalty first?”

Colthorpe was nodding.

“Even as far as the King is concerned?”

“The King...?” Confusion crept in.

“Yes, Jeremy, the King. You’ve already seen how he’s rocked the boat. And Francis fears it’s going to get worse. The Palace needs reminding, very firmly, who’s in charge.”

“But I’m not sure...”

“Loyalty, Jeremy. That’s what will make the difference between those who get what they want out of this Government, and those who don’t. It’s an unpleasant business, this thing with the Palace, but somebody has to stand up and defend the important constitutional principles at stake. Francis can’t, you

see, not formally and publicly as Prime Minister. That would create a constitutional crisis, which he absolutely does not want. The only way to avoid that may be to get someone other than a Minister, someone with great seniority and authority—someone like you, Jeremy—to remind the Palace and the public what’s at stake. It’s the least Francis has a right to expect from his loyal supporters.”

“Yes, but...Get into the House of Lords by attacking the King?”

“Not attacking. Reminding him of the highest constitutional principles.”

“But it’s the King who creates new peers—”

“Solely and exclusively on the advice of the Prime Minister. The King cannot refuse his recommendations.”

“It’s a little like *Alice in Wonderland*—”

“So’s a lot of what the Palace has been saying.”

“I’d like to think about it a little.”

“You need to think about loyalty?” Stamper’s tone was harsh, accusatory. His lip curled in contempt and there was fire in the sepulchral eyes. Without a further word the Party Chairman turned on his heel and made his way toward the door. His hand was already on the shiny brass doorknob, and Colthorpe realized his ambitions were ruined if the door closed on this conversation.

“I’ll do it!” he squealed. “Tim, I know where my loyalties lie. I’ll do it.” He was breathing heavily with the tension and confusion, trying to regain his self-control, wiping his hands on his trousers. “You can rely on me, old chap.”

Stamper held his stare, spreading his lips in the coldest of smiles. Then he closed the door behind him.

Twenty-Seven

It's said that Guy Fawkes was the only man ever to enter the Parliament building with an honest intent. I think that's a little unfair on the archbishops. Some of them, at least.

The lunch had started excellently. Both Mickey Quillington and his first cousin, Lord Chesholm of Kinsale, appreciated a good claret, and the cellar of the House of Lords dining room had a large number from which to choose. They had chosen to drink Château Léoville-Barton but were unable to decide between the '82 and '85 vintage. So they had ordered a bottle of both and slipped gently into midafternoon in the warm embrace of the elegant mahogany paneling and attentive staff. Chesholm was a good twenty years older than Quillington and substantially more wealthy, and the impecunious younger peer had hoped to use the lunch for the launch of an appeal to family solidarity that would involve his relative in leasing several hundred of Quillington's Oxfordshire acres at a generous rate, but sadly his tactics had gone awry. The claret proved too much for the elderly peer to manage and he couldn't concentrate, repeatedly exclaiming that he didn't live in Oxfordshire. The bill, although heavily subsidized, still reflected the exceptional nature of the wine and Quillington felt bruised. Maybe the old bugger would regain his wits by teatime.

They were attending the House to voice objection to a Bill that sought a total ban on foxhunting, and the debate was well under way by the time they took their places on the deep-red morocco benches in the Gothic chamber. Within minutes Chesholm was asleep while Quillington slouched with his knees tucked beneath his chin as he listened with growing resentment to a former polytechnic

lecturer, recently elevated to the life peerage for his diligence in the study of trade union matters, expounding his belief in the decay and corruption of those who still believed they owned the countryside as if by divine right. Debates in the Lords are conducted in far less pompous and vitriolic style than in the Lower Chamber, as befits its aristocratic and almost familial atmosphere, but the lack of outright rudeness did not prevent the peer from putting across his point of view forcefully and effectively. From around the Chamber, uncharacteristically packed for the occasion by hereditary peers and noble backwoodsmen from distant rural parts, came a growl of wounded pride, like a stuck boar at bay. Such displays of emotion are not commonplace in the Upper Chamber, but such a concentration of hereditary peers was also unusual outside the circumstance of state funeral or Royal wedding. It may not have been the Lords at their norm, nor even at their best, but it was certainly their Lordships at their most decorous.

Quillington cleared his throat; the debate was threatening to spoil the warm glow left by the claret. The poly-peer had broadened his attack from foxhunting itself to those who hunted, and Quillington took great exception. He was not the type of person who rode roughshod over others' rights—he'd never forced any farm laborer out of a tied cottage, and any damage inadvertently caused while hunting was always paid for. Blast the man, the Quillingtons had been dedicated custodians. It had cost them their fortune and his father's health and had left his mother with little but years of tearful widowhood. Yet here was an oaf who had spent all his working life in some overheated lecture room living off an inflation-proofed salary, accusing him of being no better than a scrounger. It was too much, really too bloody much. This sort of wheedling and insolent insinuation had gone on for too long, harking back to a style of class warfare that was fifty years out of date.

“’Bout time we put them in their place, don't you think, Chesy?” Almost before he realized it, Quillington was on his feet.

“This debate is only nominally about foxhunting; that is merely the excuse. Behind it lies an insidious attack on the traditions and values that have not only held our countryside together, not only held this House together, but have also held the whole of society together. There are wreckers in the land, some maybe even among our number here”—he deliberately avoided looking at the previous

speaker, so that everyone would know precisely whom he meant—“who in the name of democracy would force their own narrow, militant opinions upon the rest, the silent majority which is the true and glorious backbone of Britain.”

He licked his lips. There was a flush in his cheeks, a mixture of Château Léoville-Barton and real emotion that succeeded in engulfing the unease he customarily felt in public, which on more than one occasion had left him tongue-tied and floundering at the opening of the annual village fête. “They want revolution, no less. They would abandon our traditions, abolish this Chamber, stamp on our rights.” Quillington waved a finger at the canopied Throne that dominated one end of the hall and stood empty and forlorn. “They even seek to reduce to silence and insignificance our own Royal Family.”

Several of Their Lordships raised a collective eyebrow. The rules about discussion of the Royal Family were very restrictive, particularly in a debate on blood sports. “To the point, my Lord,” one growled in warning.

“But, noble Lords, this *is* the point,” protested Quillington. “We are not here to rubber-stamp what comes from the Lower House. We are here to offer counsel, advice, warning. And we do so, just as the Monarch does, because we represent the true long-term interests of this country. We represent the values that have made our nation great over previous centuries and that will continue to guide her well into the next century. We are not here to be swayed by every passing fashion and fad. We do not suffer from the corruption of having to get ourselves elected, of having to pretend that we are all things to all men, of making promises we know we cannot keep. We are here to represent what is immutable and constant in society.”

Mutters of “Hear, hear” could be heard from the crowded benches around Quillington. The Lord Chancellor drummed his fingers as he concentrated in bewigged and ermined splendor from his seat on the Woolsack; the speech was most unusual, but really rather a splendid entertainment.

“It may seem a long way from the plottings of hunt-saboteurs to assaults on Buckingham Palace, but what we have seen of both recently should encourage us to stand firm in our beliefs, not to run for the cover of undergrowth like terrified vermin.” His long, thin arms were extended theatrically away from his body, as if trying to haul in their sympathy. He needn’t have bothered, peers

were beginning to nod and tap their knees to indicate support. “Both this House and the Royal Family are here to defend those timeless aspects of the national interest, unfettered by the selfishness of The Other Place. There is no need for this House to kowtow to the muscle and money of commercial interests!” The poly-peer was sitting upright, ready to try and intervene. He was sure Quillington was about to go too far. “Not for us the temptations of bribing the public with their own money, we are here to defend the public against shortsightedness and falsehood. And at no time is that duty more pressing upon us than when we have a new Cabinet and a Prime Minister who have not even been elected by the people. Let him go to the country promising to castrate the Monarch and abolish the House of Lords if he dare, but until he has won that right and power at an election, let us not allow him to do quietly and privately what he has not yet been able to do publicly.”

The poly-peer had had enough. He was not quite sure what transgression Quillington was making, but the emotional temperature in the Chamber had soared, shouts of support for Quillington were coming from all sides, and the poly-peer suddenly felt the Chamber close in around him like a courtroom dock. “Order! The noble Lord must restrain himself,” he interjected.

“Why...?” “No, let him go on...” “Allow him to finish...” On all sides Quillington was being offered advice and encouragement, while the poly-peer sprang to his feet, shouting across the Chamber and wagging his finger in vain. Quillington had won, and knew it.

“I have finished, my Lords. Do not forget your duty, nor your allegiance to the King, nor the sacrifices that you and your forefathers accepted in order to make this nation great. Use this wretched Bill to remind others that you have not forgotten, and let the lion roar once more!”

He sat down as peers took their Order Papers and rapped them sharply on the leather benches in front of them to show their approbation.

As Order Papers beat down either side of his head, the elderly Chesholm woke with a start. “What? What was that? Did I miss something, Mickey?”

“On a Point of Order, Madam Speaker.”

“Point of Order, Mr. Jeremy Colthorpe.”

Madam Speaker’s shrill voice cut through the din of the House of Commons as MPs milled around preparing to vote after an Opposition debate on substandard housing, which had just wound its way through three turbid hours. Normally Madam Speaker was caustic about points of order raised during divisions and, indeed, the ancient rules of the House made such interruptions problematic by requiring the MP to have his head covered—in order better to be seen amid the confusion, so said the rule book; to deflect idle time wasters, according to common sense. But Colthorpe was a Member of long standing and not a renowned troublemaker; he stood defiantly if somewhat absurdly attired in a collapsible opera hat kept in the Chamber for the purpose. Points of order often had an element of comedy to them, and the bustle in the Chamber subsided as MPs strained to hear what was upsetting the old man.

“Madam Speaker, on rare occasions a question of such importance and urgency arises that it is of overriding importance to the business of the House, and you decide it is necessary for the appropriate Minister to be summoned before us to answer for it. I believe this matter is just that.” It was more than that. News of Quillington’s speech had drifted through the tea rooms and bars of the House of Commons even as Colthorpe was still chiding himself for making such a nonsense of his exchange with Stamper; he didn’t have much practice in groveling to estate agents, he told himself, and he knew he’d made a hash of it. He had listened to reports of the peer’s words like a drowning man greets the sound of an approaching rescue ship, and had hustled off to find Stamper, terrified that someone else would find him first. Within forty minutes he was back in the Chamber, and on his feet.

“Earlier this afternoon, in Another Place, a noble Lord accused this House of political corruption, of seeking to deprive both their Lordships and His Majesty the King of their constitutional rights, and claiming that His Majesty had been improperly silenced. Such a challenge to the actions of this House and to the office of the Prime Minister is such as to—”

“Hold on a minute!” Madam Speaker enjoined Colthorpe to silence in a broad Lancashire accent. “I’ve heard nothing about this. Most improper. You know it’s against the rules of this House to discuss personal matters relating to the King.”

“This is not a personal matter but a constitutional matter of the highest importance, Madam Speaker. The rights of this House are enshrined in custom and established over the course of many years. When they are challenged, they must be defended.”

“Nevertheless, I want to see what was said before I allow this one to run.” The Speaker waved Colthorpe down but he was not to be deflected.

“We tarry and delay at our peril, Madam Speaker. This is just another example of the interfering, interventionist tendencies of the mod-Monarchy—”

“That’s enough!” She was on her feet now, staring furiously over half-moon glasses, demanding Colthorpe subside.

“But Madam Speaker, we must be allowed to respond to attacks made on us, no matter from what source those attacks emanate. The debate in Another Place, ostensibly about foxhunting, has been turned into a direct assault on this Chamber. Now, Madam Speaker, I don’t wish to impugn the integrity of anyone wishing to make such attacks...”

She liked the sound of that, and hesitated.

“It is possible, I suppose,” Colthorpe continued, “to care passionately for the welfare of the nation from the back of a horse while out pursuing foxes.” There was an amused growl of support from the benches around. “It may even be possible to identify with the plight of the homeless from within the luxury of a palace—indeed, several palaces. It may even be possible, I could not deny it, that being driven around the country in chauffeured limousines and private trains with forty carriages affords a unique insight into the problems of those confined to wheelchairs...”

“Forty coaches?” a voice queried. “What on earth does he need with forty coaches?”

Madam Speaker was on her feet again, lifting onto her toes, trying to give herself added height and authority and angrily pointing her glasses in his direction, but Colthorpe, voice rising in turn, ignored her.

“It may also be possible for those who live entirely off the backs of taxpayers and who pay no tax at all to accuse those who do of greed and selfishness. It is possible, Madam Speaker, but isn’t it more likely that this is just another load of the organic fertilizer that gets spread all over the Palace Gardens?”

The Speaker's cries of "Order! Order!" were lost amid the instant hubbub. "If the Honorable Gentleman doesn't resume his seat immediately I shall be forced to name him," she mouthed, threatening Colthorpe with the procedure that would eject him from Parliament for the rest of the week's business. But already it was too late. As Colthorpe looked toward the press gallery he could see scribes furiously tearing at their notebooks. There would be a posse of them waiting as he left the Chamber. His point had already been made; he would be named in every morning newspaper. "Order! O-o-o-order!" cried the Speaker. With what he hoped was a bow of great dignity, which caused the opera hat to tumble from his head and roll across the floor, Colthorpe resumed his seat.

Twenty-Eight

Loyalty is like the Doctrine of Celibacy—easy to proclaim but damned difficult to live by.

Landless was having his hair trimmed when the call came through, and he didn't care for being disturbed at such moments. His secretary thought his reluctance arose from embarrassment because his hairdresser, who visited the businessman once a fortnight at his office, was what she called "delicate," but Landless didn't mind. Quentin was the only barber he'd ever found who could manage to keep his ropelike hair under control without larding it in hair cream and, besides, the Landless reputation with women was sufficiently beyond dispute to survive contact with an affected queen. In truth the hairdresser was a disgraceful gossip who had a fund of stories about his other fashionable clients, all of whom seemed to regard him as a father confessor for their sex lives. Landless never ceased to be intrigued by what others would admit to or fantasize about under the influence of nothing more potent than shampoo and an expert scalp massage. He kept his own mouth shut, and listened. He was engrossed in a fascinating report of what other parts of his body the country's leading romantic soap star shaved, and in what designs, when the whine of the telephone dragged him away.

It was his editor in chief, seeking guidance, covering his ass as usual. But Landless didn't object, not on this occasion. This was his story, after all.

"How are the others going to play it?" he growled.

"No one's quite sure. This story's so out of the ordinary." The issue involved King, Prime Minister, Lords and Commons—the Archbishop wasn't in there yet,

but doubtless the *Sun* or *Mirror* would find some connection. Yet it had been raised by two such nonentities—few had heard of Colthorpe, none of Quillington. It was a sensitive issue, perhaps an item on the parliamentary page?

“Any guidance from Downing Street?”

“They’re cautious. Clean hands, so they insist. Serious issues that they understand must be reported and all that, but suggest Quillington’s a fool and Colthorpe went over the top. They don’t want a repeat of what happened before Christmas.”

“But they didn’t request we spike it, either?”

“No.”

“Colthorpe tried to shift the argument away from a divided nation to hard cash. Clever—too clever for him on his own. They’re flying kites. Trying it out with Colthorpe to see if it gets a fair wind.”

“So what do we do?”

It was not so much that he had promised Quillington, it was more instinct—the instinct of a man who had been used to street fighting all his life, used to recognizing the difference between shadows that provided cover and those that hid the enemy. He trusted his instincts, and they told him that among these shadows there lurked the figure of Francis Urquhart. If Landless threw a little light around, who knows what he might flush out. Anyway, he had a lot of money invested in the Royal Family and there was no dividend in it unless the Royal Family was news. Good, bad, indifferent news, he didn’t mind—so long as it was news.

“Splash it. Page One lead.”

“You think it’s that big?”

“We make it that big.”

There was agitated breathing on the end of the phone as the editor tried to catch up and comprehend his proprietor’s flow of logic. “Peers Attack Urquhart?” he suggested, practicing a few headlines. “PM Unelected and Unelectable, Say King’s Allies?”

“No, you bloody idiot. Six weeks ago we were telling the world what a fine, noble creature he was. From Roger Rabbit to Rasputin in one bound is more than even our readers will swallow. You make it balanced, fair, authoritative. Just

make it big.”

“You want to catch the others standing on this one.” It was an assumption, not a question: this was going to be a front page like none of the competition.

“No, not on this one,” Landless responded thoughtfully. “Spread word around the newsroom.”

“But that’ll mean it will be all through Fleet Street in under an hour.” They both knew there were journalists in the newsroom taking backhanders for alerting their rivals to what was going on, just as they paid for whispers in the other direction. “They’ll all follow. Think we’re up to something, know something they don’t. No one will want to be caught out; it’ll be used on every front page...?”

“Precisely. This one is going to be a runner, because we’re going to make it run. Freely, fairly, in the national interest. Until the time comes for us to climb down off the fence, by which time the noise we make will give our Mr. Urquhart nightmares for months. That’s when we make sure he’s not only unelected, but unelectable.”

He dropped the phone back into its cradle and turned to Quentin, who was propping himself up against a far wall of the huge marble-covered private bathroom, seemingly engrossed in pursuit of a stray eyelash.

“Quentin, do you remember King Edward the Second?”

“You mean the one they did for with the red-hot poker?” He puckered his lips in distaste at the legend of sordid butchery.

“If I hear a word of this conversation breathed outside these walls, you’re going to become Quentin the First. And I personally am going to administer the poker. Get it?”

Quentin tried hard, very hard, to imagine the newspaper man was joking. He smiled encouragingly, but all he received in return was a sustained glare that left no room for doubt. Quentin remembered that Landless had never joked. He went back to cutting the hair, and said not another word.

She had taken the first editions up herself. She’d bumped into the messenger on the stairs.

“Nice to see you again, Miss.”

“Again.” Sally thought she detected undue inflection on the word. Perhaps it was her imagination—or her guilt? No, not guilt. She had long ago decided not to run her life by codes and rules that others so blithely ignored. She owed no one, and there was no sense in being the only impoverished virgin in the cemetery.

He laid the newspapers side by side on the floor, and stood over them for a considerable time, lost in thought.

“It’s started, Sally,” he said at last. She noted an edge of apprehension. “Soon we shall be beyond the point of no return.”

“To victory.”

“Or to hell.”

“Come on, Francis, it’s what you wanted. People beginning to ask questions.”

“Don’t misunderstand. I’m not despondent, only a little cautious. I’m an Englishman, after all, and he is my King. And it appears we are not alone in asking questions. Who is this Quillington, this unknown peer with a mission?”

“Don’t you know? He’s the brother of the man who is, as it is said, close enough to Princess Charlotte to catch her colds. Always in the gossip columns.”

“You read gossip columns?” He was surprised; it was one of Mortima’s least attractive breakfast traits. He eyed Sally closely, wondering if he would ever get the chance to eat breakfast with her.

“Many of my clients live in them. Pretend to be upset when they appear, are mortified when they don’t.”

“So Quillington’s a King’s man, is he? And the King’s men are already answering the call to battle.” He was still standing over the papers.

“Talking of clients, Francis, you said you’d introduce me to some new contacts, but I’ve not met anyone apart from the occasional messenger and tea lady. For some reason we seem to spend all our time alone.”

“We’re never truly alone. It’s impossible in this place.”

She came behind him and slid her hands around his chest, burying her face in the crisp, clean cotton of his shirt. She could smell him, the male smell, its muskiness mixed with the pine starch and the faint tang of cologne, and she could feel the body heat already rising. She knew it was the danger he enjoyed,

which made him feel he was conquering not only her but also, through her, the entire world. The fact that at any moment a messenger or civil servant might blunder in only heightened his sense of awareness and drive; while he was having her he felt invincible. The time would come when he would feel like that all the time, would dispense with caution and recognize no rules other than his own, and even as he reached the height of his powers he would begin the downward slide to defeat. It happened to them all. They begin to convince themselves that each new challenge is no longer new but is simply a repeat of old battles already fought and won. Their minds begin to close, they lose touch and flexibility, are no longer attuned to the dangers they confront. Vision becomes stale repetition. Not Urquhart, not yet, but sometime. She didn't mind being used, so long as she could use him, too, and so long as she remembered that this, like all things, couldn't last forever. She ran her hands down his chest, poking her fingers between his shirt buttons. Prime Ministers are always pushed, initially by their own vanity and sense of impregnability, and eventually by the electorate or their own colleagues and political friends. Although not by a King, not for many years.

"Don't worry about your clients, Sally. I'll fix it."

"Thank you, Francis." She kissed the back of his neck, the fingers still descending on his buttons as though she were practicing a piano scale.

"You understand your job exceptionally well," he breathed.

"Mrs. Urquhart not around?"

"She's visiting her sister. In Fife."

"Sounds a long way away."

"It is."

"I see."

She had run out of buttons. He was still standing, newspapers at his feet, facing the door like Horatio at the bridge, ready to take on any intruders, feeling omnipotent. When he was like this, with her, she knew that nothing else mattered for him. Part of him yearned for the door to burst open and for all of Downing Street to see him with this much younger, desirable woman and to understand what a true man he was. Perhaps he hadn't realized that they had stopped barging in with their interminable messages and Cabinet papers while

she was here, always finding an excuse to telephone ahead first, or simply not bothering to come at all. They knew, of course they knew. But maybe he didn't know they knew. Maybe he was already losing touch.

“Francis,” she whispered in his ear. “I know it's late. It will be in darkness, but... You always promised to show me the Cabinet Room. Your special chair.”

He couldn't answer. Her fingers held him speechless.

“Francis? Please...”

Twenty-Nine

A monarch is at a disadvantage when he drops the soap. What does he do when there is no valet to retrieve it for him?

He hadn't slept again. And he knew he was beginning to get things out of proportion. Ridiculous things like his tooth mug. The valet had changed it, just like that, assuming as they all did that they knew best what was good for him. It had caused an unholy, spitting row, and now he felt ashamed. He'd gotten his mug back, but in the process lost his equilibrium and dignity. Yet somehow knowing what was happening to him only seemed to make it worse.

The face in the bathroom mirror looked haggard, aged, the crow's feet around the eyes like great talons of revenge, the fire within damped and exhausted. As he studied his own image he saw reflected the face of his father, fierce, intemperate, unyielding. He shivered. He was growing old even before his life had properly started, a lifetime spent waiting for his parents to die just as now his own children waited for him. If he died today there would be a huge state funeral at which millions would mourn. But how many would remember him? Not him the figurehead, but him, the man?

As a child there had been some compensations. He remembered his favorite game dashing back and forth in front of the Palace guard, all the time being greeted with the satisfying clatter of boots being scraped and arms being presented until both he and the guard were breathless. But it had never been a proper childhood, alone and unable to reach out and touch like other children, and now they were intent on depriving him of his manhood, too. He would watch television yet couldn't understand half the commercials. A stream of

messages about mortgages, savings plans, money dispensers, new liquids for washing whiter, and gadgets that got the paint into those difficult corners and out of the bristles of the brush. It was as though the messages came from another planet. He already had the softest brand of toilet tissue but hadn't the slightest idea where to buy it. He didn't even have to take the top off his toothpaste in the morning or change a razor blade. It was all done for him, everything. His life was unreal, somehow so irrelevant, a gilded cage of miseries.

Even the girls they'd found to help with some of the basics had called him "sir," not only when they first met and in public, but later when they were alone, in bed, with nothing else between them other than an enthusiastic sweat while showing him how the rest of the world spent their time.

He'd done his best, everything that was expected of him and more. He'd learned Welsh, walked the Highlands, captained his own ship, flown helicopters and jumped out of planes at five thousand feet, presided over charity committees, opened the hospital wings and unveiled their plaques, laughed at the humiliations and lamentable impersonations, ignored the insults, bitten his lip at the vicious untruths about his family and turned the other cheek, crawled on his belly through the mud and slime of military training grounds just as he was expected to crawl through the mud and slime of Fleet Street. He'd done everything they had asked of him, yet still it was not enough. The harder he strived, the more cruel their jests and barbs became. The job, the expectations, had grown too much for any man.

He looked at the bony, balding head, so like his father's, and the sagging eyes. He'd already seen the morning newspapers, the reports of the debates, the speculation and innuendo, the pontification of the leader writers who either discussed him as if he were known so intimately to them they could peer deep into his soul, or treated him as if he, the man, simply didn't exist. He was their chattel, a possession brought out on display at their convenience to sign their legislation, cut their ribbons, and help sell their newspapers. They wouldn't allow him to join the rest of the world yet deprived him of the simple solace of being alone.

The once clear blue eyes were bloodshot with fatigue and doubt. Somehow he had to find courage, a way out, before they broke him. But there was no way out

for a King. Slowly his hand began to tremble, uncontrollably, as his thoughts began to tangle in confusion, and the tooth mug started to shake. His damp fingers gripped white around the porcelain, struggling to regain control, yet it was all slipping away and the mug flew off as though possessed, grazed the edge of the bath and bounced onto the tiled floor. He stared after it, captivated, as if watching the performance of a tragic ballet. The mug gave several tiny skips, the handle bouncing this way and that, waving at him, taunting him until, with a final extravagant leap of despair, it twisted over and smashed into a hundred angry, savage teeth. His favorite tooth mug was gone after all. And it was their fault.

Thirty

When he dies they will line the streets in the hundreds of thousands to honor their fallen king. I will be with them as the coffin passes, of course. I shall want to make sure.

January: The Third Week

“Couldn’t I have done this at the Cup Final, Tim? You know how I hate football.” Urquhart was already having to raise his voice to make himself heard above the crowd, and the match hadn’t even started.

“Final’s not until May, and we don’t have time.” Stamper’s bright eyes darted around the ground. His pleasure was not going to be diluted by the whining of his boss; he had been a keen fan since the days he was no bigger than a football. Anyway, it was part of his program to make Urquhart appear a man among the people, a Prime Minister out enjoying himself and keeping in touch. The media would get bored eventually with such spoon-feeding but not, Stamper had reasoned, before March. This was an ideal occasion, a floodlit European Championship qualifying match against arch rivals Germany with passions of victorious wars and World Cup defeats being rekindled on the terraces and in front of televisions throughout every constituency. As he had reminded the recalcitrant Urquhart several times, football fans may not have as much money as the crowd at the Opera House, but they have many more votes and Urquhart was there to be seen helping them defend the nation’s honor.

A roar engulfed them as a wave rippled around the ground, the fans throwing themselves from their seats in the image of their forefathers going over the top at the Somme, Verdun, Vimy Ridge, and countless other bloody encounters with

the Hun. The VIPs' box was littered with an assortment of half-consumed drinks, overweight football bureaucrats, and magazines carrying the latest news of twisted ligaments and even more distorted dressing room gossip. None of it was to the Prime Minister's taste and he sat hunched, seeming to have withdrawn inside the folds of his overcoat, yet as Stamper leaned over Urquhart's shoulder from his seat in the row behind he discovered his leader engrossed in the screen of a miniature television, less than three inches across. He was watching the evening news.

"She's getting too old for a bikini, if you want my opinion," Stamper bantered.

The liquid-crystal display shone bright with the image of a paparazzi photograph, slightly shaky with the effect of a gentle Caribbean swell on the long distance lens, but unmistakably showing Princess Charlotte cavorting on a secluded beach. The tropical colors were brilliant.

"You don't do our Royal Family justice, Tim. She is doing nothing improper. It is not a crime, after all, for a princess to be seen on a beach with a tanned companion, even if he happens to be considerably younger and slimmer than she. Nor does it matter that only last week she was skiing in Gstaad. You simply have no appreciation of how hard the Royal Family works. And I do deprecate the unpleasant British characteristic of envy, that simply because we are sitting here freezing our balls off in January while the country is slipping into recession, we should criticize those who happen to be more fortunate than ourselves."

"I fear others won't see it in quite the same noble light as you."

Urquhart wrapped the car rug more tightly around his knees and fortified himself from a thermos of hot coffee amply laced with whiskey. He might feign being a young man while astride Sally, but the cold night air stripped away such pretenses with little mercy. His breath was condensing in clouds. "I fear you are right, Tim. More lurid stories about how many holidays she's had in the last year, how many nights she's spent in different parts of the country from the Prince, when she last saw the children. The gutter press will read anything into one harmless holiday snap."

"OK, Francis. What the hell are you up to?"

Urquhart turned in his seat so that Stamper could hear him better above the

noise around the stadium. He took another sip of coffee. "I've been thinking. The agreement on the Civil List expires shortly and we've just begun renegotiating the Royal Family's income for the next ten years. The Palace has put in a pretty tall bid based on what some would say was an unreasonably high forecast of inflation over the coming years. It's only an opening position, of course, something to bargain with, to make sure we are not too mean with them. It would be all too easy at a time of general belt-tightening to squeeze them, to argue that they should share the burdens along with the rest of us." He arched an eyebrow, and smiled. "But I think that would be shortsighted, don't you?"

"Give it to me, Francis. Unravel the workings of that devious mind of yours, because you're way ahead of me and I don't think I'm going to catch up."

"I take that as a compliment. Listen, and learn, Timothy." Urquhart was enjoying this. Stamper was good, very good, yet he didn't have the magnificent view of the political lowlands afforded from the window of Number Ten. And he didn't have Sally, either. "I keep reading in the press that we are moving to a position of constitutional...competition, shall we say, between King and Prime Minister, in which the King appears to have considerable if uninformed popular support. If I squeeze him on the Civil List I shall simply be accused of churlishness. On the other hand if I choose to be generous, it will prove I am fair-minded and responsible."

"As always," the Party Chairman mocked.

"Unfortunately, the press and public have a simplistic way of looking at the Civil List as rather like a Royal salary. The going rate for the job. And I'm afraid the media will not take kindly to a family that celebrates a huge pay increase by dashing off from ski slope to sun-blached beach while the rest of us shiver. Even responsible editors like our friend Brynford-Jones are likely to misunderstand."

"I shall insist on it!" Stamper shouted above the loudspeaker system introducing the players.

"If it appears the Royal Family is abusing the Government's generosity, I fear that would be more of a problem for the King than the Prime Minister. Little I can do about it. Hope he doesn't find it too much of a distraction."

The pitch was in brilliant floodlight, the teams lined up, the referee ready, the

official photographs taken, the stadium noisy with the clamor of sixty thousand fans. Suddenly the chorus of raucous shouts subsided to a conspiratorial rustle.

“God Save the King, Tim!”

As Urquhart stood with Stamper for the playing of the national anthem, he felt warmer. He thought, above the perfunctory singing of the crowd, he could hear the sound of collapsing castles.

The King’s desk was a mess. Books and copies of *Hansard* were piled along the front edge with pieces of paper sticking out like weeds to mark passages for future reference, the telephone had become submerged beneath a tide of computer printout bearing the accounts of the Duchy of Lancaster, and an empty plate, which had earlier carried his lunch of a single round of wholemeal bread and smoked salmon, floated aimlessly around. Only the photograph of the children in its plain silver mount seemed immune from the encroachment, standing alone like a desert island amid stormy seas. Typically, his brow was furrowed as he read the report on the Civil List.

“A little surprising, don’t you think, David?”

“Frankly astonishing. We seem to be enjoying the spoils of victory without my being aware we’ve yet been engaged in combat. It’s not what I expected.”

“Could it be a peace signal? There’s been far too much gossip about the Palace and Downing Street. Maybe this is a chance for a new start. Eh, David?” The voice sounded tired, lacking in conviction.

“Maybe,” Mycroft responded.

“It’s certainly generous.”

“More generous than I realized he could be.”

The eyes shot a look of reproach across the jumbled desk. He was not a cynic; he liked to think of himself as a builder who found the best in people. It was one of his most infuriating characteristics, Mycroft had always thought. Yet the King did not disagree.

“It enables us to be generous in return.” The King had risen from his chair and moved to gaze out of the window across the gardens, slowly twisting his signet ring. The new gardens were beginning to show definitive and distinctive

form, and he found great solace as his mind filled in the many gaps and created a vista of beauty in front of him. “You know, David, I’ve always thought it anomalous, embarrassing even, that our private income from the properties and interests owned by the Duchy of Lancaster and elsewhere remains free of tax. I’m the richest man in the country, yet I pay no income tax, no capital gains tax, no inheritance tax, nothing. And still in addition I get a Civil List allowance of several millions that is just about to be substantially increased.” He turned and clapped his hands. “It’s time for us to join the rest of the world. In exchange for the new Civil List, we should agree to pay tax on the rest of our incomes.”

“You mean a token payment?”

“No, no gestures. The full going rate on it all.”

“But there’s no need,” Mycroft protested. “There’s no real pressure on you, no controversy about it. Once you agree to it you’ll never be able to renege. You will be binding your children and your children’s children, no matter what Government is in power and no matter how punitive the taxes might be.”

“I have no intention of reneging!” His tone was sharp, a flush in his cheeks. “I’m doing it because I think it is right. I’ve been over the Duchy accounts in great detail. Heavens, those assets should provide enough income for half a dozen Royal families.”

“Very well, sir. If you insist.” Mycroft felt chided. It was his duty to offer advice and sound cautionary notes, and he did not care for being scolded. Even after the long years of friendship he was still not comfortable with the Monarch’s flashes of impatience; it’s what came of waiting a lifetime yet being in such a hurry, he told himself. And the outbursts were growing more frequent in the few short months since he had been on the Throne. “What of the rest of the Family? You expect them also to volunteer tax?”

“I do. It would be nonsense if the King were to pay tax yet more junior members of the Firm were not. People wouldn’t understand. *I* wouldn’t understand. Particularly not after the sort of press they’ve managed to organize for themselves recently. I know the media are vultures, but do we really have to offer ourselves up on plates ready to be devoured? A lot more clothing and a little more common sense wouldn’t go amiss at times.” It was as close as he would come to personal criticism of his own family, but it had been no secret in

the sculleries and laundry rooms of the Palace how incensed he'd been, both with Princess Charlotte's lack of discretion and the media's lack of restraint.

"If you are to...persuade them to forgo substantial income, the word needs to come directly from you. You can't expect them to take that sort of idea from me or any other aide." Mycroft sounded restless. He had been sent before on similar errands to members of the Royal Family. He found that the more junior the rank, the more hostile grew their reception.

The King managed a rueful smile that turned his face down at one corner. "You're right to be squeamish. I suspect any messenger sent on such a delicate task would return with his turban nailed firmly to his head. Don't worry, David, this one's for me. Brief them, if you will, on the new Civil List arrangements. Then prepare a short paper for me setting out the arguments and arrange for them to come and see me. Separately rather than in a gang. I don't want to be subjected to yet another collective family mugging around the dinner table, not on this one."

"Some are abroad at the moment. It may take several days."

"It has already taken several lifetimes, David." The King sighed. "I don't think a few more days can matter very much..."

Thirty-One

A princess's place is in at least one of her castles. If she has any sense she will have the drawbridge drawn up, but they rarely do.

The British Airways 747-400 from Kingston arrived ten minutes behind schedule on the approach to Heathrow, unable to make up the delay caused by a picket line of striking passport officers that had stretched around the departure terminal and spilled onto parts of the tropical runway. The flight had missed the prearranged landing slot and normally might have had to circle for another fifteen or twenty minutes before air traffic control found a suitable gap in the queue, but this was not a normal flight and the captain was given immediate permission to land as twelve other flights that had arrived on schedule were shuffled back into the pack. The Princess was waiting to disembark the moment the wheels touched down.

The Boeing had taxied to a terminal in one of the quieter corners of the airport and normally the Princess and her escorts would be driven directly out of Heathrow through a private perimeter gateway. She would be back at Kensington Palace even before her fellow passengers had struggled to the head of the taxi rank. Today, however, the Princess did not drive directly away. First she had to collect the keys of her new car.

It had been a foul few months for all manufacturers of luxury cars and the prospects for the rest of the year looked worse. Trade was tough; sales—and sales promotions—were at a premium. So it had seemed an excellent idea for Maserati UK to offer the Princess a free edition of their latest and most sporty model in the expectation of considerable and ongoing publicity. She had

accepted with alacrity. As the aircraft drew alongside its arrival gate the managing director of Maserati waited anxiously on the tarmac, keys tied with an extravagant pink bow dangling from nervous fingers, eyeing the clouds. He could have wished for a kinder day, the intermittent drizzle had necessitated copious attention to the bodywork to keep it shining, but there were compensations. The media coverage afforded the Princess in recent days had considerably increased both the size and the enthusiasm of the press contingent lined up beside his car. The publicity value of his shares in the Princess had already increased considerably.

She breezed onto the damp tarmac with a polished white smile and tan that defied the elements. It would take less than ten minutes, a few words of greeting and thanks with the anxious little man in the shiny mohair suit waving the keys, a brief photo call as the cameras compared her bodywork with that of the fierce red Maserati, and a couple of minutes spent driving slowly round in circles as she discovered the location of the gears and they squeezed off a few feet of promotional video. A breeze, and fair exchange of her time for a growling new £95,000 four-and-a-half liter turbocharged mechanical Italian beast.

The press, of course, had other ideas, wanting to inquire after her holiday and the whereabouts of her husband and holiday companion, but she was having none of it. “The Princess will entertain questions only about the car, gentlemen,” an aide had announced. Why not a Jaguar—because it was American owned. How many other cars did she have—none like this wicked brute. What’s the top speed—seventy miles an hour while I’m driving. Hadn’t she recently been clocked at over a hundred on the M1—a sweet smile and a grab for the next question. Would she lean a little lower over the bonnet for the benefit of the cameras—you guys must be joking. The next shower of rain looked imminent and already it was time for a few quick revolutions around the cameras before departing. She climbed in as gracefully as the low-slung bodywork would allow and wound down the window for a final smile at the jackal pack as they closed in.

“Isn’t it a bit demeaning for a Princess to flog foreign cars?” a sharp voice asked bluntly.

Bloody typical. They were always at it. Her cheeks colored beneath her tan.

“I spend my entire life ‘flogging,’ as you so snidely put it. I flog British exports wherever I go. I flog overpriced tickets for charity dinners to help the starving in Africa. I flog lottery tickets so we can build retirement homes for pensioners. I never stop flogging.”

“But flogging flash foreign sports cars?” the voice continued.

“It’s you lot who demand the flash. If I turned up in secondhand clothes or thirdhand cars, you’d be the first to complain. I have to earn my living the same as everybody else.” The smile had disappeared.

“What about the Civil List?”

“If you knew how difficult it was to do everything that’s expected of you on a Princess’s allowance, you wouldn’t ask such bloody fool questions!”

That was enough. They were goading her; she was losing her temper; it was time to go. She slipped the clutch, a fraction impatiently, for the car began to perform inelegant kangaroo hops toward the cameramen who scattered in alarm. Serve the bastards right. The V-8 engine stalled, the man in the shiny suit looked dismayed and the cameras snapped angrily. She restarted, selected a gear, and was off. Damn their impertinence. Back at the Palace after only a week away she would be greeted with a small hillock of paperwork that would contain countless invitations, more requests and begging letters from charities and the underprivileged. She would show them. She would answer all the invitations, accept as many as possible, go on eating the dinners and raising the monies, smiling at the old and the young, the sick and the infirm, comforting those who were just plain unlucky. She would ignore the jibes and go on working hard, as she always did, grinding away through the hillock. She had no way of knowing that on top of the unopened pile lay a brief telling her about arrangements for the new Civil List, and that already copy was being prepared for the morning editions attacking a pouting princess in a brand new foreign sports car who complained she was not paid enough.

Misery in a Maserati.

The image of the Princess’s glowing brake lights faded from the television as Urquhart hit the red button. His attention stayed fixed on the blank screen for a

long time, his half-knotted tie hanging limply around his neck.

“Am I not old enough for you, Francis? You prefer middle-aged nymphomaniacs to good, clean-living young girls like me, is that it?”

He gave her a doleful look. “I couldn’t possibly comment.”

Sally dug him playfully in the ribs; distractedly he pushed her away. “Stop that or I’ll revoke your visa.” But the warning served only to redouble her efforts. “Sally! We’ve got to talk.”

“God, not another of those serious, meaningful relationships. And just when I was beginning to have some fun.” She sat on the sofa opposite him, smoothing down her dress. She put her underwear in her handbag, she’d sort that tangled mess out later.

“There will be a storm about those pictures tomorrow. The headlines will be savage. Alas, it is also the day I’ve chosen to make the public announcement about the new Civil List. Unfortunate, the announcement sitting alongside those sort of pictures, but”—he smiled a huge, theatrical smile like Macbeth welcoming dinner guests—“it can’t be helped. What I find most distressing is that it will focus attention not only on our hapless and witless Princess but on the whole Royal Family. And that’s where I need your help, O Gypsy. Please.”

“I am a stranger in your land, suh, and my campfire is small,” she mocked in a deep Southern drawl.

“But you have magic on your side. Magic that can take a family so royal, and make it so common.”

“How common?”

“So far as the lesser Royals are concerned? As common as gigolos on a beach. But not the King, though. This isn’t all-out war. Just make sure he’s not above criticism. Reflect a degree of disappointment. It can be done?”

She nodded. “Depends on the questions, how you set it up.”

“How would you set it up?”

“Can I go to the bathroom first?” Her dress was now immaculately smoothed, but somewhere underneath she was still a mess.

“Tell me first, Sally. It’s important.”

“Pig. OK, off the top of my head. You start with something like: ‘Have you seen any news about the Royal Family in the last few days, and if so, what?’ Just

to get them thinking about the photographs without, of course, being seen to lead them on. That would be unprofessional! If they're such bozos that they've not heard a damn thing about the Royals, you can exclude them as dickheads and deadbeats. Then something like: 'Do you think it is important that the Royals set a good public example in their private lives?' Of course people will say yes, so you follow up with: 'Do you think the Royal Family is setting a better or worse public example in their private lives than in previous years?' I'll bet my next month's income that eight out of every ten will answer worse, much worse, or unprintable."

"The Princess's bikini could yet prove to be as powerful as the sling of David."

"If somewhat larger," she added testily.

"Continue with the tutorial."

"Then perhaps: 'Do you think the Royal Family deserves its recent pay increase or do you think, in the current economic circumstances, it should be setting an example of restraint?' Words like that."

"Perhaps even: 'Do you think the number of members of the Royal Family supported by the taxpayer should remain the same, get larger, or be reduced?'"

"You're learning, Francis. If you put in a question immediately before that to ask whether they feel they get good value for money from the work of Princess Charlotte and a couple of other disreputable or unknown Royals, they'll be warmed up for it and you'll get an even fiercer response."

His eyes were glittering.

"Only then do you come to the killer. 'Is the Royal Family more or less popular, or doing a better or worse job for the country, than five years ago?' Top of the mind the public will say they are still great fans. So you have to bring out their deeper feelings, the concerns they hide away, the sort of things they're not always aware of themselves. Put that question up front, first off, and you'll probably discover that the Royals are only marginally less popular than they were. But ask away after you've given them a chance to think about sand, sex, and Civil Lists, and your devoted and loyal citizens will have become a rebellious mob who will string up their beloved Princess Charlotte by her bikini straps. Is that enough?"

“More than enough.”

“Then if you don’t mind I’m going to disappear for a little repair work.” Her hand was on the door handle when she turned around. “You don’t like the King, do you. Man to man, I mean.”

“No.” The reply was dry, blunt, reluctant. It only fueled her curiosity.

“Why? Tell me.” She was pushing at doors he had not chosen to open freely, but she had to broaden the relationship if it were not to descend into empty habit and boredom. It had to be more than simply screwing each other, and the Opposition between times. Anyway, she was naturally curious.

“He’s sanctimonious, naive,” came the low reply. “A pathetic idealist who’s getting in the way.”

“There’s more, isn’t there?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, irritation undisguised.

“Francis, you’re halfway to raising a rebellion. You’re not planning that just because he’s sanctimonious.”

“He’s trying to interfere.”

“Every editor in Fleet Street tries to interfere yet you invite them to lunch, not to their own lynching.”

“Why must you press it? All this twaddle about his children and the future!” His face revealed anguish, the tone had sharpened and his characteristic control had disappeared. “He lectures me constantly about how passionate he is to build a better world, for his children. About how we shouldn’t build a gas pipeline or nuclear power station without thinking first, about his children. How his first duty as a future King and Monarch was to produce an heir to the Throne—his children!” The flesh around his eyes had grown gray and his lips were spittled with saliva as he grew rapidly more animated. “The man is possessed about his children. Forever talking about them whenever I meet him. Nagging. Harassing. Whining. As if children were some form of miracle that he alone could perform. Yet isn’t it the commonest, most covetous and selfish act of all, to want to re-create your own image?”

She stood her ground. “No, I don’t think it is,” she said softly. She was suddenly frightened by the eyes that were red with fire, looking directly at her yet at the same time staring through her to some torment hidden beyond. “No,

it's not. Not selfish."

"It's sheer egoism and self-love, I tell you. A pathetic attempt to grab at immortality."

"It's called love, Francis."

"Love! Was your child born out of love? Damned funny kind of love that leaves you in the hospital with broken ribs and the child in a cemetery plot!"

She slapped him with the full force of an open palm, and knew at once it was a mistake. She should have recognized the danger signs in the throbbing veins at his temples. She should have remembered that he had no children, had never had children. She should have shown pity. Understanding came with a cry of pain as his hand lashed in return across her face.

Immediately he drew back, despairing at what he had done. He collapsed into a chair, the energy and hate draining from him like an hourglass shedding its last grains of sand. "My God, Sally, forgive me. I am so very sorry."

By contrast, she retained a supreme calm. She'd had so much practice. "Me too, Francis."

He was panting, the leanness that often gave him the appearance of vigor and youth now turning him into a shriveled, aging man. He had breached his own defenses. "I have no children," he said, gasping for breath, "because I cannot. I have tried all my life to convince myself that it never mattered, but every time I see that damned man and listen to his taunts, it's as if I am stripped naked and humiliated simply by being in his presence."

"You think he does it deliberately...?"

"Of course it's deliberate! He uses his talk of love like weapons of war. Are you so blind you can't see?" His anger gave way to contrition. "Oh, Sally, believe me, I'm sorry. I have never hit a woman before."

"It happens, Francis."

Sally stared at this new image of the man she had thought she knew, then closed the door quietly behind her.

Thirty-Two

Leadership is the quality that enables a man to make a complete cock-up of things, combined with the ability to rise far above it.

A buzz of expectation grew as Urquhart walked into the House from behind the Speaker's Chair, red leather folder tucked beneath his arm, civil servants filing like ducklings into the officials' box at the back of the Chamber. They were there to provide him with instant information should the need arise, but it wouldn't. He had briefed himself very carefully for this one; he knew exactly what he wanted.

“Madam Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement...”

Urquhart looked slowly across the packed benches. McKillin sat on the other side of the Dispatch Box, double-checking the statement Urquhart's office had made available to him an hour beforehand. He would be supportive. Such matters were supposed to be noncontroversial and, in any event, as Urquhart's personal relations with the King had become the subject of press controversy, so the Opposition Leader's identification with the Monarch had grown. Your enemy, my friend. It's what Opposition was about. The Leader of the small Liberal Party, sitting with his band of eternal optimists toward the far end of the Chamber, was likely to be less enthusiastic. He had seventeen MPs in his party and an ego greater than all the others combined. As a precocious backbencher he had made a name for himself by introducing a private bill to restrict the scope of the Civil List to only five members of the Royal Family and, furthermore, to batter home the message of equality by passing Royal succession down through the eldest child of either sex, and not exclusively the eldest son. It had given him

ten minutes of parliamentary time before the bill was thrown out, but several hours of prime time on television and coverage in newspapers he measured in feet. He had a record to defend; doubtless he would seek to do so with decorum but, as Urquhart glanced further around the House, the Prime Minister noted that decorum had a short shelf life in politics.

His eyes alighted on “The Beast of Bradford.” Dressed in his habitual shapeless sports jacket, the colorful and eccentric Member for Bradford Central was already leaning forward in anticipation, lank hair falling over his eyes, wringing his hands and waiting to leap to his feet at the first opportunity. The Opposition MP was a street fighter who saw every issue as a chance to pursue the class war against capitalism, which he fought with considerable venom sustained by the scars of a factory accident as a working student that had left him with two short fingers on his left hand. An ardent republican, he was primed to self-ignite on issues involving hereditary rights. He was also utterly predictable, which is why Urquhart had ensured that one of his own members, a Knight of the Leafy Suburbs renowned for his bucolic complexion and pugnacious temper, was stationed directly opposite. The Knight had been deputed to “take care” of The Beast during the statement; what this might involve had been left to The Knight’s discretion, which was notoriously fragile, but he was anxious “to get back into the fray,” as he put it, after treatment for a mild heart complaint. He was already glowering across the floor at the Honorable Member for Bradford Central, seated barely six feet away.

“I would like to make a statement on arrangements for future financial support for His Majesty the King during the ten-year period ahead,” Urquhart continued. He paused to look directly at The Beast and smiled condescendingly. The other responded with an audible growl, which only served to broaden the Prime Minister’s smile. The Beast’s cage was already being rattled.

“The settlement is a considerable and I hope generous one, but is for a full ten-year period during which the vagaries of inflation must be accounted for. Should inflation prove to be less than predicted, the surplus will be carried forward...”

“Ow much is the Princess getting?” The Beast snapped.

Urquhart ignored him and continued with his explanation.

“Come on, then. Tell us. ’Ow much are we paying Charlotte to screw around in the Caribbean next year?”

“Order! Order!” Madam Speaker demanded shrilly.

“I was only asking...”

“Shut up, you fool!” snapped The Knight, a comment heard by everyone in the Chamber with the exception of the official record takers of *Hansard*.

“Carry on, Prime Minister.”

The atmosphere was already tangled, the temperature rising as Urquhart continued to the end of his short announcement. He had to struggle through growing noise as The Knight continued his private tussle across the floor of the Chamber. The Beast muttered away throughout the brief and supportive response of the Leader of the Opposition who, in a modest attempt to get under Urquhart’s skin, was fulsome in his praise of the King’s environmental work and social perceptiveness.

“Tell that to this bloody man!” the Knight stormed, waving an accusing finger at The Beast who had just impugned his wife’s fidelity. He got a crude gesture involving two amputated fingers in response.

The Liberal leader, when it came to his turn, was less supportive. “Will the Prime Minister recognize that, although we fully support the valuable work of the Royal Family, its financial affairs leave much to be desired? The Civil List represents but a fraction of the expense to the taxpayer of the Royal Family when you take into account the airplanes of the Royal Flight, the Royal Yacht, the Royal Train...”

“The Royal Racing Pigeons,” interrupted The Beast.

“...the costs of which are buried in the budgets of various Government departments. Wouldn’t it be better, more open and honest, to consolidate all these expenditures into one budget so that we know exactly what the true figures are?”

“It’s a sham. What’re you ’iding?”

“I resent the Right Honorable Gentleman’s insinuation that I am being neither open nor honest...” Urquhart began.

“’Ow much is it, then?”

“There is no secret conspiracy on these matters. The Royal Family gives us

excellent value for money—”

“Ow much money?”

A handful of others were joining in the interruptions from the Opposition benches. It seemed they might have found a weakness in the Prime Minister’s defenses and could not resist the temptation to exploit it.

“The figures vary greatly from year to year because of exceptional items...”

“Like what?”

“...such as refits and modernization of the Royal Trains. Also the Royal Palaces require extensive upkeep that in some years is unduly heavy. It is often very difficult to extract the exact cost out of large departmental budgets.” Urquhart appeared to be suffering from the interruptions. He was noticeably under pressure, reluctant to give details, which only excited his hecklers further. The more he prevaricated the louder became the calls for him to “come clean”; even the Liberal leader was joining in.

“The House must understand that the statement I am making today covers the Civil List only. On other items of expenditure I am bound by custom, and it would be most improper of me to make announcements about such matters without first consulting His Majesty. We must preserve the dignity of the Crown and recognize the esteem and affection in which the Royal Family is held.”

As Urquhart paused to consider his words the noise levels around him rose sharply. His brow clouded.

“It was only the other day that the Opposition benches were accusing me of treating His Majesty with contempt, yet now they insist that is precisely what I do.” This antagonized his hecklers; the language swilling around the floor became increasingly unparliamentary. “They are a pathetic lot, Madam Speaker.” Urquhart waved a menacing finger at the benches opposite. “They don’t want information, they just want a row!” He appeared to have lost his temper in the face of the constant baiting, and Madam Speaker knew that it would mark the end of any sensible dialogue. She was just about to curtail discussion and call the next business when an explosion erupted in the vicinity of The Knight, who was on his feet.

“On a Point of Order, Madam Speaker!”

“No points of order, please. We’ve already wasted enough time...”

“But that wretched man just told me to go and have another heart attack!”

Accusatory fingers pointed toward The Beast and the pandemonium grew worse.

“Really!” snapped the Speaker in exasperation.

“E’s got it wrong, as always,” The Beast was protesting innocently. “I told ’im ’e would have another ’eart attack, if he found out ’ow much the bloody Monarchy cost. It’s millions and millions...”

The rest was lost in the storm of outrage from all sides.

Urquhart picked up his folder and started to leave. He looked at the parliamentary benches in turmoil. Great pressure would undoubtedly be brought to bear on him to reveal the full cost of the Royal Family, and he might have to give it. In any event, prompted by the row, every newspaper in Fleet Street would be setting journalists to dig and make inspired guesses, and reasonably accurate figures wouldn’t be too difficult to find. A pity, he thought to himself, that last year the King’s Flight replaced both their aging airplanes, and modern jets don’t come cheap. A still greater pity that it happened to coincide with an extensive refit for the Royal Yacht *Britannia*. The figures even the dimmest journalist would arrive at would be well in excess of one hundred and fifty million pounds, and that was too large a chunk of red meat for even the most loyal editor to ignore. Yet nobody could accuse Urquhart of being unfair or inconsiderate to the King, not personally. Hadn’t he done his best to defend the King, even while under considerable pressure? By tomorrow morning’s headlines it would be the King himself experiencing the pressure. Then for Sally’s opinion poll.

Even for a Prime Minister it had been an exceptional day’s work, he told himself.

Thirty-Three

Better a man of any reputation than a forgotten one. I have no intention of being forgotten, and what does it matter if I'm not forgiven?

“Mr. Stamper would like a word, Prime Minister.”

“In his capacity as Privy Councilor, Chairman of the Party, Chief Bottle Washer, or honorary president of his football club?” Urquhart swung his feet down from the green leather sofa on which he had been propped reading Cabinet papers as he waited in his House of Commons office for a series of late-night divisions. He couldn't remember what they were voting for next. Was it to increase punishment for offenders, or reduce subventions to the United Nations? Something, anyway, which would get the tabloids going and reveal the Opposition in the worst possible light.

“Mr. Stamper didn't say,” responded the humorless private secretary, who had still put no more than his head and left shoulder around the door.

“Wheel him in!” the Prime Minister instructed.

Stamper appeared, offered no word of greeting, and made straight for the drinks cupboard where he poured himself a large whiskey.

“Looks like bad news, Tim.”

“Oh, it is. Some of the worst I've heard for ages.”

“Not another selfish swine in a marginal seat gone and died?”

“Worse, much worse, Francis. Our latest private polls put us three points ahead. What's even more worrying, for some reason people seem to like you, you're ten points ahead of McKillin. Your vanity will be uncontrollable. Your ridiculous plan for an early election looks as if it could work after all!”

“Praise the Lord.”

“There’s something even more fascinating, Francis,” Stamper continued in more serious demeanor. Unbidden he had filled a glass for Urquhart and handed it to him before continuing. “I’ve just been having a quiet chat with the Home Secretary. The cock-up theory of politics rules supreme. Seems that little shit Marples has at last gotten himself caught with his trousers down, late the other night on the towpath at Putney.”

“In January?” Urquhart asked incredulously.

“Absolutely *in flagrante*. With a fourteen-year-old. Apparently he’s into little boys.” He made himself comfortable behind Urquhart’s desk, his feet up on the Prime Ministerial blotter. He was deliberately pushing his luck, teasing. His news must be particularly weighty, mused Urquhart.

“But lucky. The police were going to charge him so he broke down and told them everything in the hope they’d go easy on him. Lots of names, addresses, gossip, suggestions of where to look if they wanted to find an organized prostitution ring.”

“Castration’s too good—”

“And it appears he came up with a very interesting name. David Mycroft.”

Urquhart took a deep swig.

“So all of a sudden our boys in blue have gone coy and are asking for a little informal guidance. If Marples gets prosecuted, he’ll implicate Mycroft and all hell will break loose. The Home Secretary’s given a nod and a wink that prosecuting the Honorable and Upright Member for Dagenham would not be in the public interest. So we’re saved a by-election.”

Urquhart swung his legs down from the sofa. “What do they have on Mycroft?”

“Not a lot. Just his name and the fact that Marples was tangling with him at some gay club on New Year’s Eve. Who knows where that could lead? But they haven’t interviewed him.”

“Maybe they should.”

“They can’t, Francis. If they go after Mycroft they’ve got to do for Marples as well, which in turn will do for us all. Anyway, if spending time at a gay club were a crime we’d have to lock up half the House of Lords.”

“Listen to me, Tim. They can have Marples kebabed on a rusty skewer for all I care. But he wouldn’t be charged for weeks, not until after the election, by which time it won’t matter a bent farthing. Yet if they can put pressure on Mycroft now, it may be just the insurance policy we need. Don’t you see? Pieces for position. Capture the low ground today, in exchange for giving up a player later, when it no longer matters. I think they call it a queen sacrifice.”

“I think I need another drink. Problems like that, so close to the heart of the Palace. If this were to come out...”

“How long’s Mycroft been with the King?”

“Known each other since they were both spotty youths. One of his longest-serving aides. And closest friends.”

“Sounds distressingly serious. It would be awful if the King knew.”

“And were covering up for Mycroft, in spite of the sensitivity of the work he does. Must know half the nation’s secrets in his job.”

“Be even worse if His Majesty didn’t know. Fooled, bamboozled, defrauded for thirty years by one of his closest friends, a man he has put into a position of trust.”

“A knave or a fool. A monarch who didn’t fulfill his responsibilities, or couldn’t. What will the press make of all this, if it gets out?”

“Terrible news, Tim. This is terrible.”

“Worst I’ve heard in ages.”

There was a long moment of silence. Then, coming from inside the Prime Minister’s room, the private secretary heard a sustained, almost uncontrollable bout of gut-wrenching laughter.

“Damn them! Damn them all, David! How could they be so cretinous?” The King hurled one newspaper after another into the air as Mycroft watched the pages flutter down to lay strewn across the floor. “I didn’t want the Civil List increase, but now I’m attacked for greed. And how can it be that only a few days after informing the Prime Minister that I wished the Royal Family to pay full taxes on our income, they report it as if it’s his idea?”

“Downing Street’s unattributable briefing...” Mycroft muttered feebly.

“Of course it is!” snapped the King as if talking with a backward pupil. “They even suggest I’m caving in to pressure in agreeing to pay tax, that I’ve been forced into it by the hostile press coverage. That man Urquhart is abominable! He can’t help but twist everything to his advantage. If he even stumbled by accident upon the truth he would pick himself up and carry on as if nothing had happened. It’s preposterous!”

A copy of *The Times* was hurled to the farthest corner of the room, settling like huge flakes of snow.

“Did any of them bother to inquire after the facts?”

Mycroft coughed awkwardly. “The *Chronicle*. Their story is fair...”

The King snatched the paper from among the pile, scanning its columns. He seemed to calm a little. “Urquhart is trying to humiliate me, David. To cut me to ribbons, piece by piece, without even a chance to explain myself.” He’d had the dream again last night. From the pages of every newspaper he could see staring at him the wide, expectant eyes of the grubby boy with the dribble of crumbs on his chin. It terrified him. “I will not let them drag me like a lamb to the slaughter, David. I must not permit that. I’ve been thinking: I must find some way of explaining my views. Get my point across without Urquhart getting in the way. I shall give an interview.”

“But Kings don’t give newspaper interviews,” Mycroft protested weakly.

“Not before they haven’t. But this is the age of the new, open Monarchy. I’m going to do it, David. With the *Chronicle*, I think. An exclusive.”

Mycroft wanted to protest that if an interview were a bad idea, an exclusive could be even worse, giving all the other newspapers something to shoot at. But he didn’t have the strength to argue. He hadn’t been able to think clearly all day, ever since he had answered a knock at the door early in the morning to discover a DC and Inspector from the Vice Squad standing on his front step.

Thirty-Four

The free press talks of its principles like the accused talks about his alibi.

January: The Fourth Week

Landless had driven himself, simply telling his staff that he would be uncontactable. His secretary hated mysteries; when he presented excuses she always assumed he was off being grubby with some young woman who had a strong back and weak bank balance. She knew what he was like. Some fifteen years earlier she, too, had been young and grubby with Landless, before things like marriage, respectability, and stretch marks had intervened. Such insights into the inner man had helped her become an efficient and outrageously overpaid personal assistant, yet hadn't stopped her being jealous. And today he had told no one, not even her; he didn't want the whole world knowing where he was even before he had arrived.

The reception desk was tiny and the waiting room dull, covered in mediocre early Victorian oils of horses and hunting scenes in imitation of Stubbs and Ben Marshall. One of them might have been an authentic John Herring; he couldn't be positive but he was beginning to develop an eye for such things, after all, he'd bought enough of the genuine article over the past few years. Almost immediately he was being summoned by a young footman in full livery, waisted tails, buckles, and stockings, and ushered into a small but immaculately appointed lift where the mahogany shone as deep as the Palace servant's shoes. He wished his mother had been here: she would have loved it. She'd been born on the day Queen Alexandra died and had always believed it somehow tied her in, hinting at a mysterious "special link," and in later life attending gatherings of

spiritualists. Just before his dear old mum had taken her own trip to “the other side,” she had stood for three hours to catch a view through the crowd of Princess Di on her wedding day. She’d only seen the back of the coach, and that for no more than a few seconds, but she’d waved her flag and cheered and cried, and come home feeling she had done her bit. For her it was all patriotic pride and commemorative biscuit tins. She would be wetting herself if she were gazing down now.

“Your first time?” the footman inquired.

Landless nodded. Princess Charlotte had telephoned him. An exclusive interview with the *Chronicle*, implying she had set it up herself. Would he be sure to send someone reliable? And allow the Palace to check the article before it was printed? Perhaps they could have lunch again soon? He was being led along a broad corridor with windows overlooking the inner courtyard. The paintings were better here, portraits of long-forgotten Royal scions by masters whose names had endured rather better.

“You address him as ‘Your Majesty’ when you first go in. Afterwards you can simply call him ‘sir,’” the footman muttered as they approached a solid but unpretentious door.

As the door swung quietly open, Landless remembered Charlotte’s other question. Was the idea a good one? He had doubts, serious doubts, about whether an exclusive interview would be good for the King, but he knew it would be bloody marvelous for his newspaper.

“Sally? Sorry to telephone so early. You haven’t been in contact for a day or two. Everything all right?”

In fact it had been nearly a week, and although Urquhart had sent along flowers and two major potential clients, he hadn’t found the right moment to call. He shrugged. They’d had a spat, she would get over it. She would have to if she wanted to retain an inside track. In any event, this was urgent.

“How’s the opinion poll coming along? Ready yet?” He tried to judge her mood down the phone. Perhaps a little cool and formal, almost as if he’d woken her up. Anyway this was business. “Something’s come up. Word is His Royal

Conscience has given an exclusive interview to the *Chronicle* and they're hoping to get it cleared for publication in a couple of days. I haven't any idea what's in it, Landless is sitting on it as though he were hatching an egg, but I can't help feeling that in the public interest there should be a bit of balance. Don't you think? Perhaps an opinion poll, published beforehand, reflecting the growing public disaffection with the Royal Family? To put the interview in context?" He looked out of the window across St. James's Park, where, beside the pelican pool, two women were struggling in the grubby morning light to pull their squabbling dogs apart. "I suspect some newspapers like *The Times* might even infer that the King's interview was a hurried and somewhat desperate attempt to respond to the opinion poll." He winced as one of the women, her smaller pet lodged firmly between the jaws of a large black mongrel, gave the other dog a firm kick in the testicles. The dogs separated, only for the two owners to begin snarling at each other. "It would be really superb if the poll were ready for release by, say...this afternoon?"

As Sally rolled over to place the phone back in its cradle, she stretched the aches of the night out of her bones. She lay staring at the ceiling for a few moments, allowing the mental instructions to seep from her brain down through her body. Her nose was twitching like a periscope above the sheets, tasting the news she had just received. She sat up in bed, alive and alert, and turned to the form beside her.

"Got to go, lover. Mischief afoot and work to be done."

Guardian, Page One, January 27

NEW STORM HITS KING

"IS HE A CHRISTIAN?"

• • •

A new storm of controversy surrounded the Royal Family last night when the Bishop of Durham, from the pulpit of his cathedral, questioned the King's religious motives. Quoting the King's much-criticized newspaper

interview earlier this week in which he revealed a deep interest in Eastern religions and did not discount the possibility of physical resurrection, the fundamentalist Bishop attacked such “fashionable dalliance with mysticism.”

“The King is the Defender of the Faith and anointed head of our Church of England. But is he a Christian?”

Buckingham Palace indicated last night that the King had simply been trying to emphasize, as King of a country with a large number of racial and religious minorities, that he felt it his duty not to take a narrow and restrictive view of his religious role. But the Bishop’s attack seems set to fuel further controversy in the wake of the recent critical opinion poll that showed dramatically falling support for some members of the Royal Family such as Princess Charlotte, and a growing demand to restrict the number of members of the Royal Family who receive their income from the Civil List.

Supporters of the King rallied to his defense last night. “We shouldn’t be enticed into a constitutional supermarket, shopping around for the cheapest form of government,” Viscount Quillington said.

In contrast, critics were quick to point out that the King, in spite of his own personal popularity, was failing to set a clear lead in many areas. “The Crown should stand for the highest standards of public morality,” one senior Government backbencher said, “but his leadership of his own family leaves much to be desired. They are letting down both him and us. They are overpaid, overtanned, underworked, and overly numerous.”

“The Royal oak is being shaken,” said another critic. “It would do no harm if one or two members of the Family were to fall out of the branches...”

Thirty-Five

Beware the king whose ambition is to be a Man of the People. The Unelected in pursuit of the Unwashed.

News began trickling through shortly before four in the afternoon, and by the time it was confirmed the short winter's day had finished and all London was dark. It was a wretched day; a warm front had passed across the capital, bringing in its wake a deluge of relentless rain that would continue well into the night. It was a day for staying home.

Staying home had been the mistake, fatally so, of three women and their children who called 14 Queensgate Crescent, a tenement block in the middle of Notting Hill, home. It was the heart of old slumland, which in the sixties had housed streetwalkers and tides of immigrants under the stern eye of racketeers. "Rachmanism" they had called it then, after the most notorious of the landlord racketeers. "Bed and breakfast" it was called in the modern parlance, where the local council housed one-parent and problem families while they searched around listlessly for somewhere or someone else to take over the responsibility. Much of the temporary accommodation provided in Number 14 had changed little in the thirty-odd years since it had been a brothel. Single rooms, shared bathrooms, inadequate heating, noise, rotting woodwork, and unremitting depression. When it rained, they would watch the windowsills trickle and the damp brown stains creep even lower as the wallpaper peeled from the walls. But it was better than sitting in the middle of the downpour outside, or so they had thought.

Institutional housing breeds indifference, and no one had bothered to report

the smell of gas that had been lingering for days. That was up to the caretaker, and so what if he only turned up when he felt like it. It was somebody else's problem. Or so they had thought.

As dusk had gathered the automatic timer had turned another gear and switched on the light in the communal hallways. They were only sixty-watt bulbs, one per landing, scarcely adequate, but the small spark caused by the electrical contact had been sufficient to ignite the gas and blow the five-story building right out of the ground, taking much of the neighboring building with it. Fortunately there had been no one in next door, it was derelict, but remnants of five families were inside Number 14 and of the twenty-one women, children, and babies only eight would be pulled out of the rubble alive. By the time His Majesty reached the scene it consisted of little more than a huge pile of bricks, fractured doorframes, and twisted fragments of furniture over which firemen crawled beneath harsh arc lights. There were still doubts about the final toll; several persons were unaccounted for and rumored to be inside. A double bed teetered precariously on a ledge of splintered wood many feet above the heads of the rescuers, its sheets flapping in the squally wind. It should have been pulled down before it had a chance to fall on those below, but the mobile crane was having trouble getting through the rain and rush hour traffic and they couldn't afford to wait. Someone thought they had heard a noise from the rubble directly beneath and although the infrared image enhancer showed nothing, many willing hands were tearing at the ruins, lashed by the rain and the fear they would be too late.

As soon as the King had heard the news he had asked to visit the scene. "Not to interfere, to gawk. But a word to the bereaved at a time such as this can speak louder than a thousand epitaphs later." The request had gone through to the Met Police Control Room at Scotland Yard just as they were briefing the Home Secretary, who had immediately passed the news on to Downing Street. The King arrived on site only to discover he had unwittingly been involved in a race he had already lost. Urquhart was already there, holding hands, comforting the injured, consoling the distressed, giving interviews, searching for the television cameras, being seen. It made the Monarch look like a man sent onto the field from the substitutes' bench, no better than an able reserve, following in others'

footsteps, but what did it matter? This wasn't a contest, or, at least, shouldn't be. Or so the King struggled to convince himself.

For some time the Monarch and his Prime Minister succeeded in avoiding each other as one took briefing and quietly sought out survivors while the other concentrated on finding a dry spot from which to give interviews. But both knew a meeting would have to come. Avoiding each other would be news in itself and would serve only to turn tragedy into farce. The King stood like a sentinel gazing at the devastation from atop a mound of rubble surrounded by a rapidly enlarging lake of slime and mud, through which Urquhart had to trudge to meet him.

“Your Majesty.”

“Mr. Urquhart.”

Their greeting had the warmth of a collision of icebergs. Neither looked directly at the other, but chose to examine the scene around them.

“Not a word, sir. There has already been too much damage done, too much controversy stirred. See, but do not speak. I must insist.”

“No perfunctory expression of grief, Mr. Urquhart? Not even to one of your own scripts?”

“Not a wink or a nod, no sideways expressions or exaggerated lowering of the eyes. Not even to an agreed formula, since you seem to delight in untangling every knot we weave.”

The King waved the charge away with a dismissive gesture.

The Prime Minister spoke slowly, with great deliberation, returning to his theme. “I must insist.”

“Silence, you think?”

“Absolutely. For some considerable period.”

The King turned from the carnage and for the first time looked directly at the Prime Minister, his face frozen in condescension, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his raincoat. “I think not.”

Urquhart struggled to avoid rising to the challenge and losing his self-control. He wasn't willing to let the King escape with even a trace of satisfaction.

“As you have seen, your views have been widely misunderstood.”

“Or manipulated.”

Urquhart ignored the innuendo.

“Silence, you say,” the King continued, turning his face into the wind and spray, his nose jutting forward like the prow of some great sailing ship. “I wonder what you would do, Mr. Urquhart, if some damn fool bishop made you the target of such ludicrous misrepresentation. Shut up? Or stand up? Wouldn’t you think it even more important to speak out, to give those willing to listen the opportunity to hear, to understand?”

“But I am not the King.”

“No. A fact for which both you and I should be grateful.”

Urquhart rode the insult. Beneath the burning arc lights a tiny hand was spotted beneath the rubble. Brief seconds of confusion and hope, much scrabbling, only for the flicker of anticipation to die amid the mud. It was nothing but a doll.

“I must make sure, sir, that I am also heard and understood. By you.” To one side there was a crash of falling masonry but neither stirred. “Any further public outpourings by you would be regarded as deeply provocative by your Government. A declaration of constitutional war. And no Monarch has taken on a Prime Minister and won in nearly two hundred years.”

“An interesting point. I had forgotten you were a scholar.”

“Politics is about the attainment and use of power. It is a rough, indeed ruthless arena. No place for a King.”

The rain ran in rivulets down their faces, dripping from their noses, creeping behind their collars. They were both soaking and chilled. Neither was young; they should have sought shelter but neither would be the first to move. At a distance onlookers could hear nothing beyond the rattle of jackhammers and the urgent shouts of command, they could see only two men staring face to face, rulers and rivals, silhouetted against the harsh glow of the rescue lights in a monochrome scene washed by rain. They could not distinguish the insolence on the face of Urquhart nor the ageless expression of regal defiance that suffused the cheeks of the other. Perhaps an astute observer might have seen the King brace his shoulders, but surely only against the elements and the harsh fortune that had brought him to this place?

“Did I miss a mention of morality in there, Prime Minister?”

“Morality, sir, is the monologue of the unexcited and the unexcitable, the revenge of the unsuccessful, the punishment of those who tried and failed, or who never had the courage to try at all.”

It was Urquhart’s turn to attempt to provoke the other. A silence hung between them for many moments.

“Prime Minister, may I congratulate you? You have succeeded in making me understand you with absolute clarity.”

“I didn’t wish to leave you in any doubt.”

“You haven’t.”

“We are agreed, then? No more words?”

When finally the King spoke, his voice had grown soft so that Urquhart had to strain to hear it. “You may rest assured that I shall guard my words as carefully as you aim yours. Those you have used today I shall never forget.”

The moment was broken as a shout of warning rose above the scene and men scurried from the rock pile as the wooden ledge shivered, jarred, and finally collapsed, propelling the bed into a slow, graceful somersault of death before it was reduced to nothing more than another pile of matchwood on the ruins below. A solitary pillow sagged drunken in the wind, skewered upon the pointed shard of what that morning had been a baby’s cot, its plastic rattle still singing in the wind. Without another word Urquhart began the trudge back through the slime.

Mycroft joined the King in the back of his car for the return drive to the Palace. For much of the trip the Monarch was silent, lost in thought and his emotions, eyes closed—affected by what he had witnessed, thought Mycroft. When he spoke, his words were soft, almost whispered, as though they were in a church or visiting a condemned cell.

“No more words, David. I am commanded to silence, or must accept the consequences.” His eyes were still closed.

“No more interviews?”

“Not unless I want open warfare.”

The thought hung between them for several moments that dragged into silent minutes. His eyes were still closed. Mycroft thought it might be his opportunity

to speak.

“Perhaps it’s not the right time...it’s never really the right time. But it would be helpful for me to take a few days away. If you’re not doing much in public. For a while. There are a few personal things I need to sort out.”

The King’s head was still back, eyes shut, words coming in a monotone and squeezed of emotion. “I must apologize, David. I’ve rather taken you for granted, I’m afraid. Lost in my own problems.” He sighed. “With all this confusion I should still have found time to inquire. Christmas without Fiona must have been hell. Of course. Of course you must have a little time off. But there’s one small thing I want your help with beforehand, if you can bear it. I want to arrange a small trip.”

“To where?”

“Three days, David. Just three days, and not far. I was thinking of Brixton, Handsworth, perhaps Moss Side and the Gorbals. Work my way up the country. Dine at a soup kitchen in Cardboard City one day, have breakfast at the Salvation Army the next. Take tea with a family living off benefit and share their one-bar fire. Meet the youngsters sleeping rough. You get the idea.”

“You can’t!”

The head remained back, sightless, the tone still cold. “I can. And I want cameras to accompany me everywhere. Maybe I shall live off a pensioner’s diet for three days and challenge the press traveling with me to do the same.”

“That’s bigger headlines than any speech!”

“I shall say not a word.” He started laughing, as if cold humor were the only way to suppress the feelings that battered him within, so forcefully they had left him a little in fear of himself.

“You don’t have to. Those pictures will be top of the news every night.”

“If only every Royal engagement could get such coverage.” The tone was almost whimsical.

“Don’t you know what you’re doing? It’s a declaration of war on the Government. Urquhart will retaliate...”

Mention of the Prime Minister’s name had a galvanizing effect on the King. His head came up, red eyes open and burning bright, the jaw tightened as if a burst of electricity had passed through him. There was fire in his belly. “We

retaliate first! Urquhart cannot stop me. He may object to my speeches, he may bully and threaten me, but this is my kingdom, and I have every right to go wherever and whenever I bloody well please!”

“When did you have in mind for starting this civil war?”

The grim humor settled on him once more. “Oh, I was thinking...next week.”

“Now I know you’re not serious. It would take months to organize.”

“Wherever and whenever I please, David. It needs no organization. I’m not going to meet anyone in particular. No advance notice need be given. Anyway, if I give them time to prepare, all I will see is some anesthetized version of Britain that has been swept and whitewashed just for my visit. No, David. No preparation, no warning. I’m bored with playing the King; time to play the man! Let’s see if I can take for three days what so many others have to take for a lifetime. Let’s see if I can lose the silk-covered shackles and look my subjects in the eye.”

“Security! What of security?” Mycroft urged desperately.

“The best form of security is surprise, when no one expects me. If I have to get in my car and drive myself, by God I’m doing it.”

“You must be absolutely clear. Such a tour would be war, right out in front of the cameras, with no hiding place and no diplomatic compromise later on to smooth everything over. It would be a direct public challenge to the Prime Minister.”

“No, David, that’s not the way I see it. Urquhart is a public menace, to be sure, but this is more about me. I need to find myself, respond to those things I feel deep inside, see whether I am up to the task not just of being a King, but of being a man. I can’t go on running away from what I am, David, what I believe. This is not just a challenge to Urquhart. It’s more of a challenge to myself. Can you understand?”

As the words hit him, Mycroft’s shoulders sagged, the weight of several worlds seeming to bear down upon his shoulders. He felt exhausted from his own lifetime of running, he had no resources left. The man sitting beside him was not just a King; he was a man who insisted on being himself. Mycroft knew exactly how he felt, and marveled at his courage. He nodded. “Of course I do,” he responded softly.

Thirty-Six

A Constitutional Monarch is like a fine claret—to be left in the dark and turned occasionally for a gentle dusting. Otherwise, he should wait until he is called for.

“Mortima. The toast is burnt again!”

Urquhart contemplated the ruins of his breakfast, which had crumbled at the first touch of his knife and showered into his lap. His wife was still in her dressing gown; she had been out late again—“working hard, telling the world how wonderful you are, darling”—and was only half awake.

“I cannot think in that ridiculous little kitchen, Francis, let alone cook your toast. Sort out the refurbishment and then you can have a proper breakfast.”

That again. He’d forgotten about it, pushed it to one side. There were other things on his mind.

“Francis, what’s wrong?” She had known him too long not to catch the signs.

He gestured to the newspapers, announcing plans for the King’s visit. “He’s called my bluff, Mortima.”

“Will it be bad?”

“Could it be worse? Just when everything was beginning to come right. The opinion polls turning in our favor, an election about to be called. It will change everything.” He dusted the crumbs off his lap. “I can’t go to the country with everyone talking about nothing but poverty and freezing pensioners. We’d be out of Downing Street before you had time to choose new wallpaper let alone get your paste bucket out.”

“Out of Downing Street?” She sounded alarmed. “It may sound churlish, but

haven't we only just gotten here?"

He looked at her pointedly. "You'd miss it? You surprise me, Mortima. You seem to spend so much time away." But she usually came back before daybreak, and as she sat there he understood why. She wasn't at her best first thing in the morning.

"Can't you fight him?"

"With time, yes. And beat him. But I don't have time, Mortima, only two weeks. The pathetic thing is that the King doesn't even realize what he's done."

"You mustn't give in, Francis. You owe it to me as well as yourself." She was struggling with her own toast as if to emphasize what weak, useless creatures men were. She was no more successful than he, and it irritated her. "I've shared in all the sacrifices and the hard work, remember. And I have a life, too. I enjoy being the Prime Minister's wife. And one day I'm going to be a former Prime Minister's widow. I'll need some support, a little social respectability for when I'm on my own." It sounded selfish, uncaring. And as she did when she couldn't help herself, she used her most potent weapon, his guilt. "If we had children to support me, it would be different."

He stared at the ruins of his breakfast. That's what it had come to. Dickering over his coffin.

"Fight him, Francis."

"I intend to, but don't underestimate him. I chop off a leg, yet he keeps bouncing back up again."

"Then fight him harder."

"You mean like George Washington?"

"I mean like bloody Cromwell. It's us or him, Francis."

"I've struggled so hard to avoid that, Mortima, truly I have. It would not simply be destroying one man but several hundred years of history. There are limits."

"Think about it, Francis. Is it possible?"

"It would certainly be a distraction from bellyaching about the underprivileged."

"Governments don't solve people's concerns; they simply try to rearrange them in their favor. Can't you rearrange them in your favor?"

“Inside two weeks?” He examined the determined look in her eyes. She was in earnest. Deadly earnest. “That’s what I’ve spent all night thinking about.” He nodded gently. “It might just be. With a little luck. And witchcraft. Make him the issue, the people versus the King. But this would not simply be an election, it would be a revolution. If we won, the Royal Family would never recover.”

“Spare me the pity. I’m a Colquhoun.”

“But am I a Cromwell?”

“You’ll do.”

He suddenly remembered they had dug up Cromwell and stuck his rotting skull on a gibbet. He looked at the remnants of charred toast, and was very much afraid she might be right.

PART THREE

Thirty-Seven

A public life is like a laundry basket—it quickly overflows with dirty linen.

February: The First Week

The ringing of the telephone startled him, intruding into the quiet of the apartment. It was late, well after ten, and Kenny had already retired to leave Mycroft working on some last-minute arrangements for the King's tour. Kenny was on standby; Mycroft wondered whether the telephone was summoning him to fill a last-minute vacancy on some flight crew, but surely not at this time of night?

Kenny appeared at the bedroom door, rubbing wearily at his eyes. "It's for you."

"For me? But who...?"

"Dunno." Kenny was still half asleep.

With considerable trepidation Mycroft lifted the extension. "Hello."

"David Mycroft?" the voice inquired.

"Who's speaking?"

"David, this is Ken Rochester from the *Mirror*. I'm sorry to bother you so late. It's not too inconvenient, is it, David?"

Mycroft had never heard of the man before. His nasal tones were unpleasant, his informality insolent and unwelcome, his concern patently insincere. Mycroft made no reply.

"It's something of an emergency; my editor's asked if I can come on the tour tomorrow, along with our Royal correspondent. I'm a special features writer myself. You moved, have you, David? Not your old number, this."

“How did you get this number?” Mycroft asked, forcing out every word through suddenly leaden lips.

“It is David Mycroft, isn’t it? From the Palace? I’d feel a total fool talking about this to anyone else. David?”

“How did you get this number?” he asked again, the constriction in his throat drying his words. He had supplied it to the Palace switchboard for use only in an emergency.

“Oh, we usually get whatever we want, David. So I’ll turn up tomorrow to join the rest of the reptiles, if you’ll make the necessary arrangements. My editor would be furious if I couldn’t find some way of persuading you. Was that your son I spoke to on the phone? Sorry, silly question. Your son’s at university, isn’t he, David?”

Mycroft’s throat was now desiccated, unable to pass any words.

“Or a colleague, perhaps? One of your highfliers? Sounded as if I’d woken him from bed. Sorry to have disturbed you both so very late at night, but you know how editors are. My apologies to your wife...”

The journalist prattled on with his confection of innuendo and inquiry. Slowly Mycroft withdrew the telephone from his ear and dropped it back into its cradle. So they knew where he was. And they would know who he was with, and why. After the visit of the Vice Squad he had known it would happen sooner or later. He’d prayed it would be much later. And he knew the press. They wouldn’t be satisfied with just himself. They’d go for Kenny, too, his job, his family, his private life, his friends, everybody and anybody he’d ever known, even through his dustbins in search of all the mistakes he had ever made. And who hadn’t made mistakes? They would be remorseless, unstinting, uncompromising, unspeakable.

Mycroft wasn’t sure he could take that sort of pressure; he was even less sure he had the right to ask Kenny to take it. He wandered over to the window and glanced up and down the darkened street, searching the shadows for any hint of prying eyes. There was nothing, nothing that he could see at least, but it wouldn’t be long, maybe as soon as tomorrow.

Kenny had fallen asleep again, innocent and unaware, his body twisted in the sheets as only young people can manage. All they had wanted was to be left

alone, yet it was only a matter of time before others came to tear them apart.

Urquhart had arrived back late from the diplomatic reception to find Sally waiting for him, chatting over a plastic cup of coffee with a couple of Protection Squad officers in what passed as their office: a cramped closet-sized room just off the entrance hall. She was perched on the corner of their desk, supported by her long and elegant legs, which the seated detectives were admiring with little sign of reticence.

“My apologies for disturbing you at your work, gentlemen,” he muttered tetchily. He realized he was jealous, but felt better as the detectives sprang to their feet in evident confusion, one of them spilling the coffee in his haste.

“Good evening, Prime Minister.” Her smile was broad, warm, showing no aftereffects of their previous meeting’s misunderstanding.

“Ah, Miss Quine. I was forgetting. More opinion polls?” He attempted an air of distraction.

“Who do you think you’re kidding?” Sally muttered from the corner of her mouth as they made their way from the room.

He arched an eyebrow.

“If they thought you’d really forgotten about a late-night meeting with a woman who had a figure like mine, they’d send for the men in white coats.”

“They are not paid to think but to do as I tell them,” he responded waspishly. He sounded as if he meant every word, and Sally felt alarmed. She decided to change the subject.

“Talking of opinion polls, you’re six points ahead. But before you start congratulating yourself, I have to tell you that the King’s tour will blow that lead right out of the water. It’s going to be one heck of a circus—lots of hand-wringing and talk of compassion. Frankly, not a game where your side fields a strong team.”

“I’m afraid His Majesty is going to have distractions of his own before the week is out.”

“Meaning?”

“His press officer and close friend, Mycroft, is a homosexual. Shacked up

with an air steward.”

“So what? It’s no crime.”

“But sadly the story is just dribbling out to the press, and in their usual disreputable fashion they will be bound to make him wish he were a simple criminal. There’s not only the deceit of his family—apparently his poor wife has been forced to leave the marital home after more than twenty years of marriage in disgust at what he’s been up to. There’s also the security angle. A man who has access to all sorts of sensitive information, state secrets, at the heart of our Royal Family, has lied his way right through the regular vetting procedures. Laid himself wide open to blackmail and pressure.” Urquhart was leaning on the wall button that would summon the private lift to the top-floor apartment. “And then, most serious of all, is deceit of the King. A lifelong friend, whom he has betrayed. Unless, of course, you wish to be uncharitable and conclude that the King knew all along and has been covering up to help an old friend. Messy.”

“You’re not implying that the King, too—”

“I imply nothing. That’s the job of the press,” he responded, “who, I confidently predict, by the end of the week will be wading in it.”

The lift doors were open, beckoning. “Then why wait, Francis? Why not strike now, before the King sets off and does all that damage?”

“Because Mycroft is no more than a dunghill. The King needs to be pushed not from a dunghill but from a mountain top, and by the end of his tour he will have climbed about as high as he’s going to get. I can wait.”

They stepped into the lift, a small, insalubrious affair that had been squeezed into a recess of the old house during refurbishment earlier in the century. The narrowness of its bare metal walls forced them together and, as the doors closed, she could see the way his eyes lit up, sense the confidence, arrogance even, like a lion in his lair. She could be either his prey, or his lioness; she had to keep pace with him or find herself devoured.

“Some things you shouldn’t wait for, Francis.” Match him step for step, hold on to him, even as he slithered toward his own mountain top. She leaned across him to the control panel, and as her groping fingers found the key the lift stopped quietly between floors. Already her blouse was unbuttoned and he was kneading the firm flesh of her breasts. She winced. He was getting rougher, more bruising,

his thrust for domination more insistent. He still had on his overcoat. She had to allow it, to encourage and indulge him. He was changing, no longer bothering with self-restraint, perhaps no longer able. But as she wedged herself uncomfortably in the corner of the lift, bracing her legs against the walls, feeling cold metal on her buttocks, she knew she had to go with him as far as she could and as far as he wanted to go; it was the type of opportunity that would not present itself again. It was once in a lifetime and she had to grab it, whether or not he any longer said please.

It was four a.m. and pitch dark when Mycroft crept slowly from the bedroom and began to dress quietly outside. Kenny still slept, his body innocently engaged in a tumbling match with the bed linen, an arm wrapped around a toy bear. Mycroft felt more father than lover, driven by a deep and innate sense of protectiveness toward the younger man. He had to believe that what he was doing was right.

When he had finished dressing he sat down at the table and switched on a small lamp. He needed light to write the note. He made several hopeless attempts, all of which he tore into small pieces and placed atop a mounting pile beside him. How could he explain that he was fractured between his feelings of love and duty toward two men, the King and Kenny, both of whom were now threatened through him? That he was running away because that is what he had done all his life and he knew no other answer? That he would continue running as soon as the King's tour was over—for surely he had three days left before disaster struck?

The pile of torn paper mounted, and in the end he was left with nothing more than: "I love you, believe me. I'm sorry." It sounded so pathetic, so insufficient.

He placed the scraps of paper back inside his briefcase, snapping the locks as quietly as he was able, and put on his overcoat. He glanced out of the window to check the street, which he found silent and cold, as he felt inside. As carefully as he could he crept back to place the note on the table where Kenny would find it. As he placed it against the vase of flowers, he saw Kenny sitting up in bed, staring at the case, the overcoat, the note, understanding flooding into his sleep-

filled eyes.

“Why, David? Why?” he whispered. He raised no shout, shed no tears; he had seen too many departures in his life and with his job, but accusation filled every syllable.

Mycroft had no answer. He had nothing but a sense of imminent despair from which he wanted to save all those he loved. He fled, away from the sight of Kenny clutching a favorite bear to his chest as he sat forlornly amid his throne of sheets; he ran out of the apartment and back into the real world, into the dark, past the empty milk bottles, his footsteps on the pavement stones echoing down the empty street. And as he ran, for the first time in his adult life Mycroft discovered he was crying.

Thirty-Eight

*When they circumcised His Majesty I fear they threw away the wrong part.
Perhaps it is time to cut him down to size again.*

The night air was damp, full of winter that dripped down the mold-covered walls and into the overflowing gullies of the concrete underpass as the old derelict stared into the face of his King. The dirt of weeks beneath his fingernails he no longer noticed and the stench of stale urine he no longer smelled, but the King had been aware from several yards away and even more so as he knelt beside the sum of all the old man's possessions—a hand grip tied with sisal, a torn and stain-covered sleeping bag, and a large cardboard box stuffed with newspapers, which would probably be gone by the time he returned the following night.

“How on earth did he get like this?” the King inquired of a charity worker at his elbow.

“Ask him,” suggested the charity worker, who over the years had lost patience with the high and mighty who came bearing their hearts on their sleeves, to express their deeply felt concerns yet who always, without exception, did so in front of accompanying cameramen, who treated the down-and-outs as impersonal objects rather than as people, who peered and passed on.

The King flushed. At least he had the decency to recognize his own crassness. He knelt on one knee, ignoring the damp and the debris that seemed to be everywhere, to listen and to attempt understanding. And in the distance, at the end of the underpass where they had been shepherded by Mycroft, the cameras turned and recorded the image of a sad, tearful man, bent low amid the filth, listening to the tale of a tramp.

It was said later by those accompanying members of the media that never had a royal press aide worked more tirelessly and imaginatively to give them the stories and pictures they needed. Without interfering with the King or intruding too savagely on the pathetic scenes of personal misery and deprivation, they were faced with abundance. Mycroft listened, understood, cajoled, wheeled and dealed, encouraged, advised, and facilitated. At one point he intervened to delay the King a moment while a camera crew found their ideal position and changed their tape, at another he whispered in the Royal ear and got the King to repeat a scene, steam rising from the drains and beautifully backlit for effect by a street light, with a mother cradling a young baby. He argued with police and remonstrated with local officials who tried to insinuate themselves into the picture. This was not to be a caravan of officialdom who would pass by on the other side as soon as the obligatory photographs were taken; this was a man, out discovering his Kingdom, alone with a few derelicts and his conscience. Or so Mycroft explained, and was believed. If during those three days the King slept fitfully, then Mycroft slept not at all. But whereas the King's cheeks became more sallow and his eyes more sunken and full of remorse as the tour passed from day to night and back to freezing day, Mycroft's blazed with the fire of a conqueror who saw justification in every scene of deprivation and triumph in every click of the shutter.

As the King stooped beside the derelict's cardboard hovel to listen, he knew his suit was being ruined by the damp slime that covered everything, but he did not move. He was only kneeling in it; the old man lived in it. He forced himself to stay, to ignore the odors and the chill wind, to nod and smile encouragement as the old man, through the bubbling of his lungs, told his tale, of university degrees, of a faithless marriage that shattered his career and confidence, of dropping out, only to find no way back. Not without the basic respectability of an address. It was no one's fault; there was no blame, no complaints, except for the cold. He had once lived in the sewers, it was drier and warmer down there and no hassle from policemen, but the Water Board had found out and put a lock on the entrance. It took a moment to take in. They had locked this man out of the sewers...

The derelict stretched out his arm, revealing a bandage through which some

bodily fluid had escaped and solidified. The bandage was filthy, and the King felt his flesh crawl. The old man drew closer, the misshapen fingers trembling and blackened with filth, thick and broken fingernails like talons, a hand not fit even for the sewers. The King held it very tightly and very long.

When at last he rose to move on, there was foul smear on the leg of his suit and his eyes were damp. From the bite of the wind, probably, because his jaw was set firm and angry, but from tears of compassion the press would say. “King of Conscience” the headlines would shout. The King walked slowly and stained out of the dripping underpass and onto the front page of every newspaper in the country.

Gordon McKillin’s advisers had argued the matter through for a full day. The original idea had been to call a press conference, the full works, and deliver as strong a message as possible to ensure that no journalist left with any question unanswered. But the Opposition Leader had his doubts. If the purpose of the exercise was to identify himself as closely as possible with the King’s tour, shouldn’t he match it in style? Wouldn’t a formalized press conference seem too heavy, too intrusive, as if he were trying to hijack the King for party political purposes? His doubt grew into a flood of uncertainty and the plans were changed. The word was circulated. McKillin would be found on his doorstep immediately after breakfast time, bidding his wife farewell in a touching family scene that complemented the informal fashion of the King’s tour, and if any cameras or pressmen happened to be passing...

The scrum outside the front door in Chapel Street was appalling and it took several minutes before McKillin’s communications adviser nodded that the multitude of cameras was in position and organized. It had to be right; after all, Breakfast TV was carrying it live.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” he began as his wife hovered shyly in the background. “I’m delighted to see you all, for what I assume is an early look at our forthcoming announcements on transport policy.”

“Not unless it includes the abolition of the Royal Trains.”

“Hardly.”

“Mr. McKillin, do you think the King is right to take such a high-profile tour?” The questioner was young, blond, aggressive, thrusting a microphone at him as though it were a weapon. Which, of course, it was.

“The King is high profile, in that he has no choice. Of course he is right to see for himself how the underprivileged live. I believe what he is doing is admirable and I applaud it.”

“But Downing Street is said to be very upset; they say that such matters should be left to the politicians,” another voice chimed in.

“When did Mr. Urquhart last visit such places himself, for goodness sake? Just because he doesn’t have the *nerve*”—in his Highland tongue the word sounded like a military drumroll calling troops to the advance—“to face the victims of his policies, that is no reason why others should also run away.”

“You wouldn’t criticize the King’s tour in any respect?”

McKillin paused. Keep the vultures waiting, guessing, anticipating. His chin came up to make him look more statesmanlike, less fleshy around the jowls, as he had rehearsed a thousand times. “I identify myself entirely with what the King has done. I’ve always been a firm supporter of the Royal Family, and I believe we should be thanking fortune we have a King who is as concerned and involved as he is.”

“So you’re one hundred percent behind him?”

The voice was slow, emphatic, very dour. “One hundred percent.”

“Will you be raising the matter in the House?”

“Och, no. I cannot. The rules of the House of Commons are quite clear in excluding any controversial discussion of the Monarch, but, even if the rules permitted, I would not. I believe very firmly that our Royal Family should not be used by politicians for narrow partisan purposes. So I’m not planning to raise the matter or hold any press conferences. I will go no further than simply expressing my view that the King has every right to do what he is doing, and I join in his concern for the underprivileged, who form such a large part of modern Britain...”

The communications man was waving his hands about his head, drawing one arm across his throat. Time to wrap up. Enough said to grab a headline, not enough to be accused of exploiting the situation. Always keep the vultures

underfed, wanting more.

McKillin was making his final self-deprecating plea to the cameras when from the street came the noisy rapping of a car horn. He looked up to see a green Range Rover shuffling past. Wretched man! It was a Liberal MP, a neighbor from farther down Chapel Street who took delight whenever he could in disrupting the Opposition Leader's doorstep interviews. The more McKillin protested about fair play, the louder and more sustained became his neighbor's efforts. He knew it would mark the end of interest in the interview from the Breakfast TV producer; he had perhaps only a second or two of live television left. McKillin's eyes lit up with pleasure, he offered a broad smile and cast an extravagant wave in the direction of the retreating Range Rover. Eight million viewers saw a politician at his best, for all the world as if he were responding graciously and enthusiastically to the unexpected greeting of one of his most ardent supporters. Serve the bugger right. McKillin wasn't going to allow anything to spoil what was turning out to be an excellent day.

As the producer brought the program back to the studio, Mortima Urquhart dragged her attention away from the flickering screen to look at her husband. He was playing with pieces of blackened toast, and he was smiling.

Thirty-Nine

I don't know why he says these things. How can I? I'm not a psychiatrist.

The coach taking the party of journalists from the Gorbals to the airport on the outskirts of Glasgow swayed as it turned the sharp corner into the car park. Mycroft, standing in the aisle, clung tightly as he surveyed the results of his handiwork. Throughout most of the coach sat journalists who were exhausted but content, their work having dominated the front pages for three full days, their expenses justified for at least another month. Plaudits were offered in abundance to Mycroft for his Herculean efforts on their behalf. Goodwill expressed itself in face after face, genuine and wholehearted, until his eyes reached the back rows of the coach. There, like truculent schoolboys, sat Ken Rochester and his photographer, alongside another pair from a rival newspaper who had also joined the tour at the last minute. They weren't accredited Royal correspondents but sailed under a flag of journalistic convenience that described them as feature writers. The attention they had been paying him, and the cameras that had been turned in his direction when they should have been pointed at the King, left Mycroft in no doubt as to whom they intended to feature in their next reports. The word was clearly spreading, the vultures were circling overhead, and the presence of competitors would make them all the more anxious to pounce. He had less time than he had realized.

His thoughts returned to the words that had inspired him and others over the last few days, words he had taken directly from the King. Words about the need to find himself, to respond to those things he felt deep inside, to see whether he was up to the task not just of doing his job, but of being a man. The need to stop

running. He thought of Kenny. They wouldn't leave him alone, he was sure of that; the Rochesters of this world weren't the type. Even if Mycroft never saw Kenny again, they would treat Kenny as fuel to feed the pyre, destroy Kenny in order to get at him, destroying him in order to get at the King. He felt no anger, there was no point. That was the way the system worked. Defend the free press and damn the weak. He felt numb, almost clinical, distanced even from his own plight, as if he had stepped outside himself and could regard this other man with the objective detachment of a professional. After all, that's what he was.

At the rear of the coach Rochester was talking conspiratorially in the ear of his photographer, who proceeded to squeeze off yet another series of shots as Mycroft stood above the heads of the journalists, like an actor before his audience playing out some great drama of the doomed. By the weekend, Mycroft reasoned. That was all the time he had left. Such a pity it was excrement like Rochester who would get the credit for the story rather than the court correspondents he had worked with and grown to respect over all these years. As the camera shutter clicked away, he began to find his calmness being steadily eaten away by his acid dislike of Rochester with his curled lip and ingratiating whine. He could feel himself beginning to tremble and he held on more tightly. Don't lose control, he shouted at himself, or the Rochesters will win, tear you to pieces. For God's sake be professional, go out on your own terms!

They were well inside the car park now, heading for the bustle of the departures building. Through his lens, Rochester's photographer saw Mycroft tap the driver on the shoulder and say something that caused the coach to turn aside and park in a quiet lay-by some considerable distance from the terminal. As the coach stopped, Mycroft squeezed out a tight smile for the throng around him. He was right in their midst.

"Before you finish this tour, there's one part of the story you haven't yet got. It might surprise you. It might even surprise the King..."

Forty

A life of hunting and humping isn't much of a claim to be a King, even less to be a Man of the People.

Urquhart sat on the Government Front Bench, shielded only in part by the Dispatch Box, surveying the army of waving hands and wagging tongues before him. George Washington? He felt more like General Custer. The restraint shown by McKillin on his doorstep has disappeared; the Opposition's hounds scented blood. It needed nerve, this job, to withstand the slings and arrows and all the vile taunts of which a parliamentary enemy could think. He had to believe in himself, utterly, to force out any room for doubt that his enemies might exploit. Perfect, absolute, uncompromising certainty in his cause. They were a rabble, not only lacking in principle but also in imagination; he wouldn't be surprised if in their newfound royalist fervor they descended to singing the national anthem, right here and now, in the Chamber of the House of Commons, the one place in all the Kingdom to which the Monarch was denied entry. His eyes lit on The Beast and he smiled grimly. The Beast was, after all, a man true to himself. While others around him roared and waved and stirred themselves to heights of manufactured passion, The Beast sat there looking simply embarrassed. The cause was, to him, more important than victory. He wouldn't cast it aside simply to grasp the opportunity of humiliating his opponent. Bloody idiot.

They were such petty, unworthy specimens. They called themselves politicians, leaders, but none of them understood power. He would show them. And his mother. Show her that he was better than Alastair, had always been better, would always be better than them all. No doubts.

As the first backbencher was called, Urquhart knew what he would say, regardless of the question. But they always asked such predictable questions. It would be the King. And Madam Speaker would object, but he would answer it anyway. Emphasize the principle of keeping the Monarch out of politics. Deprecate their ill-concealed attempt to drag him into partisan warfare. Insinuate that any damned fool could identify problems, the responsible looked for solutions. Encourage them to make as much noise as possible, even if it meant an afternoon of prime ministerial humiliation, to tie themselves as tightly as they could to the King so that they could never unravel the knots. Then, and only then, would it be time to push His Majesty off the mountain top.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!!!” The expletives ricocheted off the walls as Stamper gave vent to his fury, for a moment drowning the television commentary.

Sally and Urquhart were not alone. Stamper sat in one of the large leather armchairs of the Prime Minister’s study, agitatedly devouring the news report and his fingernails. For the first time since their relationship had started, she was being shared with someone else. Perhaps Urquhart wanted others to know; maybe she had become a status symbol, another prop for his virility and ego. Or maybe he had simply wanted an audience to witness another of his triumphs. If so, he must be sorely chagrined at the scenes unfolding in front of their eyes.

“In an astonishing finale to the Royal tour this afternoon, the King’s press secretary, David Mycroft, announced his resignation,” the reporter intoned.

“I am a homosexual.” The pictures of Mycroft were not particularly clear, there was too much backlighting coming from the windows of the coach, but they were good enough. Surrounded by seated colleagues, sharing news with them as he had done for many years, a player plucking at his audience. This was no fugitive with shifting eyes and sweaty brow, cornered, back to the wall. This was a man in control.

“I had hoped that my private life would remain just that, and not interfere with my responsibilities to the King, but I can no longer be sure of this. So I am resigning.”

“What was the King’s response?” a reporter was heard to challenge.

“I don’t know. I haven’t told him. When last I asked to resign, he refused my resignation. As you all know, he is a man of the utmost compassion and understanding. But the task of the Monarch is more important than any one man, particularly a press aide, and so I have taken it upon myself to relieve him of any responsibility by announcing my resignation publicly, to you. I only hope that His Majesty will understand.”

“But why on earth is being a homosexual a bar to your job?”

Mycroft bent his face into an expression of wry amusement. “You ask *me* that question?” He laughed as if someone had made a modestly good joke. No animosity, no snarl of an animal at bay. God, it was a fine performance. “A press officer is meant to be a channel for news, not the target of it. Speculation about my private life would have made my professional duties impossible.”

“Why have you hidden it all these years?” It was Rochester from the back of the bus.

“Hidden it? I haven’t. My marriage broke up recently after many years. I was always faithful to my wife, and I am deeply grateful to her for the years of happiness we spent together. But with that breakup came a new understanding and possibly a final opportunity, to be the man that perhaps I always wanted to be. I have made that choice. I have no regrets.”

With apparent utter frankness he had turned the attack. Anyway, most of the people here were old colleagues, friends, nothing could disguise the atmosphere of sympathy and goodwill. Mycroft had chosen his moment, and his interrogators, well.

Urquhart turned off as the TV reporter continued the saga of the Royal aide, whom he described as “much respected and well liked,” against a background of footage from the just-completed tour.

“Selfish bastard,” Stamper muttered.

“I thought you wanted him out,” Sally interjected.

“We wanted him hung, not walking into the sunset with the applause of the crowd ringing in his ears,” snapped Stamper. Sally suspected he was irritated by her presence in what had formerly been an all-male preserve.

“Don’t fret, Tim,” Urquhart responded. “Our target was not Mycroft, but the King. And even as he surveys his realm from the mountain top, the ground

beneath his feet is beginning to crumble. Almost time to give him a helping hand. In the small of the back, I think.”

“But you only have a week before...Those images of the tour are killing you, Francis,” she said softly, marveling at his composure.

He looked at her with narrowed, hard eyes, as if scolding her for lacking faith. “But there are images, dear Sally, and there are images.” A dark smile split his face but his eyes remained like rock. He crossed to his desk, extracting a small key from his wallet before slowly unlocking a top drawer. He extracted a large manila envelope and spilled its contents across the desk. Every action was meticulous, like a craftsman jeweler displaying his most precious stones. There were photographs, perhaps a dozen of them, all in color, which he sorted through to select two, holding them up so that Sally and Stamper could clearly see.

“What do you think of them?”

She was uncertain whether he meant the photographs or the pair of breasts they prominently displayed. The two photographs, as all the others, revealed the uninhibited charms of Princess Charlotte. The only variation on the central theme was the precise position of her body and the contortions of the young man with her.

“Oh, I say,” breathed Stamper.

“One of the more onerous burdens of being Prime Minister is that one is entrusted with a variety of secrets. Stories that are never told. Such as the tale of a young military equerry to the Princess who, fearing that his favored position at the side and on top of the Princess was in jeopardy, took out an insurance policy in the form of these photographs.”

“Oh, I say,” Stamper said once more as he rifled through the other shots.

“It was the equerry’s bad luck,” Urquhart continued, “that he should try to encash the policy with the wrong man, an investigative journalist who also happens to be a former operative for the security services. And so the photographs finished up in my drawer while the unfortunate lovesick boy has been told in no uncertain terms that his testicles will be ripped from his body should any copies find their way around Fleet Street.” He took back the photographs, which Stamper had been clinging to perhaps a moment too long. “Something tells me, Timothy, that I wouldn’t wish to be in his predicament in a

few days' time."

The two men laughed bawdily, but Urquhart noticed that Sally seemed not to be enjoying the moment.

"Something bothering you, Sally?"

"It doesn't feel right. It's the King who is doing the damage to you, not Mycroft or the Princess."

"The limbs first..."

"But she's done nothing. She's not involved."

"Bloody soon will be," snorted Stamper.

"Call it an occupational hazard," Urquhart added. His smile was stretching more thinly.

"I can't help thinking of her family. The effect on her children." An edge of stubbornness was beginning to creep into her voice and her full, expressive lips pouted in defiance.

His response was slow and stonily firm. "War breeds misery. There are many unfortunate victims."

"Her only sin, Francis, is to be saddled with a healthy sex drive and an inbred English wimp for a husband."

"Her sin is getting caught."

"Only because she's a woman!"

"Spare me the collective feminism," Urquhart snapped in exasperation. "She's spent a lifetime living off the fat served at the Royal table, and the time has come for her to pay the bill."

She was about to respond but she saw his eyes flare and pulled herself back. She wasn't going to win this argument and, in pursuing it, she might lose much more. She told herself not to be so naive. Hadn't she always known that a woman's sex was no more than a tool, a weapon, which as often as not fell into the hands of men? She turned away, conceding.

"Tim, make sure these get a good airing, will you? Just a couple for the moment. Leave the rest."

Stamper nodded and took the opportunity to bend over the desk and rifle once more through the photographs.

"Now, Tim. There's a good fellow."

Stamper's head came up sharply, his eyes flickering as he looked first at Urquhart, then at Sally, then back to Urquhart. The ember of understanding began to glow in his eyes, and with it rivalry. She was muscling in on his relationship with the boss, and had an advantage not even Stamper with all his guile and gamescraft could match.

"I'll get right to it, Francis." He gathered up two of the images and looked sharply at Sally. "Night, one and all." Then he was gone.

Neither of them spoke for some time. Urquhart tried to appear nonchalant, taking great care to adjust the razor-sharp creases of his trousers, but the softness of the words when eventually they came belied their menace.

"Don't go coy on me now, O Gypsy."

"She's going to get a very raw deal out of this one."

"It's them or me."

"I know."

"Are you still on my side?"

In answer, she crossed slowly to him and kissed him passionately, forcing her body up against his and her tongue into his mouth. Within seconds his hands were fondling, bruising. She knew his instincts were angry, animal. Roughly he bent her forward across his desk, sweeping his pen tray and telephone to one side and knocking over a framed photograph of his wife. Her skirt was lifted over her back and he was at her, tearing at her underwear, forcing himself inside, kneading the flesh of her buttocks with such intensity that she winced at the bite of his nails. She was prostrate across the desk, her nose and cheek forced flat into the leather top. And she remembered. As a young girl of perhaps thirteen she had taken a short cut through the back alleys of Dorchester on her way to the cinema and there had come face-to-face with a woman, bent low across the hood of a car. She was black, with bright crimson lips and gaudy eyes that were hard, impatient, bored. The man behind her was fat and white and had sworn at Sally, foul, disgusting words, but he had not stopped. The memory crowded back in all its chilling clarity, as Urquhart's nails dug ever more deeply into her skin and her face was pressed painfully into the scattering of photographs across the desktop. She felt like crying, not in ecstasy but in pain and degradation. Instead, she simply bit her lip.

Forty-One

The concept of a hereditary monarchy is a little like a bottle of fine champagne that has been left open far too long.

Mycroft found him on the moors above Balmoral, where he often went when troubled and wanting to be alone, even in the middle of winter with snow on the ground and an easterly wind that had found nothing to obstruct or deflect it since it had gathered strength in the shadows of the Urals two thousand miles away. There were ageless spirits up there, he had once said, which lurked in the crannies of the granite outcrops and sang as they ran with the wind through the rough heather, long after the deer had sought the shelter of lower pastures. The King had seen him coming, but had not offered any greeting.

“I had no choice. *We* had no choice.”

“We? Since when was I consulted?” The regal tone betrayed a sense of insult and personal hurt. The anger—or was it solely the wind?—brought a bucolic flush to his cheeks and his words came slowly. “I would have stuck by you.”

“You think I didn’t realize that?” It was Mycroft’s turn for exasperation. “That’s why I had to take the decision out of your hands. It’s time to start following your head rather than your heart.”

“You have committed no offense, David, broken no law.”

“Since when did such things matter? I would have become a monumental distraction. Instead of listening to you they would have been snickering behind their hands at me. You’ve taken such personal risks to carry your message across without interference and I would simply have gotten in the way, another excuse for them to sidetrack and confuse. Don’t you see? I didn’t resign in spite of you.

I resigned because of you.” He paused, searching the mists that clung to the moorland around them and burying himself deeper inside the borrowed ski jacket. “And, of course, there’s someone else. I had to think of him, too. Protect him.”

“I feel almost jealous.”

“That I could love two men in such different ways I never thought possible.” Mycroft’s hand reached out to touch the other man on the arm, an unforgivable action between man and Monarch, but the words and the freezing wind seemed to have stripped the formality away.

“What’s his name?”

“Kenny.”

“He will always be welcome. With you. At the Palace.”

The King placed his hand to cover that of Mycroft, who lowered his head, weighed down by gratitude and emotion.

“Ours was a very private matter, not something for headlines and the baying of hounds, of having his private life turned inside out,” Mycroft explained.

“Such plants rarely grow when showered in innuendo and the manure of publicity.”

“I’m very much afraid this may all have been too much for him. But thank you.”

The wind sighed through the heather, a low, mournful sound as the light began to fade, like demons of the night come to reclaim their land.

“It has all been such an unhappy accident, David.”

“Funny, but I feel almost relieved, released. No regrets. But no accident, either.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m not a great believer in coincidence. It was timed to detract from your tour, meant to damage you as much as me.”

“By whom?”

“By whoever had a motive to get at you. And by whoever had the opportunity. By someone who knows the Member for Dagenham and who has the resources to track down a private phone number.”

“It would require someone who could sink very low.”

“The lowest. And he will continue his pursuit of you, have no doubts. There will be more.”

“Then I hope I can find your courage.”

“You already have. All you need is the courage to face up to yourself, that’s what you said. To play the man—your own words. Facing up to others holds fewer torments, believe me. But I think you already know that.”

“I shall need your advice, David, more than ever if, as you say, it is all to get worse.”

Slowly at first, then with gathering force, drops of cold-hardened rain began to fall across the two lonely figures. Darkness was encroaching fast.

“Then the best advice I have for you, sir, is for us to get off this bloody moor before we both freeze to death and save Francis Urquhart the bother.”

Forty-Two

Let them sniff coke.

February: The Second Week

It took less than a second for the phone to be answered in the foreign currency dealing room at one of the City's leading finance houses which squatted alongside the Thames, in a site near to where the Great Fire that had destroyed half of London more than three centuries earlier had started. It wouldn't take another fire to ruin the City again, they joked, just another Japanese takeover.

The phones never took long to be answered. The difference between disaster and success could often be measured in seconds, and the chief currency dealer couldn't afford to be caught napping by either the markets or any of the seventeen other currency dealers, all of whom envied his job and the commissions that went with it. He dragged his thoughts away from the ruinously fashionable forty-foot cruiser he had just agreed to purchase to concentrate on the voice at the end of the phone. It was not, however, a deal, but an inquiry from one of his many press contacts.

"Heard any rumors about some scandal at the Palace, Jim?"

"What rumors?"

"Oh, nothing very specific. Simply a buzz that there's something brewing that is just about to blow the Royal Yacht out of the water." He didn't see the dealer wince. "My editor's asking us all to check around, bit of a dragnet, really. But something's smelling pretty ripe."

The dealer's eyes flashed up to his screen yet again, checking the mixture of red, black, and yellow figures. Sterling seemed to be fine; all the attention today

was on the ruble following news of a fresh outbreak of food riots in Moscow. A crippling winter seemed to have frozen both the capacity of its leaders and the nerve of its foreign exchanges. The dealer rubbed his eyes to make sure; his eyes ached from the constant strain, yet he didn't dare wear his prescription glasses in the office. His position was all about maintaining confidence and at thirty-seven he couldn't afford the slightest sign of age or physical decline; there were too many waiting eagerly to push him off his seat.

"Heard nothing this end, Pete. There's no activity in the markets."

"I can tell you, the flies are definitely beginning to buzz at this end."

"Maybe it's just another load of Royal bullshit being spread about the Royal parks."

"Yeah, maybe," responded the journalist, sounding unconvinced. "Let me know if you hear anything, will you?"

The dealer punched the button to disconnect the line and returned to massaging his eyeballs while trying to figure out how he was going to stretch his already crippling mortgage to cover his latest material indulgence. He was dreaming of naked girls covered in smiles and coconut oil and laid out across fiberglass reinforced with Kevlar when the phone rang again. It was a client who had heard similar rumors and who wanted to know whether to make a quick switch into dollars or yen. More flies. And as the dealer looked once again at the screen, the sterling figures began to flash red. A fall. Not much of one, only a few pips, but it was another hint.

Could he afford to ignore them? Hell, he was getting too old for this; maybe he should pack it all in and spend a year sailing around the Caribbean before getting himself a proper job. But not yet, not before he had made one last big hit, to cover the boat and the bloody mortgage. He tuned in his aching brain to the box that connected him to the brokers and their constant dangling of buy and sell prices, pressing the button that put him through.

"Cable?" he inquired. It was dealers' kvetch for the price of sterling, harking back to the days when the two great financial empires of London and New York were connected only by unquenchable avarice and a submarine cable.

"Twenty, twenty-five. Five by ten," came the crackling response. Even in this age of space travel they still couldn't fix the lines connecting them with the

brokers' rooms less than a sparrow's fart away. Or were his ears going, too?

He sighed. In for a penny, in for five million. "Yours. Five."

The selling had begun.

The door to the editor's office had been slammed shut. It wouldn't make any difference; everybody in the building would hear about it within minutes. The deputy, news, and picture editors stood around the chief editor's desk in a formation that gave the impression of Sioux circling a wagon train, but he wasn't giving up without a fight.

"I'm not holding the front page for this. They're disgusting. An invasion of privacy."

"They're news," responded his deputy through clenched teeth.

"You know the proprietor's breakfast rule."

"Nothing on the front page that would offend two old ladies reading the paper over breakfast," the editor countered.

"That's why there's no one other than old women who read our paper nowadays!"

The editor wanted to shove the words straight back down his pushy deputy's throat, but since they were precisely those he had used in his increasingly frequent rows with the aging proprietor, he couldn't. He stared once again at the two plate-sized photographs that had already been cropped in red pencil to concentrate the attention away from extraneous features such as the bed, the disarranged pillows and entangled legs, and onto the body and face of the Princess.

"We can't. It's simply obscene."

Without a word the picture editor leaned across the desk and, with red pencil and ruler, drew two neat lines cutting both photographs just above the nipple. What was left had all been seen before in countless beach photographs of the Princess, but it made no fundamental difference; the expression on her face, the arched back, and the tongue in her ear told the whole story.

"What does the Palace have to say?" the editor inquired wearily.

"Sweet bugger all. Since Mycroft publicly deflowered himself they're in

something of a mess.”

“First Mycroft, now this...” The editor shook his head, conscious that he would be hounded off the society dinner circuit if these went out under his name. He found another burst of resistance. “Look, this isn’t the bloody French Revolution. I will not be the one to drag the Royal Family to the guillotine.”

“There’s a real public issue here,” the news editor interjected, somewhat more quietly than the deputy.

“The King involves himself in all sorts of matters, stirring up political controversy, while quite clearly he is ignoring what’s going on under his own palace roof. He’s supposed to be the personal embodiment of the nation’s morality, not running a knocking shop. He’s turned out to have more blind eyes than Nelson.”

The editor lowered his head. Sterling had already dipped nearly two cents on the rumors; it was inflicting real harm.

“No one’s asking you to lead a revolution, just keep step with the others.” The deputy took up the cudgels once more. “These piccies are all over town. By morning we might be the only paper not carrying them.”

“I disagree. I don’t give a damn about the foreign rags. This is a British affair. Every editor in this town knows the consequences of using these photos. No one’s going to rush, not in British newspapers. No.” He braced his shoulders with patriotic pride and shook his head in determined fashion. “We are not going to use them unless we know for certain that someone else has. It may be throwing away a scoop, but it’s the kind of scoop I don’t want etched on my gravestone.”

The deputy was about to make some comment that the accountants were already chiseling the circulation figures on his gravestone when the door burst open and the gossip columnist rushed in. He was too excited and breathless to make any sense, his words wrapping themselves in impenetrable knots, until in exasperation he threw his hands in the air and made a dive for the TV remote control on the editor’s desk. He punched the button to call up one of the satellite news channels. It was German-owned, run out of Luxembourg, and had a footprint that covered half of Europe, including most of Southern England. As the screen came to life they were greeted with the images of an ecstatic Princess

Charlotte, nipples and all. Without a further word the deputy grabbed the pictures and rushed off to save the front page.

“Oh, I like this, Mortima. I like this a lot.”

It was after one in the morning, the early editions had arrived, and Mortima with them. He seemed not to mind, chuckling as he glanced through the reports.

““This morning the King stands accused of dereliction of duty,”” Urquhart read out from the pages of *The Times*. ““In pursuit of personal popularity and his own political scruples he has laid open not only himself but the institution of the Monarchy to frontal attack. The politicians and press lords who have jumped on his bandwagon in the last few weeks have revealed themselves as opportunistic and unprincipled. It has taken courage to stand firm for constitutional principle, to remind the nation that the Monarch should be neither showbiz nor social conscience, but an impartial and politically uninvolved head of state. Francis Urquhart has shown that courage; he is to be applauded.”” Urquhart chuckled again. “Yes, I do like that. But then I should, my dear. I wrote most of it myself.”

“I prefer *Today*,” Mortima responded. ““An end to Royal tittle and tattle. It’s time for them all to belt up and button up!””

““Crackpot King,”” Urquhart announced, reading from another. ““HRH should have an urgent word in the Princess’s ear, even if he has to jump to the front of the queue to do so...””

Mortima was in fits of laughter. She had just picked up the *Sun* with its blaring headline: “King of Cock-Up.” “Oh, my dear.” She struggled to respond through convulsions of mirth. “You really have won this battle.”

He grew suddenly serious, as though someone had thrown a switch. “Mortima, I’ve scarcely even started to fight.” He picked up the phone, an operator answered. “See if the Chancellor of the Exchequer is still in the land of the living,” he instructed, replacing the phone very carefully. It rang less than half a minute later.

“How are you, Francis?” a weary and just-woken voice inquired down the line.

“Well, and about to get considerably better. Listen carefully. We have a particularly difficult crisis on our hands that has already set the doves fluttering in the dovecote. We need to take action before they all fly away for good. I believe sterling is about to take yet another precipitous fall. In the circumstances it would be uncivil and unworthy if we were to ask our friends in Brunei to hold on any longer. It would place an important international alliance at risk. You are to call the Sultan’s officials and suggest they sell their three billion pound tranche immediately.”

“Christ Almighty, Francis, that will do for the currency completely.” There was not a trace of tiredness now.

“The markets must have their way. It is a matter of great misfortune that the consequences will strike terror into the hearts of ordinary voters as they see the pound plummet and their mortgage rates about to soar. It will be an even greater misfortune that the whole debacle will be blamed on the King’s conscience and those who support him.”

There was silence on the end of the phone.

“I make myself clear?”

“Absolutely,” came the quiet answer.

Urquhart looked attentively at the receiver before softly replacing it. Mortima was looking at him with unconcealed admiration.

“We must all make sacrifices in battle, Mortima.” He placed the tips of his fingers to the point of his nose. Unconsciously he was beginning to mimic the King in some of his mannerisms, Mortima thought. “I’m not quite sure how to put this delicately,” he continued, “so perhaps I shall have to crave your understanding and be blunt. It does not pay to fight a battle from within glass houses. It would be helpful if you would stop taking such an ardent interest in Italian arias. Your newfound operatic interests could be so easily... misconstrued. It might confuse the troops.”

Mortima, who had been sipping a glass of wine, replaced the glass gently on the table.

“Government drivers are such a gossipy bunch,” he added, as if by way of explanation and excuse.

“I see.”

“No hard feelings?”

“After all these years?” She inclined her head. “Of course not.”

“You are very understanding, my dear.”

“I have to be.” She reached for her purse and extracted an earring. It was bold, fashionable, enameled, costume jewelry from Butler & Wilson in the Fulham Road. One of Sally’s. “The cleaner gave me this the other day. Found it jammed down the side of the Chesterfield. Thought it was one of mine. I’m not sure how to put this delicately, Francis...”

He flushed, lowered his eyes, said nothing.

“Sauce for the goose? Even a Canadian goose?”

“She’s...American,” he responded haltingly.

“Nevertheless.”

“Mortima, she is important to me; she has more vital work to do.”

“But not on her back, Francis. Not in a glass house.”

He looked directly at his wife. It had been a long time since anyone had put him in such a corner. He wasn’t used to it. He sighed, he had no choice.

“All you have to do, Mortima, is to say please. You remember how to say please, don’t you?”

“It’s getting very messy.”

“It’ll get worse.”

“You sure?”

“Never been more certain.”

“How so?”

“Because he can’t yet be certain about winning an election; there’s more to be done. He needs a few more points on the polls. He can’t stop now. Risk a Royal comeback. And...” She hesitated. “And because he’s an axman. His target isn’t the Princess, it’s the King himself. I’m not sure if he knows any longer when to stop hacking.”

He was silent, pondering. “Sally, you’re absolutely certain about this?”

“About his plans? Yes. About him...?” She could still feel the mangled flesh of her buttocks where his fingernails had dug deep. “I’m certain.”

“Then I have work to do.”

He rolled out of bed and reached for his trousers. Moments later he was gone.

The currency dealer turned over and lay in the luminous blue glow of his digital alarm. Four thirteen a.m. Crap. He wouldn't get back to sleep again now. He'd been unsettled all night, his thoughts jarring between the yacht and the young nurse he'd tried and failed to pull a few hours previously. They had shared a ludicrously indulgent meal at Nikita's; she'd drunk too much cherry vodka and been sick. *Tant pis.*

He flicked on his palm-sized Pocket Watch and checked the miniature screen for the latest state of the markets. Perhaps that's what had been eating away at him. Christ! Sterling was down almost another two hundred points in the Far East and he was beginning to wish he, too, had drunk a little less vodka. He was holding twenty million pounds overnight, and he suddenly felt very exposed. He punched one of the memory buttons on his bedside phone that connected with his branch in Singapore, eight hours ahead. “What's up?”

“Negara's been selling steadily since the market opened,” an accented voice told him. So the Malaysian central bank was in on the act...

“What's Cable in forty?” he demanded.

“Sixty-five seventy.”

Selling at sixty-five, buying at seventy. But no one was buying. Time to join the herd. “Shit, let's move it. At sixty-five.” He put the phone down, having just sold forty million pounds sterling in the belief the price would continue falling. If it did he would have covered his overnight position, and more. He'd better get into the office early, in case the entire bloody world woke up with a headache and the herd started to stampede. And maybe he would call that very special client who helped with all those unofficial deals on the side. The client wouldn't mind being woken at this hour, not for the size of stakes he played with. And if they got it right, he could stop worrying about the yacht. And that silly nurse.

Evening Standard, City Edition, February 9

POUND AND PRINCESS EXPOSED

• • •

Sterling continued to come under heavy pressure as the London market followed the lead set overnight in the Far East. Dealers expressed concern that the stream of sexual scandal enveloping the Royal Family could cause a full-blown constitutional and political crisis, following the resignation of the King's press secretary last week and lurid photographs of Princess Charlotte published in many of this morning's newspapers.

The Bank of England and other European banks moved to support sterling as soon as the markets opened but could not prevent further speculative selling driving the currency down hard against the bottom of its EC limits. There were reports of a major holder of sterling in the Far East dumping significant quantities of the currency. It is feared that interest rates may have to be raised substantially to prop up the ailing pound.

"This sort of situation is a new one for us," one dealer commented. "The markets hate the uncertainty, at times this morning they were in turmoil. The sheiks are saying if Buckingham Palace crumbles, how safe is the Bank of England? The City has the atmosphere of a farmyard before Christmas..."

Forty-Three

Damn his stubbornness! If I crucified him he would only expect to rise again on the third day.

It was a good day for a hanging, McKillin thought. The Chamber was packed beyond capacity with many Members, deprived of a seat on the benches, standing at the Bar, crouching in gangways or crowding around the sides of the Speaker's Chair. The pressure of so many mostly male bodies crushed together gave rise to a heady, boisterous atmosphere, overflowing with expectation. It was said there had been similar scenes at Tyburn when they came to hang some wretch from the three-legged gallows, and that they even paid for the privilege of watching the poor bastard swing.

There had already been a long queue of victims today. The waves of panic rippling through the currency markets had washed over into the Stock Exchange, and by lunchtime share prices were off, badly. The cries of pain emanating from those with exposed positions could be heard from all over the City, and it was going to spread faster than a lassie's legs at the Edinburgh Festival. The building societies were meeting in emergency session; mortgages would have to be raised, the only question was by how much. It wasn't the King's fault, of course, but people had lost their innocent belief in bad fortune, in catastrophes simply happening; they had to have someone to blame. And that meant that McKillin, too, was in the firing line, reflecting ruefully on his recent public displays of indulgence on behalf of the Royal Family, wincing at one hundred percent. He had thought all morning of defense through aggression, making a full-scale charge in support of the King, but decided that the King's position was too well

covered by hostile guns. The troops behind him were no Light Brigade, and he wasn't Errol Flynn. No point in getting shot in the Trossachs for nothing, much better to fight another day. Some question about human rights, perhaps, high-ground stuff, related to the PM's lightning trip to Moscow that had been announced for the coming week. That would do, give him some distance from the sound of battle, get him out from under the gibbet...As he waited, he began to feel sticky with the heat and pressure from the bodies of overfed men crowding around.

He saw Urquhart appear just in time for the three fifteen p.m. start, forcing his way through the scrum that surrounded the Speaker's Chair and squeezing past the outstretched limbs of other Cabinet Ministers perched untidily along the Front Bench. Urquhart smiled across the Dispatch Box at McKillin, a fleeting parting of thin lips to expose the incisors, the first warning shot of the afternoon's campaign. Behind Urquhart's position sat the Honorable Lady Member for Dorset North, bobbing obsequiously as her master took his seat, wearing a garishly crimson outfit that stood out like a traffic beacon amid the gloom of gray suits and that would show well on the television screens. She had been practicing her expressions of support all morning in front of a mirror. She was a handsome and well-presented woman, early forties, with a voice like a hyena, which rumor had it could reach top C in bed, as even some members of the Opposition claimed to know. She'd never make Ministerial office, but her memoirs would probably outsell the rest.

McKillin leaned back, giving the impression of a relaxed demeanor while he studied the press gallery above his head; over the finely carved balustrade he could see the heads of the scribblers, faces strained in expectation, their pencils and prejudices sharpened. He wouldn't keep them waiting, he would get in there at the first opportunity, show his colors and retire from the field before the real battle started and it all got out of control. Human rights, that was it. Damned good idea.

Already Madam Speaker had called the first question, to ask the Prime Minister his engagements for the day, and Urquhart was giving his standard and calculatedly unhelpful response, detailing a few of his official appointments "in addition to answering questions in the House."

“It’d be the first bloody time.” It was The Beast, from his seat below the gangway that he claimed by right of constant occupation. He looked dyspeptic; perhaps his sandwiches and pint of bitter had disagreed with him.

Urquhart gave short shrift to the first question, about a local bypass, posed by a conscientious constituency member with a small majority, and it was McKillin’s opportunity. He leaned forward and inclined his head toward Madam Speaker.

“The Leader of the Opposition.” Madam Speaker’s voice summoned him to the Dispatch Box. He hadn’t even finished rising to his feet before another voice cut through the bustle.

“You couldn’t mistake him for a Leader of the Opposition, the groveling little shit.”

McKillin felt his cheeks flush with anger, then astonishment. It was The Beast. His own side!

“Order! Order!” trilled Madam Speaker. In an atmosphere charged like this, with so many hot MPs rubbing shoulders and jostling elbows, she knew it was vital to stamp her authority on proceedings from the first moment of disruption. “I heard that. The Honorable Member will withdraw that remark immediately!”

“What else would you call someone who threw away all his principles and got caught licking the boots of the Royal Family? He’s made a complete balls of it.”

Opposition Members sat largely silent, stunned. Government backbenchers, too, were uncertain, not knowing whether to agree with The Beast or to denounce his vulgarity, but knowing it was essential to make as much noise as possible and stir the pot. In the midst of the growing uproar The Beast, his tangled forelock tumbling across his face and his baggy sports jacket unbuttoned and open, was on his feet and ignoring the repeated demands of Madam Speaker.

“But isn’t it an undeniable fact—”

“No more!” shrieked the Speaker, her half-moon glasses slipping down her nose as she flushed uncomfortably hot beneath her wig. “I shall have no hesitation in naming the Honorable Member unless he withdraws his remarks immediately!”

“But...”

“Withdraw!” Cries demanding his retraction grew from all sides. The Serjeant at Arms, the parliamentary constable, dressed for the part in executioner’s garb of black cloth court dress, complete with silk stockings and ceremonial sword, was standing to attention at the Bar, waiting on Madam Speaker’s instructions.

“But...” began The Beast once again.

“Withdra-a-a-a-w!”

There was pandemonium. The Beast looked around, seeming unperturbed, as if he could hear none of the noise nor see the flailing hands and Order Papers. He smiled, then at last seemed to appreciate that his game was up for he started nodding his head in agreement. The din subsided, allowing him to be heard.

“OK.” He looked toward the Speaker’s Chair. “Which words do you want me to withdraw? Groveling? Little? Or Shit?”

The tidal wave of outrage all but drowned Madam Speaker’s cries. “All of it! I want it all withdrawn!” Eventually she was heard.

“The lot? You want me to withdraw the lot?”

“Immediately!” The wig had been shaken askew and she was attempting to readjust herself, desperately struggling to maintain her temper and sense of dignity.

“All right. All right.” The Beast held up his hands to silence the tumult. “You all know my views about groveling to their Royal Mightinesses but”—he stared around fiercely at the pack of parliamentary hounds snapping at his heels—“if you rule I can’t say such things, that I’ve got to retract it, then I shall.”

“Now. This instant!”

There was a baying of approval from all sides. The Beast was now pointing at McKillin.

“Yes, I was wrong. You obviously *can* mistake him for a Leader of the Opposition. The groveling little shit!”

In the cacophony of shouts from all sides there was not the slightest chance for Madam Speaker to make herself heard, but The Beast didn’t wait to be named, gathering up his papers from the floor and throwing a lingering look of insolence in the direction of his party leader before withdrawing himself from the Chamber. The Serjeant at Arms, who could lip-read the Speaker’s

instructions, fell in beside The Beast to ensure he remained withdrawn from the premises of the Palace of Westminster for the next five working days.

As The Beast's back passed through the doors and beyond, some semblance of order began to be restored to the Chamber. From beneath her wig, still slightly askew, Madam Speaker gazed in the direction of McKillin, her eyes inquiring after his intentions. He shook his head. He didn't want any longer to ask some fool question about human rights. What about his own human rights? All he wanted was for this cruel and exceptional punishment to come to an end, for someone to come and gently cut him down from the parliamentary gallows on which he was swinging, and hope they might give him a decent burial.

"How do you do it, Francis?" Stamper demanded as he strode into the Prime Minister's office in the House of Commons.

"Do what?"

"Get The Beast so wound up that on his own he's more effective at stuffing McKillin than a dozen Barnsley butchers."

"My dear Tim, you've become such a sad old cynic. You look for conspiracies everywhere. The truth—if you could ever recognize it as such—is that I don't have to wind him up. He comes ready wound. No, my contribution to the fun is more along these lines." He indicated the television with its display of the latest teletext news. The building societies had finished their emergency meeting and the result of their deliberations was flashing up on the screen.

"Christ. Two percent on mortgages? That'll go down like a shovel of shit in drinking water."

"Precisely. See how much concern the average punter has for the homeless when the mortgage on his own semidetached roof starts burning its way through his beer money. By closing time tonight the King's conscience will seem an irrelevant and unaffordable luxury."

"My apologies for ever having uttered a cynical remark in your presence."

"Accepted. Voters appreciate clear choices, Tim; it helps them concentrate. I am presenting them with a choice that is practically transparent. The King may be a rare orchid to my common cabbage, but when the buggers start starving,

they'll grab for the cabbage every time.”

“Enough cabbage to give the King chronic wind.”

“My dear Tim, you might say that. On such matters I couldn't possibly comment.”

The King was also seated before his television screen, where he had remained silently watching events since the televising of Prime Minister's Question Time had begun. He had left instructions not to be disturbed but eventually his Private Secretary could restrain his sense of unease no longer. He knocked and entered with a deferential bow.

“Sir, my apologies, but you must know that we are being inundated with calls from the media, wanting some reaction, some guidance as to your feelings about events in the House of Commons. They will not take silence as an answer, and without a press officer...”

The King seemed not to have noticed the intrusion, staring fixedly at the screen, unblinking, his body taut, the veins at his temple a vivid blue against the parchment skin of his skull. He looked ashen—not with anger; the Private Secretary was well used to the flashes of fire that sparked from the King. The stillness suggested more a man on a different plane, driven deep within himself, the strain indicating that the search to find equilibrium had proved futile.

The Private Secretary stood motionless, watching the other man's agony, embarrassed at his intrusion yet not knowing how to dismiss himself.

Eventually the King spoke, in a whisper, but not to the Secretary. “It is no use, David.” The voice was parched and hoarse. “It cannot be. They will no more let a King be a man than they would any man be King. It cannot be done—you know that, don't you, old friend...?”

Then there was silence. The King had not moved, still staring, unseeing, at the screen. The Private Secretary waited for several seemingly endless seconds and then left, pulling the door gently behind him as if he were closing the lid on a coffin.

Forty-Four

I do deference; of course I do. I always raise my kneecap in His Majesty's presence.

Sally rushed across to the House of Commons as soon as she received the summons. She had been in the middle of a pitch to a potential new client, one of the country's leading manufacturers of processed beans, but he had been most understanding, impressed even, and had assured her of the business. With contacts like that he seemed uninterested in further credentials.

A secretary was waiting for her at St. Stephen's entrance to escort her like a VIP past the long queues of visitors and through the security gates, rushing her past several hundred years of history. It was her first time; one day, she promised herself, she would be back and take a calmer look at the glories of Old England, when she had the patience to queue for several hours with all the rest. But for the moment she preferred the preferential treatment.

They showed her straight into his office. He was on the phone, pacing around the room in his shirtsleeves, trailing the cord of the telephone behind him, animated, issuing orders.

"Yes, Bryan, I am well and my wife is well. Thank you very much, now shut up and listen. This is important. You will be receiving details of a new poll tomorrow afternoon. A telephone poll following the panic in the markets. It will be a startling one. It will show the Government in a ten-point lead over the Opposition, and my personal lead over McKillin having doubled." He listened for a moment. "Of course it's bloody front-page news, why on earth do you think I'm giving it to you? That front-page poll will be supported by an editorial

inside your newspaper, something along the lines of ‘Mortgages and the Monarchy.’ It will blame the problem with sterling and international confidence foursquare on the King and his flawed personality, and those opportunistic politicians who have sought to encourage him in what you will conclude are his grave errors of judgment for seeking to take on the elected Government. Are you listening?”

There was a mild squawking on the end of the phone and Urquhart rolled his eyes in impatience.

“You are to suggest that their unprincipled support for the King has shattered the Opposition and ruined the credibility of McKillin, and even more seriously has cast the country into a constitutional mess that is causing deep economic anguish. Reluctantly you will call for a thoroughgoing review of the Monarchy—restricting its powers, its influence, its size, its income. Take it all down carefully. Yes, I’ve got time...” He paused. “Now we come to the important bit, Bryan. Pay great attention. Your editorial will finish by concluding that so much economic, political, and constitutional uncertainty has been created that it requires an immediate solution. No time for extended debates, parliamentary commissions of inquiry—not while every shareholder and mortgage payer in the country is swinging on the hook. The matter needs to be dealt with decisively. Once and for all, in the national interest. You are to suggest that the only established means of deciding who governs Britain is to hold an election. Do you understand? An election.” He looked across at Sally and winked.

“My dear Bryan, of course this is something of a shock, that’s why I’m giving you the opportunity to prepare. But just between the two of us, until tomorrow. No running down to the bookies to put a couple of quid on an early election, now. Another of our little secrets, eh? You call me, only me, Bryan, day or night, if you have any questions. OK? Bye.”

He turned with an expectant expression toward Sally. She offered back a serious, hard look, almost a scowl.

“So who’s supposed to be producing this magical overnight poll of yours, Francis?”

“Why, you are, my dear. You are.”

Her bug eyes sank back into their sockets as if trying to hide. It was after midnight and she had been sitting in front of the computer terminal ever since the last of her staff had departed for the night and left her on her own. She needed space to think.

Preparing a questionnaire had been simple. Nothing fancy or out of the ordinary. And she had on the shelf any number of computer disks with their random digit dialing facilities that would give a spin to the sample and so to the results, to drive the survey upmarket or down-market, give added weight to council-house tenants or the substantial leafy glades of suburbia, question only company directors or the unemployed. The trouble was she had no idea how much the sample needed to be leaned on to get the desired result—Urquhart was clearly ahead, but by how much? By however much, it would be more after *The Times* had sounded off. There was so much unease and anxiety around, it was a perfect time to hotwire the bandwagon.

She wandered around her scruffy premises. The overheads were kept low, all the flash was up front in the reception area, all the quality poured into the strategy and the thinking. The mechanical side was low life. She walked alongside rows of open booths, covered in cloth for soundproofing, where tomorrow the motley collection of part-time staff would gather to sit in front of their individual computer screens, phoning the randomly chosen telephone numbers thrown out by the mainframe, mindlessly reading out the required questions and equally mindlessly tapping in the answers. They would not suspect. They were junkies in torn jeans, off-duty New Zealand nurses worrying about missed periods, failed businessmen who had suffered from the mistakes of others, and fresh-faced students eagerly waiting to make their own. All that mattered was they were vaguely computer literate and could turn up at two hours' notice. They had no means of knowing what was happening to the information they gathered, and wouldn't care. She paced along the carpet worn with time and well-trodden with gum, examining the polystyrene tiles missing from the corner where the gutter had blocked and backed up, running a finger along the open metal shelves overflowing with computer manuals and telephone

directories, and dispatch docketts cast around like sweet wrappers on a windy day. Little natural light penetrated in here to expose the workings of the opinion-research industry. She told clients it was for security, in reality it was simply because the place was a dump. A potted plant had struggled and withered and eventually died, and now doubled as an ashtray. This was her empire.

It had its advantages, this air-conditioned, computerized, paperless empire. A few years ago she would have needed to shift a ton of paper to do what she had been asked to do; now she had to lift no more than a couple of fingers, tap a few keys—the right keys, mind you—and there you had it. Your result. Urquhart's result. But there was the rub. He had been uncompromisingly specific about the figures he wanted, had already given them to Brynford-Jones. No matter how much she toyed with the specs or put a wobble into the weighting of the sample, what was required was more than a little spin. She would have to end up doing what she had never done before, and fiddle the result. Take two figures, one Government, the other Opposition, and work backwards. Not so much massaging as beating them to pulp. If she were found out she would never work again, might even be put away for criminal deception. To lie, to cheat, to steal the opinions of ordinary men and women and abuse them. For Francis Urquhart. Is that what her dreams were all about?

She gazed once more around the room, its walls painted black to disguise the cracks, its mustiness that even the lavatory deodorizers couldn't disguise, its tired-out percolators and secondhand furniture, its corners that overflowed with plastic cups and discarded cigarette packets, its fire alarm system, brick-red amid the gloom, a relic of the 1970s, which probably wouldn't work even if tossed into Vesuvius. She picked up the potted plant, plucked off its withered leaves, swept away the stub ends, tidied it as if it were an old and rather disreputable friend, then she dropped the whole thing, container and all, into the nearest waste bin. This was her empire. And it was no longer enough, never had been.

The lack of sleep showed in Sally's eyes, and she had hidden them behind spectacles with a slight tint, which only served to emphasize the fullness of her mouth and the exceptional animation of her nose. As she walked in through the

doorway of Downing Street one of the doormen nudged a colleague; they had heard talk of her, of course, but this was the first time she had appeared during daylight. And Mortima Urquhart was at home, too. They smiled at her encouragingly, both wishing they could find some excuse to frisk her for weapons.

He was in the Cabinet Room. It was different from the last occasion they had been here, in the dark, with nothing but the distant glow of street lamps and the tips of their fingers and tongues to guide them. He still sat in his special chair, but this time a civil servant drew back a chair on the opposite side of the table for her. It felt as though she were a million miles away from him.

“Good afternoon, Miss Quine.”

“Prime Minister.” She nodded coyly while the civil servant made herself scarce.

He waved his arms a little awkwardly. “Excuse the, er...working formality. A busy day.”

“Your poll, Francis.” She opened her briefcase and extracted a single sheet of paper, which she thrust across the table. He had to stretch to retrieve it. He studied it briefly.

“Of course, I know these are the figures I asked for. But where are the real figures, Sally?”

“You’re holding them, Francis. Ludicrous, isn’t it? You didn’t have to get me to cheat and fiddle. Ten points ahead, just as you asked. You’re home and dry.”

His eyelids blinked rapidly as he took the information in. A smile began, like the fingers of a new dawn creeping across his face. He started nodding in pleasure, as if he had known all along.

“I could have kept my innocence after all.”

He looked up from the piece of paper, a crease across his brow. She was making a point of sorts but damned if he could figure out what. Over a set of figures, one poll among the thousands? Selective statistics, the sort of thing Government departments did by instinct? He took out a colorful handkerchief and wiped his nose with meticulous, almost exaggerated care. He wanted to celebrate yet she seemed intent on puncturing his euphoria. That, and the distance between them across the table, would make the next bit easier.

“How are those new clients I sent you?”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise; it seemed such a tangent. “Fine. Really fine. Thanks.”

“I’m the one who should be grateful, Sally. There will be more in the future...clients, that is. I want to go on helping.” He was looking at the figures again, not at her. He was evidently uncomfortable, unsnapping his watch strap and massaging his wrist, easing his collar as if he felt claustrophobic. Claustrophobic? When she was the only other person in the room?

“What is it, Francis?” She pronounced his name in a more nasal manner than usual; less attractive, he thought.

“We have to stop seeing each other.”

“Why?”

“Too many people know.”

“It never bothered you before.”

“Mortima knows.”

“I see.”

“And there’s the election. It’s all very difficult.”

“It wasn’t exactly easy fiddling your goddamned figures.”

There was a silence. He was still trying to find something in the sheet of paper on which to concentrate.

“For how long? How long do we have to stop seeing each other?”

He looked up, a flicker of unease in his eyes, his lips stretched awkwardly. “I’m...afraid it must be for good. Mortima insists.”

“And if Mortima insists...” Her tone was scornful.

“Mortima and I have a very solid relationship, mature. We understand each other. We don’t cheat on that understanding.”

“My God, Francis, what the hell do you think we’ve been doing here, there, everywhere in this building, even in that chair you’re sitting in, if it wasn’t cheating on your wife? Or wasn’t it personal for you? Just business?”

He couldn’t hold her stare. He began fiddling with his pencil, wondering if she were going to burst into hysterics. Not that, anything but that. He couldn’t handle hysterical women.

“Not even after the election, Francis?”

“I’ve never cheated on her, not like that. Not when she has made her wishes clear.”

“But she need never know. Our work together, it’s been fantastic, historic.”

“And I’m grateful...”

“It’s been much more than that, Francis. At least for me. You are like none of the other men I’ve ever been with. I’d hate to lose that. You’re better than the rest. You know that, don’t you?”

Her nose was bobbing sensuously, full of sexual semaphore, and he felt himself torn. His relationship with Mortima was his bedrock; through the years, it had made up for his sense of guilt and sexual inadequacy, provided a foundation from which he had withstood all the storms of political ambition and had conquered. It had made him a man. By God, he owed her. She had sacrificed as much as he for his career, in some ways more, but it was all beginning to blur as he stared at Sally. She leaned forward, her full breasts enticing, offered up still more fully by the support of the Cabinet table.

“I’d be happy to wait, Francis. It would be worth waiting for.”

And wasn’t she right. He owed Mortima but with her it had never been like this, not raw, uninhibited, dominating lust.

“And there’s our work together. We’re lucky for each other, Francis. It’s got to go on.”

He had never betrayed his wife before, never! But he could feel that irresistible tightness growing within him once more and somehow Mortima seemed to belong to another world, the sort of world they had inhabited before he became Prime Minister. Things had changed; the job imposed different rules and responsibilities. He had given Mortima what she wanted, the chance to run her own court in Downing Street; did she have a right to ask still more of him? And somehow he knew he would never be able to find another Sally, would have neither the time nor the opportunity. He might be able to replace her mind, but not her body and what it did for him. She had made him feel so supreme, a young man once again. And he could always explain to Mortima that it was in nobody’s interest to have Sally roaming free, discontented, perhaps vengeful, not now.

“It would be difficult, Sally.” He swallowed. “But I’d like to try.”

“First time? Give up your innocence, Francis?”

“If you would have it that way.”

He was staring at her breasts, which held him like a rabbit in the beam of a lamp. She smiled, closed the lid of her briefcase, and snapped the locks shut as if inside it she had trapped his innocence. Then she rose and walked slowly around the long table. She wore a tight black body stocking in an oversized silk-cotton jacket from Harvey Nicks, an arrangement he hadn't seen before, and as she approached him the jacket was drawn back to expose her full physical charms. He knew he had made the right decision. It was good for the cause, would ensure continued support and security, Mortima would understand that—if she ever found out.

Sally was there, beside him. She extended a hand. “I can't wait. Partner.”

He stood up, they shook hands. He felt triumphant, all-powerful, as though there were no challenge, no dilemma, to which he could not rise.

She was a remarkable woman, this American, practically a true British sport, his smile suggested. What an utter English prick, she thought.

Forty-Five

No stone unturned, no knife untwisted.

Brian Redhead's beard had grown longer and wisper with the years, but his Geordie bite remained formidably sharp. Why else would he have survived so long as the doyen of early morning radio and continued to attract an endless stream of politicians to be mangled and torn even before their first cup of coffee had time to grow cold? He sat in his studio within Broadcasting House like a hermit in his cave, searching for some intangible truth, the table strewn with dirty cups, disused notes, and soiled reputations, glowering at his producer through the murky window of the control room. A huge old-fashioned wall clock with a burnished oak surround hung on the wall, like a British Rail waiting room, the second hand ticking remorselessly onward.

“It's time once more for our review of the morning papers and we have our regular Thursday reviewer, Matthew Parris, to do just that for us. The Royal robes seem to be in something of a twist again, Matthew.”

“Yes, Brian. Our homebred answer to all those Australian soaps begins another tangle-filled episode this morning, but perhaps there are signs that some sort of ending may be in sight. There are suggestions that we could be losing at least one of the key players, because the latest straw poll carried in *The Times* puts the Opposition ten points behind and it could be the straw that breaks the Opposition camel's back. Not that Gordon McKillin will take kindly to being compared to a camel, or a tramp for that matter, but he must be wondering how soon it will be before he's sent off to live in a Royal underpass. He might find it a lot more comfortable than the House of Commons this afternoon. But it's *The*

Times editorial comment that has galvanized the rest of Fleet Street in their late editions: ‘Time for an election to clear the air?’ it asks. No one doubts that it would not only be Mr. McKillin’s leadership under public scrutiny, but also the King’s. The *Mirror* goes back to basics. ‘Under the present system he could be the biggest twerp in the kingdom yet still get to reign. To use his own words, something has got to be done.’ And not all the other papers show as much respect. Have you forgotten the *Sun* headline of just a few days ago, which shouted ‘King of Conscience’? The *Sun*’s editor obviously has, because he’s reused the same headline today—except it’s been abbreviated to read simply: ‘King Con.’ It seems a week is a long time in Royal politics. There’s more in the rest...”

In a City office a few miles away from Broadcasting House, Landless switched off the radio. Dawn was still a brushstroke in the sky but already he was at his desk. His first job had been delivering newspapers as an eight-year-old, running all the way through the dark streets because his parents couldn’t afford a bike, stuffing letter boxes and catching glimpses of negligee and bare flesh through the badly drawn curtains. He’d put on a bit of weight since then, and a few millions, but the habit of rising early to catch the others at it had stuck. There was only one other person in the office, the oldest of his three secretaries who took the early turn. The silence and her graying hair helped him think. He stood lingering over his copy of *The Times*, laid open on his desk. He read it again, cracking the knuckles of each of his fingers in turn as he tried to figure out what—and who—lay behind the words. When he had run out of knuckles he leaned across his desk and tapped the intercom.

“I know it’s early, Miss Macmunn, and they’ll still be pouring the milk over their wholemeal cornflakes and scratching their Royal rumps. But see if you can get the Palace on the phone...”

He had wondered, very briefly and privately, whether he should consult them, take their advice. But only very briefly. As he gazed around the Cabinet table at his colleagues, he could find no patience within himself for their endless debates and dithering, their fruitless searches for the easy way ahead, the constant resort

to compromise. They had all arrived with their red Cabinet folders containing the formal Cabinet papers and the notes that civil servants felt might be necessary to support their individual positions or gently undermine those of rival colleagues. Colleagues! It was only his leadership, his authority, that prevented them from indulging in the sort of petty squabbles that would disgrace a kindergarten. Anyway, the civil servants' notes were irrelevant, because the civil servants had not known that he was about to hijack the agenda.

There had been no point in seeking opinions; they would have been so pathetically predictable. Too soon, too precipitate, too uncertain, too much damage to the institution of the Monarchy, they would have said. Too much chance they would lose their Ministerial chauffeurs sooner than necessary. Oh, ye of little faith! They needed some backbone, some spunk. They needed terrifying out of their political wits.

He had waited until they finished smiling and congratulating each other at their favorable showing in the opinion polls—*their* favorable showing! He had called on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to recite for them just how wretched it was all going to be, particularly after the chaos in the markets had knocked the stuffing out of business confidence. A tunnel that had been dug deeper and longer than anyone could have expected, the Chancellor recited, with not a flicker of light to be seen and a Budget in the middle of next month that would blow holes in their socks. If they had any socks left.

While they were chewing nauseously on those bones he had asked the Employment Secretary about the figures. School holidays beginning on March 15, some three hundred thousand school leavers flooding onto the market, and employment prospects that looked as welcoming as a witch's armpit. The jobless total would rise above two million. Another election pledge out of the window. And then he had turned to the Attorney General's report about the prospect for Sir Jasper Harrod's trial. From the ague that crossed one or two of the faces he suspected there were other individual donations that had not yet come to light among the high and, for the moment, mighty. Thursday, March 28, was the trial date. No, no postponements likely, the dirty linen being hung out to dry within days of the first rap of the judge's gavel. Sir Jasper had made it clear he did not wish to suffer on his own.

The colleagues had begun to look as though they were sailing in an overcrowded dinghy through a Force 9 before he put his own twist to their discomfort. A strong rumor that McKillin was considering resignation at Easter. Only that twerp of an Environment Secretary Dickie thought it good news; the rest had recognized it immediately for what it was—the Opposition’s best hope of salvation, a new start, a clean break with McKillin’s fooleries and failures, a leap for firm new ground. Even the other dunderheads had seen that—all except Dickie. He would have to go, after the election.

Only after silence had hung in the air for many seconds did he throw them a lifeline, a chance to be hauled toward dry land. An election. On Thursday, March 14. Just enough time if they hurried and scuttled to tidy up the parliamentary loose ends and a dissolution that would squeeze them through before the next storms hit and overwhelmed them. Not a suggestion, not a request for opinions, simply an indication of his mastery of tactics and why he was Prime Minister, and not any of the rest of them. A strong opinion poll lead. An Opposition in disarray. A Royal scapegoat. A timetable. And an audience with the King in under an hour to issue the Royal Proclamation. What more could they want. Yes, he knew it was tight, but there was time enough. Just.

Forty-Six

Those who wish to cross a King must find themselves a sound horse.

“Your Majesty.”

“Urquhart.”

They did not bother sitting. The King showed no signs of offering a chair, and Urquhart needed only seconds to deliver his message.

“There is only one piece of business I wish to raise. I want an immediate election. For March 14.”

The King stared at him, but said nothing.

“I suppose in fairness I must tell you that part of the Government’s manifesto will be a proposal to establish a parliamentary committee of inquiry into the Monarchy, its duties and responsibilities. I shall propose to that commission a series of radical restrictions on the activities, role, and financing of both you and your relatives. There has been too much scandal and confusion. It is time for the people to decide.”

When he replied the King’s voice was remarkably soft and controlled. “It never ceases to amaze me how politicians can always pontificate in the name of the people, even as they utter the most absurd falsehoods. Yet if I, a hereditary Monarch, were to read from the Testaments my words would still be regarded with suspicion.”

The insult was delivered slowly so that it sank deep. Urquhart smiled patronizingly but offered no response.

“So it is to be outright war, is it? You and me. The King and his Cromwell. Whatever happened to that ancient English virtue of compromise?”

“I am a Scot.”

“So you would destroy me, and with me the Constitution that has served this country so well for generations.”

“A constitutional Monarchy is built on the mistaken concept of dignity and perfect breeding. It is scarcely my fault that you have all turned out to have the appetites and sexual preferences of goats!”

The King flinched as if he had been slapped and Urquhart realized he may have gone a step too far. After all, what was the point?

“I will bother you no longer, sir. I merely came to inform you of the dissolution. March 14.”

“So you say. But I don’t think you shall have it.”

There was no alarm in Urquhart’s demeanor—he knew his rights. “What nonsense is this?”

“You expect me to issue a Royal Proclamation today, this instant.”

“As I have every right to do.”

“Possibly. And then again, possibly not. An interesting point, don’t you think? Because I also have rights accorded by the same constitutional precedents, rights to be consulted, to advise and to warn.”

“I am consulting you. Give me as much advice as you want. Warn me, threaten me for all I care. But that cannot prevent you from granting the dissolution I demand. That is the right of the Prime Minister.”

“Be reasonable, Prime Minister. This is my first time at this; I am new to the job. I need to take advice myself, talk to a few people, make sure I am taking the correct constitutional action. I’m sure I could be in a position to grant your request by, say, next week? Not unreasonable, is it? Just a few days?”

“That cannot be!”

“And why not?”

“You cannot expect me to hold an election on Maundy Thursday when those who are not on their knees are flat on their backs for the Easter holidays. No delay. I will not have it, d’you hear!”

The composure had been peeled away; Urquhart’s fists were clenched in consternation and his legs braced as if he were about to launch a direct physical attack against the Monarch. Instead of flinching or drawing back, the King began

to laugh, a frosty, hollow noise that echoed around the high ceiling.

“You must forgive me, Urquhart. My little joke. Of course I cannot delay your demand. I merely wanted to see how you would react.” The muscles continued to pull his face into the expression of a smile, but behind it there was no sense of warmth. The eyes were like frost. “You seem to be in something of a hurry. And so, I have to tell you, am I, for your eagerness has helped prompt a decision of my own. You see, Urquhart, I despise you and all that you stand for. The ruthless, relentless, utterly soulless way you pursue your ends. I feel bound to do everything within my power to stop you.”

Urquhart was shaking his head. “But you cannot delay an election.”

“No. But neither can I accept what I know to be a fact—that you have destroyed my friends, and my family, and now you attempt to destroy me and along with me, the Crown. You know, Charlotte may be a foolish woman but she is basically a kind soul. She didn’t deserve what you did to her. But then, neither did Mycroft.” He waited for a second or two. “I see you don’t even feel the need to deny it.”

“I make no comment. You can prove nothing.”

“I don’t need to. Only to myself, at least. You see, Urquhart, you have used those I love as a doormat on which to wipe your boots as you wade your way through the sewers. Now you wish to trample on me. I won’t allow it.”

“There’s nothing you can do. After this election the Crown will never be in a position to play politics again.”

“On that, Prime Minister, we are agreed. It’s taken me much anguish to face up to the fact that what I have been doing these last months, the ideals I have been trying to cherish, the interests I wish to propagate, are politics. Sadly, there is no clear dividing line anymore. If I hold a view in public, even about the weather, then it is politics.”

“At last we are making progress.”

“I am. I’m not so sure about you. I have a duty, a divine duty almost, to do everything within my powers to protect the Crown. I have an equally strong commitment to myself and those things in which I believe. But conscience sits uneasily beneath a modern Crown. You have made certain of that.”

“The people will make certain of that.”

“Perhaps. But not on March 14.”

Urquhart wiped a hand across his mouth in exasperation. “You are wearing my patience thin. It shall be March 14.”

“But it cannot be. Because you must delay the dissolution of Parliament for an unexpected piece of business.”

“What business?”

“For a Bill of Abdication.”

“Another of your silly jokes!”

“I am not noted for my sense of humor.”

“You will abdicate?” For the first time Urquhart began to feel he was losing his grip. His jaw betrayed the slightest quiver.

“In order to protect the Crown and my conscience. And in order to fight you and your kind by every means possible. It is the only way.”

There was no mistaking the earnestness; that had always been the man’s weakness, a complete inability to hide his honesty. Urquhart’s eyes flickered rapidly as he tried to calculate the political fallout, and how much damage any delay might inflict on his plans. He would still win, surely? The People’s Parliament before the Crown. He would have to squeeze another week’s grace out of the calendar, even if it meant Maundy Thursday—a propitious day for giving Kings their comeuppance. Unless...my God, he wasn’t going to replace McKillin as Leader of the Opposition, was he? No, it was too ludicrous.

“What role do you expect to play in the campaign?” The words were hesitant.

“A modest one. Highlighting the issues of concern to me—of poverty, the lack of opportunities for the young. Urban and environmental squalor. I shall ask David Mycroft for his help. He has a flair for publicity, don’t you think?” The King had changed, the habitual tension in his face seemed to have eased, grown softer, no longer plagued by nightmares and self-inflicted guilt. He seemed almost to be enjoying himself. “But whatever I shall do shall be done entirely properly. I will not engage in personal confrontation or debate with you. Although others, I suspect, will be less fastidious.” He moved to a button hidden behind one of the window drapes and pushed it. Almost immediately the door opened, and in walked Benjamin Landless.

“You!”

“Me.” He nodded. “It’s been a long time, Francis. Seems like a lifetime ago, almost a different world.”

“Bizarre bedfellows, a King and a low-born thug like you.”

“Needs must.”

“I suppose you intend to publish and promote the Royal witterings.”

“Possibly, Francis. But not to the exclusion of other important news.”

For the first time Urquhart noticed that Landless held something in his hand...a clutch of papers?

“Photos, Francis. You know about photos, don’t you?”

Landless held them out toward Urquhart, who took them as though offered a goblet of hemlock. He studied them in complete silence, unable to engage his tongue even if he had found the words.

“There seems to have been an outbreak of this sort of thing recently, don’t you think, sir?” Landless offered.

“Regrettably,” the King responded. “Francis, you’ll recognize your wife, of course. The other person, the one underneath—sorry, on top in the one you’re looking at now—is an Italian. Possibly you’ve met him. Sings, or some such nonsense. And doesn’t draw his curtains properly.”

Urquhart’s hands were trembling such that the photographs were in danger of falling from his grasp. With an angry cry he crushed them within his fist and hurled them across the room. “I’ll disown her. People will understand, sympathize. That’s not politics!”

The King could not restrain his snort of contempt.

“I sincerely hope you’re right, Frankie,” Landless continued. “But I have my doubts. People will find it very lumpy porridge when they find out about your own outside interests.”

“Meaning?” A haunted edge was creeping into Urquhart’s eyes.

“Meaning a particular young and very attractive lady who has not only been seen a lot in Downing Street since you got there, but who has also recently made a huge killing on the foreign exchanges. Anyone might think she knew something—or someone—on the inside. Or will you try to disown her, too?”

The cheeks were suddenly drained, the words tumbling between trembling lips. “How on earth...? You couldn’t possibly know...”

A huge bearlike arm was placed around Urquhart's shoulders and Landless lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. As if on cue, the King walked over to a window and turned his back on them, preoccupying himself with the view of his garden.

"Let you in on a little secret, old chum. You see, she's been my partner as well as yours. I have to thank you. Did very nicely out of the currency wobbles, switched out of sterling just in time."

"This isn't necessary," he gasped, bewildered. "You could have done just as well with me..."

Landless looked the other man carefully up and down. "Nope. 'Fraid you're not my type, Francis."

"Why, Ben? Why are you doing this to me?"

"How many reasons do you want?" He raised his hand to count off the pudgy fingers. "Because you so obviously enjoyed treating me like shit. Because Prime Ministers come and go, as you'll soon be gone, while the Royal Family endures." He nodded his huge head in the direction of the King's back. "And perhaps mostly because he welcomed me, just as I am, Big Bad Benjamin from Bethnal Green, without looking down his nose, when I was never good enough for you or your high and mighty wife." He twisted over his hand so that it became an upturned claw. "So I'm squeezing your balls, as hard as I can."

"Why? Oh, why?" Urquhart continued to moan.

Landless's fist closed tight. "Because they're there, Francis. Because they're there." He chuckled. "Speaking of which, I have good news of Sally."

Urquhart could only raise mournful eyes in inquiry.

"She's pregnant."

"Not by me!" Urquhart gasped.

"No, not by you." The voice, which had patronized, now sneered. "Seems you're not man enough for anything."

So he knew about that, too. Urquhart turned away from his antagonist, trying to hide the humiliation, but Landless was in full pursuit.

"She's played you for the fool you are, Frankie. In politics, and in bed—or wherever it was. You shouldn't have used her. All that brains and beauty, and you threw it away."

Urquhart was shaking his head, like a dog trying to rid itself of an unwanted collar.

“She’s got new business, new clients, new capital. And a new man. It’s a different life for her, Frankie. And being pregnant, too...well, you know what women are like about things like that. Or rather you don’t, but take it from me. She’s an exceptional and very happy lady.”

“Who? Who did she...?” He seemed unable to finish.

“Who did she prefer to you?” Landless chuckled. “You idiot. You still can’t see it, can you?”

Urquhart’s whole body had shrunk, his shoulders sagged and his mouth gaped open. He couldn’t, wouldn’t, take it in.

A look of triumph suffused the publisher’s rubbery face. “I’ve beat you at everything, Frankie. Even with Sally.”

Urquhart had an overwhelming, primal desire to crawl away, to find a dark place, any place, to bury his humiliation as quickly and as deeply as he could manage, but he couldn’t depart, not yet. There was one more thing he had to do first. A final chance, perhaps, to buy a little time. He made an attempt at straightening his shoulders and walked stiffly across the room until he was facing the King’s back. His face was contorted with the effort and he drew a deep, gulping breath. “Sir, I have changed my mind. I withdraw my request for a dissolution.”

The King spun round on his heel, like an officer on parade. “Oh, do you, Prime Minister? Damned difficult that, I’ve already set the wheels in motion, you see. Prime Minister’s right to demand an election, of course, the Constitution’s clear about that. Can’t for the life of me remember the bit where it says he’s allowed to call one off. Anyway, I’m the one who dissolves Parliament and signs the Royal Proclamation, and that’s just what I’m going to do. If you find my actions objectionable on constitutional or personal grounds, I’m sure I can rely on your vote during the abdication debate.”

“I shall withdraw my proposals for constitutional reform,” Urquhart uttered in exhaustion. “If necessary, I shall make a public apology for any... misunderstanding.”

“Decent of you to offer, Urquhart. Saves me and Mr. Landless here insisting

on it. I would like the apology made when you introduce the Abdication Bill.”

“But there’s no need. You win. We can turn the clock back...”

“You still don’t understand, do you? I am going to abdicate, whether you want that or not. I am not the right man for this task I was born to; I don’t have the self-restraint required of a King. I’ve come to terms with that. My abdication will protect the Crown and all it stands for much more effectively than if I try to muddle my impatient way through the murky constitutional waters. My son has already been sent for and the regency papers are being drawn up. He is more patient than I, younger, more flexible. He will have a better chance of growing into the great King I shall never be.” He prodded his own chest. “It’s the best thing for me, the man.” The finger turned on Urquhart. “And it is also the best damned way I can devise of destroying you and everything you stand for.”

Urquhart’s lip trembled. “You used to be an idealist.”

“And you, Mr. Urquhart, used to be a politician.”

Epilogue

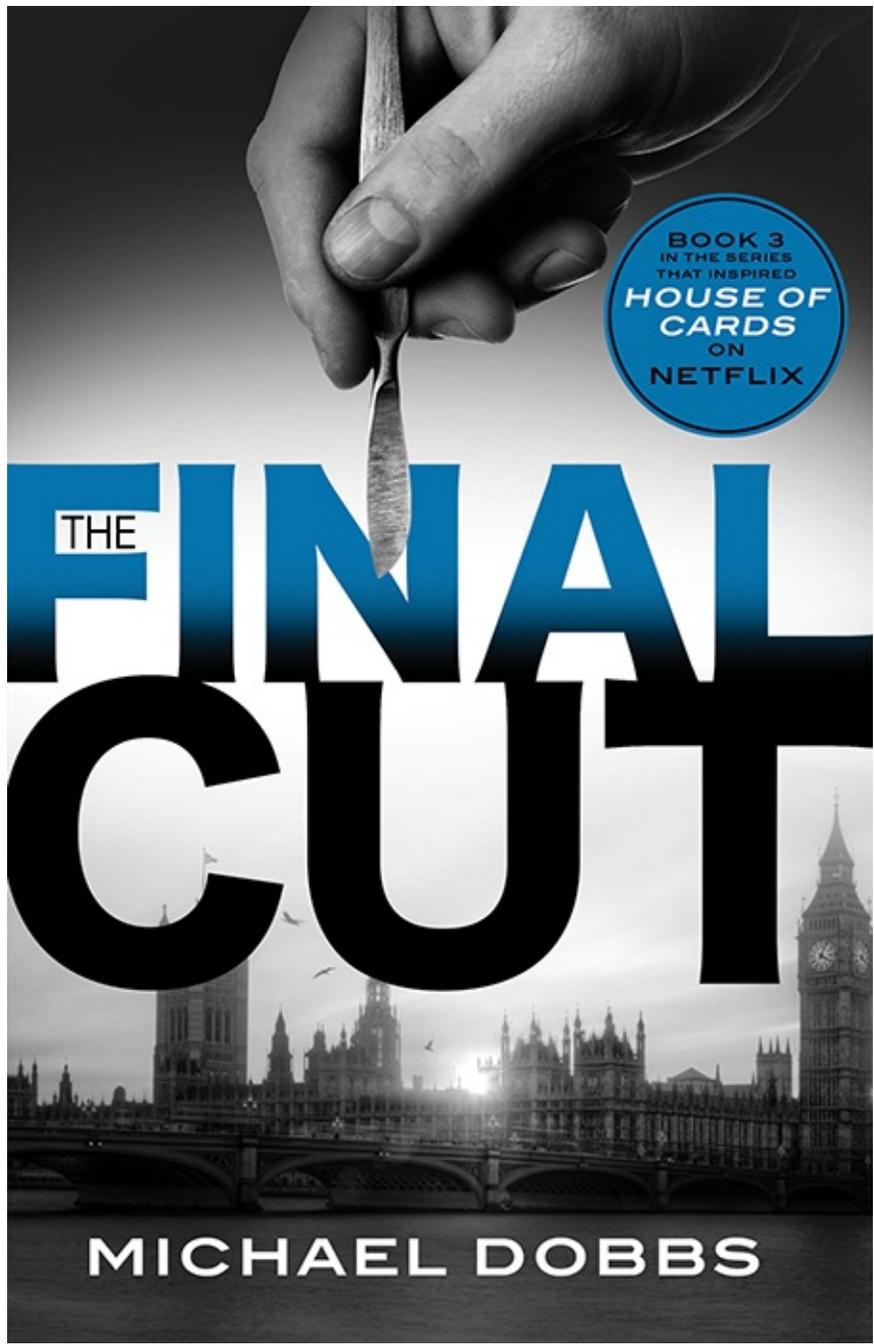
There was a knock on the front door, a soft, tentative sort of rapping. Kenny put down his book and went to answer it. The door opened and there, on the darkened doorstep, wrapped in a new overcoat against the blustery rain, stood Mycroft.

Mycroft had prepared his explanations and apologies carefully. With the announcement of the abdication and election, things had changed. The press had new fish to gut and fry and would leave them alone, if Kenny could understand. And forgive. But as he looked up at the other man he could see the pain deep within the startled eyes, and his words deserted him.

They stood facing each other, each afraid of what the other might say, not wanting to expose once again the scarcely healed wounds. It seemed to Mycroft several lifetimes before Kenny finally spoke.

“Are you going to stand out there all sodding night, David? The bears’ tea will be getting cold.”

THE END



BOOK 3
IN THE SERIES
THAT INSPIRED
**HOUSE OF
CARDS**
ON
NETFLIX

THE **FINAL**
CUT

MICHAEL DOBBS

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The Final Cut

[Front Cover](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Forty](#)

[Forty-One](#)

[Forty-Two](#)

[Forty-Three](#)

[Forty-Four](#)

[Forty-Five](#)

[Forty-Six](#)

[Forty-Seven](#)

[Forty-Eight](#)

[Forty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

“That we shall die, we know; ’tis but the time
And drawing days out, that men stand upon.”

—Brutus, William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*

Introduction

The Final Cut was written in 1994. All these years later the British are still arguing about Europe, the Cypriots have discovered a vast ocean of hydrocarbon wealth beneath the Mediterranean, and the Greeks and Turks are still arguing about the future of that sadly divided island. What I also hope the reader will find timeless is the enduring wickedness of FU.

Prologue

Troodos Mountains, Cyprus—1956

It was late on an afternoon in May, the sweetest of seasons in the Troodos, beyond the time when the mountains are muffled beneath a blanket of snow but before the days when they serve as an anvil for the Levantine sun. The spring air was filled with the heavy tang of resin and the sound of the breeze being shredded on the branches of great pines, like the noise of the sea being broken upon a pebbled shore. But this was many miles from the Mediterranean, almost as far as is possible to get from the sea on the small island of Cyprus.

These were good times, a season of abundance even in the mountains. For a few weeks in spring the dust of crumbling rock chippings that passes for soil becomes a treasury of wildflowers—erupting bushes of purple-flowered sword lily, blood-dipped poppies, alyssum, the leaves and golden heads of which in ancient times were supposed to effect a cure for madness.

Yet nothing would cure the madness that was about to burst forth on the side of the mountain.

George, fifteen and almost three-quarters, prodded the donkey further up the mountain path, oblivious to the beauty. His mind had turned once again to breasts. It was a topic that seemed to demand most of his time nowadays, depriving him of sleep, causing him not to hear a word his mother said, making him blush whenever he looked at a woman, which he always did straight between her breasts. They had an energy source all their own, which dragged his eyes toward them, like magnets, no matter how hard he tried to be polite. He never seemed to remember what their faces looked like; his eyes rarely strayed

that far. He'd marry a toothless old hag one day. So long as she had breasts.

If he were to avoid insanity or, even worse, the monastery, somehow he would have to do it, he decided. Do IT. Before he was fifteen and three-quarters. In two weeks' time.

He was also hungry. On the way up he and his younger brother, Eurypides, thirteen and practically one half, had stopped to plunder honey from the hives owned by the old crone Chlorides, who had mean eyes like a bird and horribly gnarled fingers—she always accused them of robbing her, whether they had or not, so a little larceny used up some of their extensive credit. Local justice. George had subdued the bees with the smoke from a cigarette he had brought along specifically for the purpose. He'd almost gagged—he hadn't taken to cigarettes yet, but would, he promised himself. Soon. As soon as he had had IT. Then, maybe, he could get to sleep at nights.

Not far to go. The terraced ledges where a few wizened olive trees clung to the rock face were now far behind; they were already two kilometers above the village, less than another two to climb. The light had started to soften, it would be dark in a couple of hours and George wanted to be home by then.

He gave the donkey another fierce prod. The animal, beneath its burden of rough-hewn wooden saddle and bulging cloth panniers, was finding difficulty in negotiating the boulder-strewn trail and cared nothing for such encouragement. The beast expressed its objection in the traditional manner.

“Not over my school uniform, dog meat!” Eurypides sprang back in alarm, too late, and cursed. There was a beating if he did not attend school in uniform. Even in a poor mountain village they had standards.

And they had guns.

Like the two Sten guns wrapped in sacking at the bottom of one of the panniers they were delivering, along with the rest of the supplies, to their older brother. George envied his older brother, hiding out with five other EOKA fighters in a mountain lair.

EOKA. Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston—the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters—who for a year had been trying to blast open the closed colonial minds of their British rulers and force them to grant the island independence. They were terrorists to some, liberation fighters to others. To

George, great patriots. With every part of him that was not concerned with sex he wanted to join them, to fight the enemies of his country. But the High Command was emphatic; no one under the age of eighteen could take up arms. He would have lied, but there was no point, not in a village where everyone knew even the night of his conception, just before Christmas 1939. The war against the Germans was only a few months old and his father's brother George had volunteered for the Cyprus Regiment of the British Army. Like many young Cypriots he had wanted to join the fight for freedom in Europe, which, once won, would surely bring their own release. Or so they had thought. His uncle's farewell celebration had been a long night of feasting and loving, and he had been conceived.

Uncle George never came back.

The younger George had much to live up to. He idolized the uncle he had never known, but he was only fifteen and almost three-quarters and instead of marching in heroic footsteps was reduced to delivering messages and supplies.

"Did you really do it with Vasso? Seriously, George."

"Course, stupid. Several times!" George lied.

"What was it like?"

"Like *peponia*, soft melons of flesh," George exclaimed, gyrating his hands in demonstration. He wanted to expand but couldn't; Vasso had taken him no further than the buttons of her blouse where he had found not the soft fruits he had anticipated but small, hard breasts with nipples like plum stones.

Eurypides giggled but didn't believe. "You didn't, did you?" he accused. George felt his carefully constructed edifice wobbling beneath him.

"Did."

"Didn't."

"*Psefti*."

"*Malaka!*"

Eurypides threw a stone and George jumped, stumbling on a loose rock and falling flat on his rump, fragments of his dream scattered around him. Eurypides's squeals of laughter, by turns childishly high pitched and pubescent gruff, filled the valley and cascaded like acid over his brother's pride. George felt humiliated; he needed something to restore his flagging esteem. Suddenly he

knew exactly how.

George loosened the string neck of one of the panniers and reached deep inside, beneath the oranges and side of smoked pork, until his fingers grasped a cylindrical parcel of sacking. Carefully he withdrew it, then a second slightly smaller bundle. In the shadow of a large boulder he laid both on the carpet of soft pine needles, gently removed the wrappings, and Eurypides gasped. It was his first trip on the supply run; he hadn't been told what they were carrying. Staring up at him from the sacking was the dull gray metal of a Sten gun, modified with a folding butt to make it more compact for smuggling. Alongside it were three ammunition mags.

George was delighted with the effect. Within a few seconds, as his older brother had taught him the week before, he had prepared the Sten, a lightweight machine gun, swinging and locking into position the skeletal metal butt, engaging one of the magazines. He fed the first bullet into the chamber. It was ready.

"Didn't know I could use one of these, did you?" He felt much better, authority reestablished. He wedged the gun in the crook of his elbow and adopted a fighting pose, raking the valley with a burst of pretend fire, doing to death a thousand different enemies. Then he turned on the donkey, dispatching it with a volley of whistled sound effects. The beast, unaware of its fate, continued to rip at a clump of tough grass.

"Let me, George. My turn," his brother pleaded.

George, the Commander, shook his head.

"Or I'll tell everyone about Vasso," Eurypides bargained.

George spat. He liked his little brother who, although only thirteen and practically one half, could already run faster and belch more loudly than almost anyone in the village. Eurypides was also craftier than most of his age, and more than capable of a little blackmail. George had no idea precisely what Eurypides was planning to tell everyone about him and Vasso, but in his fragile emotional state any morsel was already too much. He handed over the weapon.

As Eurypides's hand closed around the rubberized grip and his finger stretched for the trigger, the gun barked, five times, before the horrified boy let it fall to the floor.

“The safety!” George yelled, too late. He’d forgotten. The donkey gave a violent snort of disgust and cantered twenty yards along the path in search of less disturbed grazing.

The main advantages of the 9 mm Sten gun are that it is light and capable of reasonably rapid fire; it is neither particularly powerful nor considered very accurate. And its blowback action is noisy. In the crystal air of the Troodos, where the folds of the mountains spread away from Mount Chionistra into mist-filled distances, sound carries like a petrel on the wing. It was scarcely surprising that the British army patrol heard the bark of the Sten gun; what was more remarkable was the fact that the patrol had been able to approach so closely without George or Eurypides being aware of their presence.

There were shouts from two sides. George sprang to retrieve the donkey but already it was too late. A hundred yards beneath them, and closing, was a soldier in khaki and a Highland bonnet. He was waving a .303 in their direction.

Eurypides was already running; George delayed only to sweep up the Sten and two remaining magazines. They ran up the mountain to where the trees grew more dense, brambles snatching at their legs, the pumping of their hearts and rasping breath drowning any sound of pursuit until they could run no further. They slumped across a rock, wild eyes telling each other of their fear, their lungs burning.

Eurypides was first to recover. “Mum’ll kill us for losing the donkey,” he gasped.

They ran a little more until they stumbled into a shallow depression in the ground well hidden by boulders, and there they decided to hide. They lay facedown in the center of the rocky bowl, an arm across each other, listening.

“What’ll they do if they catch us, George? Whip us?” Eurypides had heard dream-churning tales of how the British thrashed boys they believed were helping EOKA, a soldier clinging to each limb and a fifth supplying the whipping with a thin, ripping rod of bamboo. It was like no punishment they received at school, one you could get up and walk away from. With the Tommies, you were fortunate to be able to crawl.

“They’ll torture us to find out where we’re taking the guns, where the men are hiding,” George whispered through dried lips. They both knew what that

meant. An EOKA hide had been uncovered near a neighboring village just before the winter snows had arrived. Eight men were cut down in the attack. The ninth, and sole survivor, not yet twenty, had been hanged at Nicosia Jail the previous week.

They both thought of their elder brother.

“Can’t let ourselves be captured, George. Mustn’t tell.” Eurypides was calm and to the point. He had always been less excitable than George, the brains of the family, the one with prospects. There was even talk of his staying at school beyond the summer, going off to the Pankypriou Gymnasium in the capital and later becoming a teacher, even a civil servant in the colonial administration. If there was still to be a colonial administration.

They lay as silently as possible, ignoring the ants and flies, trying to melt into the hot stone. It was twelve minutes before they heard the voices.

“They disappeared beyond those rocks over there, Corporal. Havnae seen hide nor hair o’ them since.”

George struggled to control the fear that had clamped its jaws around his bladder. He felt disgusted, afraid he was going to foul himself. Eurypides was looking at him with questioning eyes.

From the noises beyond the rocks they reckoned that another two, possibly three, had joined the original soldier and corporal, who were standing some thirty yards away.

“Kids you say, MacPherson?”

“Two o’ them. One still in school uniform, Corporal, short troosers an’ all. Cannae harm us.”

“Judging by the supplies we found on the mule they were intending to do someone a considerable amount o’ harm. Guns, detonators. They even had grenades made up from bits of piping. We need those kids, MacPherson. Badly.”

“Wee bastards’ll probably already huv vanished, Corporal.” A scuffling of boots. “I’ll hae a look.”

The boots were approaching now, crunching over the thick mat of pine debris. Eurypides bit deep into the soft tissue of his lip. He reached for George’s hand, trying to draw strength, and as their ice-cold fingers entwined so George started to grow, finding courage for them both. He was the older, this was his

responsibility. His duty. And, he knew, his fault. He had to do something. He pinched his brother's cheek.

“When we get back, I'll show you how to use my razor,” he smiled. “Then we'll go see Vasso, both of us together. Eh?”

He slithered to the top of the rock bowl, kept his head low, pointed the Sten gun over the edge and closed his eyes. Then he fired until the magazine was empty.

George had never been aware of such a silence. It was a silence inside when, for a moment, the heart stops and the blood no longer pulses through the veins. No bird sang, suddenly no breeze, no whispering of the pines, no more sound of approaching footsteps. Nothing, until the corporal, voice a tone deeper, spoke.

“My God. Now we'll need the bloody officer.”

The officer in question was Francis Ewan Urquhart. Second Lieutenant. Age twenty-two. Engaged on National Service following his university deferment, he personified the triumph of education over experience and, in the parlance of the officers' mess, he was not having a good war. Indeed, in the few months he'd been stationed in Cyprus he'd barely had any war at all. He craved action, all too aware of his callow youth, desperate for the chance to prove himself, yet he had found only frustration. His commander had proved to be a man of chronic constipation, his caution denying the company any chance to show its colors. The EOKA terrorists had been bombing, butchering, and even burning alive so-called traitors, setting them in flames to run down the streets of their village as a sign to others, yet Urquhart's company had broken more sweat digging latrines than hauling terrorists from their foxholes. But that was last week. This week the company commander was on leave, Urquhart was in charge, the tactics had been changed, and his men had walked four hours up the mountain that afternoon to avoid detection. And the surprise seemed to have worked.

At the first crackle of gunfire a sense of opportunity had filled his veins. He had been waiting two miles down the valley in his Austin Champ and it took him less than fifteen minutes to arrive on the scene, covering the last few hundred yards on foot with a spring in his step.

“Report, Corporal Ross.”

The flies were already beginning to gather around the bloodied body of

MacPherson.

“Two boys and a donkey? You can’t be serious,” Urquhart demanded incredulously.

“The bullet didnae seem to unnerstand it was being fired by a bairn, sir.”

The two, Urquhart and Ross, were born to collide, one brought into the world in a Clydeside tenement and the other by Highland patriarchs. Ross had been burying comrades from the Normandy beaches while Urquhart was still having his tie adjusted by his nanny.

A year earlier Urquhart had been the officious little subaltern who had busted Ross from sergeant back down to private after a month’s liquor allowance had disappeared from the officers’ mess at Tel-el-Kebir and Urquhart had been instructed to round up suitable suspects. Ross had only just been given back the second stripe, still making up the lost ground. And lost pay.

Urquhart knew he had to watch his back, but for now he ignored the other’s insolence; he had a more important battle to fight.

The children had stumbled into a remarkably effective natural redoubt. Some twenty feet across, the scraping in the mountainside was backed by a picket line of boulders that effectively denied a clear line of either sight or fire from above, while the ground ran gently away on the valley side, making it difficult to attack except by means of a frontal and uphill assault, a tactic that had already been shown to be mortally flawed. Clumps of bushes hugged the perimeter providing still further cover.

“Suggestions, Corporal Ross?” Urquhart slapped the officer’s Browning at his belt.

The corporal sucked a little finger as though trying to remove a splinter. “We could surrender straightaway, that’d be quickest. Or blow the wee bastards into eternity, if that’s what you want, Lieutenant. One grenade should do the job.”

“We need them alive. Find out where they were headed with those arms.”

“They’re weans. Be famished by breakfast time, come oot wavin’ a white flag an’ a fork.”

“Now, we need them *now*, Corporal. By breakfast time it will be all too late.”

They both understood the urgency. EOKA supply drops were made at specified times; any more than six hours overdue and the hide was evacuated.

They needed shortcuts; it made early capture essential and interrogation techniques sometimes short on patience.

“In life, Ross, timing is everything.”

“In death an’ all,” the Clydesider responded, indicating MacPherson.

“What the hell’s your problem, Corporal?”

“To be honest, Mr. Urquhart, I dinnae hae much stomach for the killing of weans.” MacPherson had a son not much younger than the boys hiding in the rocks. “I’ll do it, if I huv tae. If ye order me. But I’ll tak nae joy fae it. You’re welcome tae any medal.”

“I’ll remember to include your little homily when I write to MacPherson’s parents. I’m sure they’ll be touched.”

The tangerine sun was chasing through the sky, splashing a glow of misleading warmth across the scene. Delay would bring darkness and failure for Urquhart and he was a young man as intolerant of failure in himself as he was in others. He took a Sten from the shoulder of one of his men and, planting his feet firmly in the forest floor, unleashed a fusillade of bullets against the amphitheater of boulders at the back of the bowl. A second magazine followed, dust and sparks spitting from the orange-blond rocks; the noise was awesome.

“You boys,” he shouted. “You cannot escape. Come out, I promise no one will get hurt.”

There was silence. He directed two other members of the section to empty their magazines against the rocks, and suddenly there was a youthful cry of pain. A spent bullet had ricocheted and caught one of the lads a glancing blow. No damage, but surprise and distress.

“Can you speak English? Come out now, before anyone gets hurt.”

Silence.

“Damn them! Do they want to die?” Urquhart beat his palms with frustration. But Ross was on his knees, fiddling with a Mills grenade.

“What on earth...?” Urquhart demanded, but could not avoid taking an involuntary pace backward.

The corporal had bent the pin so that it could not fall out, then with meticulous care and using the stock of a Sten gun for torque he proceeded to unscrew the top of the grenade, lifting it away from the dull metal body

complete with its detonator. The powdered explosive poured out easily into a little pile on the rocks beside his boot. He now reassembled the harmless bomb, and handed it to Urquhart.

“If this doesnae scare those rabbits out of their hole, nothing will.”

Urquhart nodded in understanding. “This is your last chance,” he shouted to the rocks. “Come out or we’ll use grenades.”

“*Elefthería i Thánatos!*” came the reply.

“The EOKA battle cry. Freedom or Death,” Ross explained.

“They’re only children!” Urquhart snapped in exasperation.

“Brave wee buggers.”

Angrily Urquhart wrenched the pin from the grenade, letting the noise of the spring-loaded firing pin drift out across the rocks. Then he threw the grenade into the bowl.

Less than two seconds later it came hurtling out again. The reaction was automatic, the instinct for self-preservation overriding. Urquhart threw himself to the ground, burying his head among the pine needles and cones, trying to count the seconds. There came a muffled pop from the detonator, but nothing more. No blast; no ripping metal or torn flesh. Eventually he looked up to find the figure of Ross towering above him, framed in menacing silhouette against the evening sky.

“Let me help you tae yer feet, sir.” Derision filled every syllable.

Urquhart waved away the proffered hand and scrambled up, meticulously thrashing the dust from his khaki uniform to hide his humiliation. He knew that every Jock in the section was mocking and by morning the tale would have filled all four corners of the officers’ mess. Ross had exacted his revenge.

A rage grew within Urquhart. Not a blind rage that blurs judgment but a wrath that burned and whose light brought appalling clarity.

“Fetch two jerricans of gas from the Champ,” he instructed.

A soldier went scurrying.

“What are you intending to do, Mr. Urquhart?” Ross asked, the triumph evaporated from his voice.

“We need information or examples. Those terrorists can provide either.”

Ross noted the change in the boys’ status. “Examples? Of what?”

Urquhart met the other man's gaze; he saw fear. He had regained the advantage. Then the jerricans arrived.

"Corporal, I want you to get around behind them. Use the cover of those rocks. Then empty the gas into their hide."

"And then what?"

"That will depend upon them."

"They're nothin' but bairns..."

"Tell that to MacPherson. This is a war, not a tea party. So they can come out in one piece or with their tail feathers scorched. Their choice."

"You wouldna burn them out."

"I'll give them far more chance than EOKA would." They knew the bloody truth of that, had both seen the blackened carcasses, hands stretched out like claws in charred agony, fathers and sons often dragged out of church or from the desperate clutches of their families, burned, butchered. As examples. "And the message will get around, serve as a warning. Make it easier for us next time."

"But, sir..."

Urquhart cut him short, handed him a jerrican. "We'll give you covering fire."

Ross took one step back, shaking his head. "Ah'll no' burn them oot. I dinna fight that way. Against bairns."

There was an audible stirring of support from the section's other members. Ross was able, experienced; some of the men owed their lives to that.

"Corporal, I am giving you a direct order. To disobey is a court-martial offense."

"I hae lads of my own."

"And if you don't follow my orders I'll make sure you're locked up so long they will be grown men by the time you next set eyes on them."

Agony had carved deep furrows across the corporal's expression, but still he refused the jerrican. "Rather that, than never being able to look my boys in the eye again."

"This is not me ordering you, Ross, it's your country."

"You do it then. If you hae the stomach fer it."

The challenge had been struck. Urquhart looked around the others, five men

in all, saw they had sided with Ross. He knew he couldn't court-martial the entire section; it would reduce him to a laughingstock. Ross was right; if it were to be done, he would have to do it himself.

"Give me covering fire when I'm around behind them." He eyed the corporal. "No, not you, Ross. You're under arrest."

And he had gone. Ducking low, pacing rapidly through the trees, a can in each hand, until he was well behind the hide. He signaled and one then another of the troops opened up, sending barrages of sound across the scene. Quickly and as quietly as he was able, Urquhart edged up to one of the taller boulders, almost the height of a man, which stood directly behind where the boys were hiding. The cap was off one can; he stretched and spilled all four and a half gallons of stinking fuel down the rock face and into the bowl. The next four and a half gallons followed immediately. Then he retreated.

"You have thirty seconds to come out before we fire the gas!"

Within their rocky hide, George and Eurypides's faces spoke of their dread. As fast as they tried to crawl away from the swamping fuel, they were forced to duck back beneath the blanket of ricocheting bullets. What was worse, the fuel had begun to make the elevations of the rocky bowl slippery, the nails on their boots finding little purchase on the smooth stone. The inevitable result in such a small place was that their clothes became soaked in foul-smelling gas. It made them retch.

"Fifteen seconds!"

"They won't do it, little brother," George tried to convince himself. "But if they do, you jump first."

"We mustn't tell. Whatever happens, we mustn't tell," Eurypides choked.

"Five!"

It was longer than five. Considerably longer. Urquhart's bluff had been called. There was no turning back. He had retained a rag half-soaked in gas; this he tied around a small rock so that the fuel-impregnated ends hung free. He brought out his cigarette lighter, snapped it into life, and touched the rag.

Events moved rapidly from that point. The rag burst into flame, almost engulfing Urquhart's hand, scorching the hair on his arm. He was forced to throw it immediately; it performed a high, smoky arc in the sky above the rocks

before plunging down. Ross shouted. There was a crack. Hot vapor danced above the hide like a chimney from hell. Then a scream, a terrified, violent, boyish shriek of protest. Two heads appeared above the bowl, then the tops of two young bodies as they scrambled up the side. But as the soldiers watched the smaller one seemed to lose his footing, to slip, stumble, he disappeared. The older boy froze, looked back down into the ferment, cried his brother's name and sprang back in.

It was impossible to tell exactly what was happening in the bowl, but there were two sets of screams now, joined in a chorus of prolonged suffering, and death.

"You miserable bastard," Ross sobbed. "I'll no' watch them burn." And already a grenade had left his hand and was sailing toward the inferno.

The explosion blew out the life of the fire. And stopped the screaming.

In the silence that followed, Urquhart was conscious that his hands were trembling. For the first time he had killed—in the national interest, with all the authority of the common weal, but he knew that many would not accept that as justification. Nothing was to be gained from this. Ross stood before him, struggling to compose himself, his fists clenched into great balls that might at any moment strike out. The other men were crowded around, sullen, sickened.

"Corporal Ross, this was not what I had wanted," he started slowly, "but they brought it on themselves. War requires its victims, better terrorists than more like MacPherson. Nor do I wish to see you ruined and locked away as a result of a court-martial. You have a long record of military service of which you can be proud." The words were coming more easily now, his hands had stopped trembling and the men were listening. "I think it would be in everyone's interests that this incident be forgotten. We want no more EOKA martyrs. And I don't want your indiscipline to provide unnecessary work for the Military Provosts." He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. "My Situation Report will reflect the fact that we encountered two unidentified and heavily armed terrorists. They were killed in a military engagement following the death of Private MacPherson. We shall bury the bodies in the forest, in secret, leave no trace. Deny the local villagers an excuse for retaliation. Unless, that is, you want a fuller report to be lodged, Corporal Ross?"

Ross, the large, lumbering, caring soldier-father, recognized that such a full report might damage Urquhart but would in all certainty ruin him. That's the way it was in the Army, pain was passed down the ranks. For Urquhart the Army was nothing more than a couple of years of National Service, for Ross it was his whole life. He wanted to scream, to protest that this had been nothing less than savagery; instead his shoulders sagged and his head fell in capitulation.

While the men began to search for a burial site in the thin forest soil, Urquhart went to inspect the scene within the rocky bowl. He was grateful that there was surprisingly little obvious damage to the dark skin of their faces, but the sweet-sour stench of scorching and gas fumes made him desperately want to vomit. There was nothing of military value in their pockets, but around their necks on two thin chains hung crucifixes engraved with their names. He tore them off; no one should ever discover their identities.

It was dusk when they drove back down the mountain with MacPherson's body strapped in the back. Urquhart turned for one last look at the battle scene. Suddenly in the gathering darkness he saw a light. An ember, a fragment of fire, had somehow survived and been fanned by the evening breeze, causing it to burst back into life. The young pine that stood in the middle of the bowl was ablaze, a beacon marking the site that could be seen for miles around.

He never spoke of the incident on the mountain again but thereafter, at times of great personal crisis and decision in his life, whenever he closed his eyes and occasionally when he was asleep, the brilliant image and the memory of that day would return, part nightmare, part inspiration. The making of Francis Urquhart.

One

I prefer dogs to humans. Dogs are easier to train.

The door of the stage manager's box opened a fraction for Harry Grime to peer into the auditorium.

"Hasn't arrived, then," he growled.

Harry, a leading dresser at the Royal Shakespeare Company, didn't like Francis Urquhart. Fact was, he loathed the man. Harry was blunt, Yorkshire, a raging queen going to seed who divided the universe into them that were for him and them that weren't. And Urquhart, in Harry's uncomplicated and unhumble opinion, weren't.

"Be bugged if that bastard'll get back," Harry had vouchsafed to the entire company last election night. Yet Urquhart had, and Harry was.

Three years on, Harry had changed his hair color from vivid chestnut to a premature orange and shed his wardrobe of tight leather in preference for something that let him breathe and allowed his stomach to fall more naturally, but he had moved none of his political opinions. Now he awaited the arrival of the Prime Minister with the sensibilities of a Russian digging in before Stalingrad. Urquhart was coming, already he felt violated.

"Sod off, Harry, get out from under my feet," the stage manager snapped from his position alongside the cobweb of wires that connected the monitors and microphones with which he was supposed to control the production. "Go check that everyone's got the right size codpiece or something."

Harry bristled, about to retaliate, then thought better of it. The Half had been called, all hands were now at their posts backstage and last-minute warfare over

missing props and loose buttons was about to be waged. No one needed unnecessary aggravation, not tonight. He slunk away to recheck the wigs in the quick-change box at the back of the stage.

It was to be a performance of *Julius Caesar* and the auditorium of the Swan Theatre was already beginning to fill, although more slowly than usual. The Swan, a galleried and pine-clad playhouse that stands to the side of the RSC's main theater in Stratford-upon-Avon, is constructed in semicircular homage to the Elizabethan style and has an intimate and informal atmosphere, 432 seats max. Delightful for the performance but a nightmare for Prime Ministerial security. What if some casual theatergoer who loved Shakespeare much yet reviled Francis Urquhart more, more even than did Harry Grime, took the opportunity to...To what? No one could be sure. The Stratford bard's audiences were not renowned for traveling out with assorted weaponry tucked away in pocket or purse—Ibsen fans, maybe, Chekov's too, but surely not for Shakespeare? Yet no one was willing to take responsibility, not in the presence of most of the Cabinet, a handful of lesser Ministers, assorted editors and wives and other selected powers in the realm who had been gathered together to assist with celebrations for the thirty-second wedding anniversary of Francis and Mortima Urquhart.

Geoffrey Booza-Pitt was the gatherer. The youngest member of Francis Urquhart's Cabinet, he was Secretary of State for Transport and a man with an uncanny eye for opportunity. And for distractions, of all forms. And what better distraction from the shortcomings of Ministerial routine than to block-book a hundred seats in honor of the Master's anniversary and invite the most powerful men in the land to pay public homage? Two thousand pounds' worth of tickets returned a hundred-fold of personal publicity and left favors scattered throughout Westminster, including Downing Street. That's precisely what Geoffrey had told Matasuyo, car giant to the world and corporate sponsor to the RSC, who had quietly agreed to pay for the lot. It hadn't cost him a penny. Not that Geoffrey would tell.

They arrived late, their coming almost regal. If nothing else, after the eleven years they had lived in Downing Street, they knew how to make an entrance. Mortima, always carefully presented, appeared transported onto a higher plane in

an evening dress of black velvet with a high wing collar and a necklace of pendant diamonds and emeralds that caught the theater's lighting and reflected it back to dazzle all other women around her. The wooden floors and galleries of the playhouse complained as people craned forward to catch a glimpse and a ripple of applause broke out among a small contingent of American tourists, which took hold, the infection making steady if reluctant progress through the auditorium to the evident embarrassment of many.

"Le roi est arrivé."

"Be fair, Bryan," chided one of the speaker's two companions from their vantage point in the First Gallery, above and to the right of where the Urquharts were taking their seats.

"Fair? Can we possibly be talking about the same Francis Urquhart, Tom? The man who took the professional foul and set it to Elgar?"

Thomas Makepeace offered no response other than a smile of reproach. He knew Brynford-Jones, the editor of *The Times*, was right. He was also clear that Brynford-Jones knew he knew. Lobby terms. But there were limits to what a Foreign Secretary could say in a public place about his Prime Minister. Anyway, Urquhart was his friend who had repaid that friendship with steady promotion over the years.

"Still, you have to admire his footwork, a true professional," Brynford-Jones continued before offering a wave and a smile in the direction of the Urquharts who were turning to acknowledge those around them. "There's not a man here without the marks of your Prime Minister's studs somewhere on his anatomy. Good old FU."

"Surely there's more to life than simply providing you with copy, Bryan." On Makepeace's other side a third man joined in. Quentin Digby was a lobbyist, and a good one. He not only had an involvement in professional politics but, in his own quiet way, was also something of an activist, representing many charities and environmental concerns. Makepeace didn't know him well but rather liked him.

"I wondered which of us three was going to play the moralizing toad tonight," Makepeace mocked.

The house lights dimmed as the Managing Director of Matasuyo stepped

forward onto the stage to claim his place before the public eye and offer a speech of welcome. The light thrown onto the stage bounced up onto the faces of Makepeace and his companions, giving them a shadowy, conspiratorial look, like witches attending a cauldron.

“Seriously, Tom,” Brynford-Jones continued, anxious to take advantage of the Cabinet Minister’s presence. “He should have gone on his tenth anniversary. Ten bloody years at the top is enough for anyone, isn’t it?”

Makepeace made no comment, pretending to concentrate on the Japanese gentleman’s homily, which was attempting to establish some form of spiritual connection between culture and car bits.

“Wants to go for the record. Outscore Thatcher,” Digby offered. “I wouldn’t mind, but what’s the point? What’s he trying to achieve? We’ve got half the country’s trash cans crammed full of Harrods wrapping paper, which local councils can’t afford to collect while the other half go begging for something to eat.”

“You lobbyists always spoil your case with exaggeration,” Makepeace rebuked.

“Funny, I thought that was a politician’s prerogative,” the editor came back.

Makepeace was beginning to feel penned in. He’d felt that way a lot in recent months, sitting beside editors or standing before his constituents with a pretense of enthusiasm when there was only weariness and disillusionment inside. Something had gone stale. Someone had gone stale. Francis Urquhart. Leaving Makepeace with much that he wanted to say, but little he was allowed to.

“He’s had a good run, Tom. The country’s grateful and all that, but really it’s time for some new blood.”

“His blood.”

“A fresh start for the Government.”

“For you, Tom.”

“We all know the things you hold dear, the causes you stand for.”

“We’d like to help.”

“You know the country isn’t what it was. Or could be. This country has too big a heart to be beholden for so long to one man.”

“Particularly a man such as that.”

“Hell, even the illegal immigrants are leaving.”

“It should be yours, Tom. Makepeace is ever as good a man as Urquhart.”

Respite. The man from Matasuyo had subsided and the play was about to begin; Makepeace was grateful. His head was spinning. He wanted to dispute their claims, play the loyal hound, but couldn't find the words. Perhaps they were right about Urquhart. Without doubt right about himself. They knew he wanted it, enough that at times his mouth ran dry like a man lost in a desert who spots an oasis, only to discover it is a mirage. Power. But not for its own sake, not for a place in the history books like Urquhart, but for now. Today. For all the things that so desperately needed doing and changing.

Both Brynford-Jones and Digby had a strong interest in change, editor and lobbyist, professional revolutionaries by their trade. Having the world standing still was no more an option for them than it was for him, Makepeace thought. Perhaps they would make useful allies, one day, if war ever came. After his friend Francis had left the field. Or perhaps they would all go to hell together among the rogues.

And then there was laughter. Caesar had made his first appearance on stage with a face adorned with heavy makeup that made him look uncannily like Francis Urquhart. The same long profile. Piercing eyes. Receding silver hair. A straight gash across his face for a mouth. A mask that showed neither mirth nor mercy. The arguments backstage had been long and furious when they had learned of Urquhart's imminent presence. Harry had argued vociferously for a boycott and threatened to throw his body into all forms of picket lines and protests but, as the property manager had so successfully argued, “Give it a rest, love. It's been years since your bottom 'alf lived up to the promises of your top 'alf. Bloody years since you last saw your bottom 'alf, I'll bet. Must do it all from memory.”

So they had compromised. In true thespian tradition the show would go on, laden with a little ideological baggage. Yet Harry, once more sneaking a look from prompt side to test the mettle of his protest, was to be disappointed. The living mask slipped. From his privileged position beside Booza-Pitt at the front of the stage Urquhart, an experienced trouper in any public arena, had spotted the danger and responded. Not only was he leading the laughter but he also made

sure that everyone knew it by taking out a white silk handkerchief and waving it vigorously at his protégé.

As the play progressed, Makepeace agonized. Loyalty meant so much, for him it was a political virtue in its own right. Yet he hadn't been sleeping well, a disturbed mind and troubled heart had robbed him of rest, doubts beginning to crowd in on his dreams. And he knew that if he did nothing, simply chafed beneath those doubts, he would lose his dreams as well.

"The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power..."

Loyalty. But to what? Not just to a single man. Great men have their day, only to find that their reputation must fall from the sky like leaves before the autumn storm.

"And therefore think him as a serpent's egg, which, hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous..."

Every Prime Minister he'd ever known had demanded too much, been dispatched. Sacrificed. Bled. By colleagues.

And finally the deed was done. "*Et tu, Brute?*" An exceptionally pitiless portrayal of the assassination, and at every step Urquhart's handkerchief waved and waved.

"Sodding man!" Grime snapped as he stamped about the quick-change box helping the deceased Caesar into his ghost's garb.

"Your little plot didn't work, luvvie," Julius mocked. "Didn't you see him? Laughing his bloody head off at us, so he was."

"Hold still, Big Julie, or I'll run this pin up your arse," Harry snapped. "Anyway, what would you know about plots? The last miserable screenplay you spawned didn't even make it as far as the typist."

"It had a few developmental problems," Julie acknowledged.

"As much sense of direction as a horse up a hedgehog."

"At least I act. You couldn't even play the skull in *Hamlet* on a good day."

"Bitch," Harry pursed, and subsided.

In the auditorium the house lights had announced the interval and thunderous applause reflected the audience's appreciation of a production remarkable for its freshness. It had been a long time since anyone could remember laughing so much through a tragedy but, up in the First Gallery, Digby appeared distracted.

Makepeace probed.

“Sorry. Wondering about the new car,” the lobbyist apologized.

“About the mileage? Whether it’s environmentally friendly? Recyclable?”

“Hardly. It’s four liters of testosterone encased in the silkiest and most explicit Italian styling you can find in this country without getting arrested. Ferrari. Rosso red. My only vice. And parked outside.”

“And you’re worried whether all the wrapping paper is going to be removed from your trash can by the end of the week,” Makepeace taunted.

“More worried that in this brave new world of ours the stereo system will have been ripped off by the end of this performance. What do you think, Secretary of State?”

“Contain yourself, Diggers,” Brynford-Jones interjected. “Nothing lasts forever.”

The editor and lobbyist enjoyed the banter, but Makepeace’s mind had drifted elsewhere. He was gazing down onto the floor of the auditorium where Urquhart, surrounded by enthusing acolytes and attended closely by Geoffrey Booza-Pitt, was replacing his handkerchief.

“Everything pukka, Tom?” Brynford-Jones inquired.

“Yes, of course. Just thinking how right you were. You know. About how nothing lasts forever.”

The red leather box lay open on the backseat, papers untouched. The Minister, Frederick Warburton, had fallen asleep as soon as they reached the motorway—it had been a heavy working dinner and the old boy’s stamina wasn’t what it once was. He was snoring gently, mouth ajar, slumped awkwardly to one side. Should’ve worn his seat belt. The driver studied him carefully in the rearview mirror for some time before deciding he could risk it. Cautiously, while ensuring that the Jaguar’s engine maintained its constant soothing cadence at a steady eighty-three miles an hour, he reached for the volume button of the radio. They were just about to kick off at Upton Park and the next ninety minutes would decide an entire season’s effort. He didn’t want to miss it.

He paused as through the drizzle ahead emerged the rear lights of an old

Escort, trying to prove it was still sparking on all its plugs and not yet ready for the breaker's yard. The Escort's youthful driver cursed; the rotted rubber of his wipers had transformed the motorway into a smear of confusing messages and he was straining to make sense of the scene ahead. He had no eyes for what lay behind. The Minister's driver decided not to risk waking his passenger by braking suddenly, not with the match about to start. He drew over to the middle lane to pass the other vehicle on the inside.

Some events in life—and death—lie beyond reasonable explanation. Afterward men of learning, experience, and great forensic ability may gather to offer their views, yet all too frequently such views serve less as explanation than excuse. Sometimes it is as easy to accept that there are moments when Fate rouses herself from an afternoon nap and, sleep still heavy upon her eyes, points her finger capriciously and with chaotic intent. For it was just as the Minister's driver was leaning toward the radio button once more, less than six feet to the rear and on the inside of the other vehicle, that the Escort's rear offside tire burst. Fate. It swerved violently in front of the Ministerial limousine whose driver, one-handed, snatched at the wheel. The Jaguar hit the central reservation and turned a full, elegant circle on the damp road before crossing the hard shoulder and disappearing down an earth bank.

It came to rest against the trunk of an elm tree. When the driver recovered from his shock he found the Ministerial box battered and torn on the front seat beside him. And so was the Minister.

Two

I hate outbreaks of unnecessary violence. They strip the violence that is essential of its pleasures.

“Francis Urquhart, peacemaker?”

Brynford-Jones made no attempt to hide the incredulity in his voice and he stared closely at Makepeace to gauge the reaction.

“We live in an exciting new world, Bryan. Anything is possible.”

“Agreed. But Francis Urquhart?”

They had stood in line with the other guests on the stairs of Downing Street, waiting to be greeted formally by the Urquharts before being introduced to the Presidents of the divided Cypriot communities. The previous day, on the neutral territory of the ballroom of Lancaster House and under the public eye of the British Prime Minister, Turk and Greek had agreed on the principles of peace and undertaken to settle all outstanding details within three months. The Confederated Republics of Cyprus were about to be born, conflict eschewed, the Right Honorable Francis Urquhart, MP, Acting Midwife, Peacemaker.

Now came celebration. The powers that be within the land had been gathered together in the first-floor reception rooms of Downing Street in order that they might offer thanks to peace and to Francis Urquhart. It was a leveling, for some almost humbling, experience. No matter how wealthy or well-known, they had been treated alike. No cars, no eminence, no exceptions. Stopped at the wrought iron gates barring entrance to Downing Street from Whitehall. Scrutinized by police before being allowed to walk with their wives the full length of the street to the guarded front door. Being made to wait while their coats were exchanged

for a wrinkled paper cloakroom ticket. Five minutes spent in line shuffling piously up the stairs, step by single step, past the portraits of former leaders, the Walpoles, Pitts, Palmerstons, Disraelis, Churchills, and the one and only Margaret Thatcher. “To those we have crucified,” Brynford-Jones had muttered. Then the formal introduction by some red-coated alien from another galaxy who seemed to recognize no one and had great trouble with pronunciation. “Mr. Bimford-Jones” had not been impressed, but then he rarely was.

“It must have been like this at the Court of Versailles,” he offered. “Just before the tumbrels arrived.”

“Bryan, your cynicism runs away with you. Great changes require a little ruthlessness. Credit where it is due,” Makepeace protested.

“And are you ruthless, Tom? Ruthless enough to snatch old Francis’s crown? Because he’s not going to hand it over for Christmas. You’re going to have to snatch it, like he did. Like they all had to. Do you really have what it takes?”

“You need luck, too, in politics,” Makepeace responded, trying to deflect the question but showing no anxiety to finish with either the conversation or the editor.

“Men should be masters of their own fates.”

“You know I’d love the job but the question doesn’t arise. Yet.”

“It never arises when you expect it. You want to achieve great things, you grab Fortune by the balls and hang on for the ride.”

“Bryan, at times I think you’re trying to tempt me.”

“No, not me. I simply present ambition to a man and see if ambition tempts him. I’m strictly a voyeur, the prerogative of the press. The dirty work I leave up to you guys—and girls!” he exclaimed, reaching out to grab the elbow of another guest as she edged through the throng.

Claire Carlsen turned and smiled, her face lighting up in recognition. She was also an MP, at thirty-eight a dozen years younger than Makepeace and the editor.

“And what have you done to earn your place amid this glittering herd?” Brynford-Jones inquired. “I thought nobody below the rank of Earl or Archbishop was allowed at this trough. Certainly not a humble backbencher.”

“It’s called tokenism, Bryan. Apparently professional middle-aged moralizers like you like to have a bit of skirt around to remind them of lost youth. You

know, slobber a bit and go away happy. That's the plan." The smile was warm but the autumn-blue eyes searching. She was tall, almost eye-to-eye with the rotund editor who enjoyed the glint of evening sunlight shining through her blond hair.

Brynford-Jones laughed loudly. "You're too late for confession. I've already owned up to being a voyeur and in your case I'll happily plead guilty. If ever that husband of yours throws you out, you'd be more than welcome to come and stir my evening cocoa."

"If ever I throw that husband of mine out," she corrected, "I'd hope to be stirring more than cocoa in the evenings. Anyway, what have you two been plotting? Strippergrams to the Synod, or something frivolous?"

"I was inquiring whether our friend here has what it takes to succeed in politics, the necessary qualities of energy and ambition to become the next Prime Minister. Would you lay money on him, Claire?"

She arched an eyebrow—she possessed a highly expressive face and, when relaxed, an aura of refreshing mischief. In response to Brynford-Jones's invitation she examined Makepeace as though for the first time, the end of her nose puckered in skepticism, seeming to reach some conclusion before deliberately throwing their attention in an entirely different direction.

"If energy and ambition were all, then our next leader is surely standing over there by the window."

"Not our Geoff? I'd rather emigrate," the editor chuckled, irreverent though not entirely incredulous.

They turned to follow her gaze. In the bay of a grand Georgian window overlooking the garden, the Transport Secretary had pinned the Governor of the Bank of England against the elegant drape.

"Liquid engineering," Claire continued. "He handles it so smoothly the Governor won't even realize when he's been set aside for the next name on the list."

"Our Geoff's got a list?" the editor inquired.

"Surely. Typed on a card in his breast pocket. He has an hour here, so he asks for a copy of the invitation list beforehand, sees how many people he wants to impress or to harangue, then splits his time. Six minutes each. Digital precision."

In silence they watched as Booza-Pitt, without pause for breath or apparent reference to his watch, took the Governor's hand and bade farewell. Then he was moving across the room, shaking hands and offering salutations as he passed, but not stopping.

"Chances are he'll end the program with somebody's bored wife," Claire continued. "It's a regular routine, particularly since he separated from his own wife."

"His second wife," Makepeace corrected.

"Fascinating. The man goes up in my estimation," Brynford-Jones admitted. "Which, I'm forced to admit, still doesn't take him very far. But how do you come by all this delicious and wicked information?"

She pursed her lips. "You know how we girls like to gossip. And you don't think he types his own list, do you?"

The editor knew she was mocking more than Booza-Pitt. He noticed how steady the blue eyes remained throughout her conversation, examining, judging. She didn't miss much. He suspected she used men much more than she was used by them. Her clothes were expensively discreet from some of Knightsbridge's most fashionable couturiers, her sexuality unobtrusive but apparent and all her own. His desire for her was growing by the minute, but he suspected she was not a woman to cross, or to fall for one of his customary "would you like to discuss your profile over supper" ploys. It would be a mistake to miss the woman within by merely tracing over the superficial packaging.

"I believe I should talk to you more often, Claire," he offered.

"I believe you should."

"Aren't you the Booza's parliamentary twin?" he continued. "I seem to remember reading somewhere. You both came into the House together, what—seven years ago? Same age. Both wealthy, darlings of the party conference. Both tipped to go far."

"If only I had his talent."

"Foreign Secretary, d'you think, in a Makepeace Cabinet?" He turned back to his original target.

Makepeace paused, as though to emphasize his words with elaborate consideration. "Not in a million dawns," he replied softly. "The man wouldn't

recognize a political principle or an original idea if it were served up en crouete with oysters.”

“Ah, at last! A breach in your famous collective Ministerial loyalty, Tom. There’s hope for you yet,” the editor beamed, delighted to have discovered a point of such obvious antipathy. He turned to Claire. “I feel an editorial coming on. Although to tell you the truth, my dear, I’m a little worried by all his talk about principles and original ideas. It’s not good for an ambitious man. We’re going to have to work on him.”

She laughed, a genuine expression full of white teeth and pleasure. “You know, Bryan, I think we are.”

Three

Great men are usually bad men. I intend to be a very great man.

Civilian Area, Dhekelia Army Base, British Sovereign Territory, Cyprus

“Greetings, my Greek friend. Welcome to a humble carpenter’s workshop. What part of Allah’s bounty may His servant share with you?”

“Sheep. Seven of them. A week on Friday. And not all fat and sinews like your wife.”

“Seven?” the Turk mused. “One for every night of your week, Glafko. For you I shall endeavor to find the most beautiful sheep in the whole of Turkish Cyprus.”

“It’s Easter, you son of Saladin,” Glafkos the Plumber spat. “And my daughter’s getting married. A big feast.”

“A thousand blessings on the daughter of Glafkos.”

The Greek, an undersized man with a hunched shoulder and the expression of a cooked vine leaf, remained unimpressed. “Chew on your thousand blessings, Uluç. Why was I five shirts short on last week’s delivery?”

The Turk, a carpenter, put aside the plane with which he was repairing a broken door and brushed his hands on the apron spread across his prominent stomach. The sports shirts, complete with skillfully counterfeited Lacoste and Adidas logos, were manufactured within the Turkish sector by his mother’s second cousin, who was obviously “taking the chisel” to them both. But the Greek made a huge markup on the smuggled fakes, which were sold through one of the many sportswear outlets in the village of Pyla, in a shop owned by his nephew. He could afford a minor slicing. Anyway, he didn’t want a damned

Greek to know he was being cheated by one of his own family.

“Shrinkage,” he exclaimed finally, after considerable deliberation.

“You mean you’ve been pulling the sheet over to your side again.”

“But my dear Greek friend, according to our leaders we are soon to be brothers. One family.” His huge hand closed around the plane and nonchalantly he began scraping at the door again. “Why, perhaps your daughter might yet lie with a Turk.”

“I’ll fix the leaking sewers of hell first. With my bare hands.”

The Turk laughed, displaying black teeth and gruff humor. Their battle was incessant, conducted on the British base where they both worked and at various illicit crossing points along the militarized buffer zone that separated Greek and Turkish communities. They could smuggle together, survive and even prosper together, but that didn’t mean they had to like each other, no matter what those fools of politicians decreed.

“Here, Greek. A present for your wife.” He reached into a drawer and removed a small bottle marked Chanel. “May it fill your nights with happiness.”

Glafkos removed the top and sniffed the contents, pouring a little into the open palm of his hand. “Smells like camel’s piss.”

“From a very genuine Chanel camel. And very, very cheap,” Uluç responded, rolling his eyes.

The Greek tried to scrape off the odor on his shirt, then examined the bottle carefully. “I’ll take six dozen. On trial. And no shrinkage.”

The Turk nodded.

“Or evaporation.”

Uluç entered upon another hearty chuckle, yet as quickly as it had arrived his pleasure was gone and in place a gray cloud hovered about his brow. He began stroking his mustache methodically with the tip of a heavily callused finger, three times on each side, as though attempting to smooth away an untidiness that had entered his life.

“Wind from your wife’s cooking?” Glafkos the Plumber ventured.

Uluç the Carpenter ignored the insult. “No, my friend, but a thought troubles me. If we are all told to love one another, Turk and Greek, embracing each other’s heart instead of the windpipe—what in the name of Allah are you and I

going to do?”

Four

If ignorance is bliss then Parliament must be filled with happy men.

As individuals most were modest, middle class, often dull. And proud of it. Collectively, however, they shared a bloodlust of animalistic intensity that found expression in waves of screamed enthusiasm that were sent crashing across the court.

“Changed, hasn’t it?” Sir Henry Ponsonby mused, his thin face masked by the shade of a large Panama. He didn’t need to add that in his view this could not have been for the better. As Head of the Civil Service he took a deal of convincing that change was anything other than disruptive.

“You mean, you remember when we English used to win?”

“Sadly that’s ancient history of a sort that isn’t even part of the core curriculum anymore.” He sniffed. “No. I mean that every aspect of life seems to have become a blood sport. Politics. Journalism. Academia. Commerce. Even Wimbledon.”

Down on the court the first Englishman to have been seeded at the All England Tennis Championships for more than two decades scrambled home another point in the tiebreak; a further two and he’d survive to fight a deciding set. The crowd, having sulked over the clinical humiliation of its national hero throughout the first horn and a half, had woken to discover he was back in with a chance. On the foot-scuffed lawn before them a legend was in the making. Perhaps. Better still, the potential victim was French.

“I may be an academic, Henry. Even an international jurist. But deep inside there’s part of me that would give everything to be out there right now.”

Sir Henry started at this unanticipated show of emotion. From unexceptional origins Clive Watling had established a distinguished career as an academic jurist and steady hand, QC, MA, LLB, and multiple honorary distinctions, redbrick reliable, a man whose authority matched his broad Yorkshire girth. Flights of physical enthusiasm were not part of the form book. Still, everyone was allowed a touch of passion, and better tennis balls than little boys.

“Well, that’s not exactly what we had in mind for you, old chap,” Sir Henry began again. “Wanted to sound you out. You know, you’ve established a formidable standing through your work on the International Court, widely respected and all that.”

Another point was redeemed for national honor and Watling couldn’t resist an involuntary clenching of his fists in response. Sir Henry’s thin red line of lips closed formation. The mixture of tension and heat on Number One Court stifled any further attempt at conversation as the tennis players squared up once more.

A blow. A flurry of arms and fevered shouts. Movement of a ball so fast that few eyes could follow while all hearts sailed with it. A cloud of English chalk dust, a cry of Gallic despair, and an eruption of noise from the stands. The set was won and from the far end of the court came the sound of hoarse voices joined together in the chorus of “Rule, Britannia.” Sir Henry raised his eyes in distaste, failing to notice his companion’s broad grin. Sir Henry was a traditionalist, unaccustomed to expressing emotion himself and deprecating its expression by others. As he was to express to others in his club later that week, this was scarcely his *scene*. They were forced to wait until the inevitable wave had washed across them—good grief, was Watling actually flexing his thighs?—before being allowed to resume their thoughts.

“Yes, I’ve been fortunate, Henry, received a lot of recognition. Mostly abroad, of course. Not so much here at home. Prophet in his own country, you know?” And grammar school achiever in a juridical system still dominated by Oxbridge elitists. Like Ponsonby.

“Not at all, my dear fellow. You’re held in the very highest regard. We English are simply a little more reticent about these things.”

Sir Henry’s words were immediately contradicted by an outburst of feminine hysteria from behind as the players resumed their places for the final set. It was

noticeable that the many expressions of patriotic fervor emerging from around the stands were becoming mixed with vivid Francophobia. Such naked passions made Ponsonby feel uncomfortable.

“Let me come straight to the point, Clive. The Cypriots want to settle their domestic squabbles. Shouldn’t be beyond reach, both Greeks and Turks appear to be suffering an unaccustomed outbreak of goodwill and common sense. Maybe they’ve run out of throats to cut, or more likely been tempted by the foreign aid packages on offer. Anyway, most of the problems are being resolved, even the frontiers. They both know they’ve got to make a gesture, give something up.”

“Are their differences of view large?”

“Not unduly. Both sides want the barbed wire removed and most of the proposed line runs through mountains, which are of damn all value to anyone except goatherds and hermits.”

“There’s offshore through the continental shelf.”

“Perceptive man! That’s the potential stumbling block. Frankly, neither side has any experience of sea boundaries so they want an international tribunal to do the job for them. You know, give the settlement the stamp of legitimacy, avoid any loss of face on either side. All they need is a little bandage for national pride so they can sell the deal to their respective huddled masses. They’re already surveying the waters, and they’ve agreed an arbitration panel of five international judges with Britain taking the chair.”

“Why Britain, for God’s sake?”

Ponsonby smiled. “Who knows the island better? The old colonial ruler, the country both Greeks and Turks mistrust equally. They’ll choose two of the judges each, with Britain as the impartial fifth. And we want you to be the fifth.”

Watling took a deep breath, savoring his recognition.

“But we want it all signed and sealed as soon as possible,” Ponsonby continued, “within the next couple of months, if that could be. Before they all change their bloody minds.”

“Ah, a problem.”

“Yes, I know. You’re supposed to spend the summer lecturing in considerable luxury in California. But we want you here. In the service of peace

and the public interest. And, old chap, His Majesty's Government would be most appreciative."

"Sounds like a bribe."

A double fault, the crowd groaned. Ponsonby leaned closer.

"You're long overdue for recognition, Clive. There's only one place for a man of your experience." He paused, tantalizing. "You'd make a tremendous contribution in the House of Lords."

Ponsonby offered an impish smile; he enjoyed dispensing privilege. Watling, by contrast, was trying desperately to hide the twitch that had appeared at the corner of his mouth. As a boy he'd dreamed of opening the batting for Yorkshire; this ran a close second.

"Who else will be on the panel of judges?"

"Turks have nominated a Malaysian and some Egyptian professor from Cairo..."

"That would be Osman. A good man."

"Yes. Muslim Mafia."

"He's a good man," Watling insisted.

"Of course, they're all good men. And so are the Greek lot. They've chosen Rospovitch from Serbia—nothing to do with him being Orthodox Christian, I hasten to add. The thought would never have entered a Greek mind."

"And the fourth?"

"Supplied by Greece's strongest ally in Europe, the French. Your old chum from the International Court, Rodin."

"Him!" Watling couldn't hide his disappointment. "I've crossed judgments with that man more often than I care to remember. He's as promiscuous with his opinions as a whore on the Avenue Foch. Can't bear the man." He shook his head. "The thought of being cooped up with him brings me no joy."

"But think, Clive. The panel is split down the middle, two-two, by appointment. You'll have the deciding vote. Doesn't matter a damn about Rodin or any of the others, you can get on and do the job you think is right."

"I'm not sure, Harry. This is already beginning to sound like a political poker game. Would this be a proper job? No arm-twisting? I'll not be part of any grubby backstage deal," the lawyer warned, all Northern stubbornness, drawing

in his chins. “If I were to handle this case it would have to be decided on its merits.”

“That’s why you’ve got to do it, precisely because you’re so irritatingly impartial. Let me be frank. We want you for your reputation. With you involved, everything will be seen to be fair. Smother them in Hague Conventions and peaceful precedent. Frankly, from the political point of view it doesn’t matter a dehydrated fig what you decide, in practice it will be little more than a line drawn across the rocks. A half mile here or there on which you couldn’t grow a bag of beans. But what it will do is enable the Cypriot politicians to sew up a deal they badly need. So come down on whatever side you like, Clive, there’ll be no pressure from us. All we want is a settlement.”

They paused. The crowd was rising to the boil once more as the decisive set began to take shape. Watling still hesitated; it was time for the final nudge.

“And I suspect it would be appropriate to speed things along at our end, too. No need to wait in a long line, I think we could ensure your name appeared in the very next Honors List, at New Year’s. Wouldn’t want any uncertainty clouding your deliberations.” Ponsonby was laughing. “Sorry about the hurry. And about California. But there’s pressure on. The Cypriots have been at war with each other for a quarter of a century; it’s time to draw the curtain on their little tragedy.”

“You’re assuming I’ll say yes? In the interests of a peerage?”

“Dear fellow, in the interests of British fair play.”

Further exchanges were rendered impossible, buried beneath the weight of noise. The French player had lunged, tripped, become entangled in the net as in desperation he tried to save a vital rally. Break point. The crowd, as one and on its feet, bellowed its delight.

The captain of the seismic vessel *Happy Valley* flicked the butt of his cigarette high above his head, watching it intently as it hung in the heavy air before dipping and falling reluctantly out of sight beyond the trawler’s hull. His lungs were burning; he tried to strangle a cough, failed, shivered violently, spat. He’d promised his wife to give up the bloody things and had tried but, out here, day

after day spent under callous skies, crisscrossing the featureless seas of the eastern Mediterranean, he found himself praying for storms, for mutiny, for any form of distraction. But there was none. He'd probably die of boredom long before the weed did for him.

He ached in his bones for the old days, running tank spares into Chile or stolen auto parts into Nigeria, his manifests a patchwork of confusion as he confronted the forces of authority, slipping between their legs with a cargo of contraband as a child evades a decrepit grandparent. Yet now his work was entirely legitimate; he thought the dullness of it all would crush his balls.

So those Byzantine bastards in Cyprus had agreed to exorcize their ghosts and reach a compromise. Peace to all men, whether Greek or Turk and no matter whose daughters they'd raped or goats they'd stolen. Or was it the other way around? Hell, he was French Canadian and loathed the lot, but they wanted their offshore waters surveyed so they could agree to an amicable split. And the sanctions-busting business wasn't what it used to be, not with peace breaking out everywhere. Seismic was at least a job. Until the next war.

From the sea behind him came the explosive thud of compressed air. Once, he remembered, it had been bullets and mines. He'd never thought he'd die of boredom. He squinted into the setting sun at the lines of floats and hydrophones that trailed for three thousand meters beyond the *Happy Valley*, crisscrossing the seas on a precise grid pattern controlled by satellite while bouncing shock waves off the muds and shales below the seabed and down the throats of the computers. The damned computers had the only air conditioning on the vessel while the men fried eggs in their underwear. But, as his bosses at Seismic International never ceased to remind him, this was a thirty-thousand-dollar-a-day operation, the captain and his crew were the cheapest part of it and by far the easiest to replace.

He spat at a seagull that had perched on the rail beside him. The bird rose languidly into the skies behind the vessel, examined the creamy wake for fish and, finding none, gave a cry of contempt before departing in search of a proper trawler. Christ, even the bloody birds couldn't stick the ship. And what was the point? Everyone knew there was nothing but a lot of scrap iron and shards of old pottery down there; not even any fish to talk of, not after they'd blown the once

thriving marine world apart with old grenades and other forms of indiscriminate fishing.

He couldn't stick this outburst of peace. He wanted another war. And another cigarette. He coughed and began searching his pockets.

Five

A nation's pride was never defended successfully by good men. Good men find it impossible to reach the depths required.

He was standing in his dress shirt, bow tie cast aside, staring out through the shardproof curtains of the bedroom window across St. James's Park when she came in. The room was in darkness, his face cast like a wax mask in the reflection from the lighting beneath the trees in the park. Francis Urquhart, shoulders down, hands thrust deep into his dress trouser pockets, looked miserable.

"They turned old Freddie off," he whispered.

"Darling?"

"Old Freddie Warburton. The car crash? On life support? They decided there was no point, Mortima. So they turned him off."

"But I thought you said he was useless."

Urquhart spun around to face his wife. "Of course he was useless. Utterly and comprehensively useless. I'm surprised they could even tell when his brain had stopped functioning. But that's not the point, is it?"

"Then what is the point, Francis?"

"The point, Mortima, is that he was the only surviving member of my original Cabinet from all those years ago. They'll say it's the end of an era. My era. Don't you see?"

Mortima had begun taking off her jewelry, methodically preparing herself for bed in the semilight while she considered her husband's fragile mood. "Don't you think you're overreacting a little?" she ventured.

“Of course I am,” he replied. “But they’ll overreact, too, the wretched media always do. You know how the poison has begun to drip. Should’ve retired on his tenth anniversary. An aging administration in need of new ideas and new blood. An age that is passing. Now with bloody Freddie away they’ll say it’s passed. Gone.” He sat down on the edge of his bed. “It makes me feel so...alone, somehow. Except for you.”

She knelt on his bed and began to work away at the tension in his shoulders. “Francis, you are the most successful Prime Minister this country has ever had. You’ve won as many elections as anyone, in three months’ time you will have passed Margaret Thatcher’s record of time in office. Your place in the history books is assured.”

He turned. She could see the jaw muscles working away, making his temples throb.

“That’s it, Mortima. I feel as if I’m already history. All yesterday, no longer today. No tomorrow.”

It was back, his black mood, when he raged at the pointlessness of his life and the ingratitude and incompetence of the world around him. The moods never lasted long, but undeniably they were lasting longer. The challenge had lost its freshness, he needed dragons to slay but instead they seemed to have crawled away and hidden between the subclauses of interminable policy documents and Euro regulations. The cloak of office hung heavily on his shoulders, ceremonial robes where once there had been armor. He had towered like a giant above the parliamentary scene, quite beyond the reach of his foes, but something had changed, perhaps in him and certainly in others. They speculated openly about how long he would last before he stepped down, about who would be the most likely successor. His reputation for slicing through the legs of young pretenders was formidable, but now they seemed to have formed a circle around his campfire, skulking in the shadows, staying just beyond his reach, finding safety in growing numbers while they waited for their moment to step into the light. A few weeks ago he had appeared in the Chamber at Question Time, ready as always to defend himself against their arrows, carrying with pride the shield that bore the dents and scars of so many successful parliamentary battles. Then a young Opposition backbencher whom Urquhart scarcely recognized had risen to

his feet.

“Does the Prime Minister know the latest unemployment figure for this country?”

And sat down.

Impudence! Not “Will he comment on” or “How can he excuse” but “Does he know.” Of course Urquhart knew, two million or other, but he realized he needed not an approximation but the precise figure and had searched in his briefing notes. He shouldn’t have needed to search; he should have known. *But the damned figure changed every month!* And as he had searched, his glasses slipped, and the Opposition benches had erupted as he scrabbled. “He doesn’t know, doesn’t care!” they shouted. He had found the answer but by then it was too late.

A direct hit.

It was unlike Francis Urquhart. He had bled, shown he was mortal. And the black moods had increased.

“I sometimes wonder what it’s all been for, Mortima. What you and I have to look forward to. One day we’ll walk out through that door for the last time and...then what? Hot chocolate and woolen underwear?” He shivered as her fingers reached the knot at the back of his neck.

“You’re being silly,” she scolded. “That’s a long way off and, anyway, we’ve discussed it many times before. There’s the Urquhart Library to establish. And the Urquhart Chair of International Studies at Oxford. There’s so much we will still have to do. And I met a publisher at the reception this evening. He was enthusing about your memoirs. Said the Thatcher books went for something like three million pounds and yours will be worth far more. Not a bad way to start raising the endowment money we need for the Library.”

His chin had fallen onto his chest once more. She realized the talk of memoirs had been misjudged.

“I’m not sure. Not memoirs, I don’t think I can, Mortima.”

“We shall need the money, Francis. As much as we shall need each other.”

He turned sharply to look at her, staring intensely. In the dark she couldn’t detect whether the cast in his eye betrayed mirth or yet deeper melancholy.

“No memoirs,” he repeated. “Setting down the old falsehoods and inventing

new ones. I couldn't write about my colleagues in that way, speaking such ill of the departed. God knows, I uttered lies enough to bury them, I couldn't pursue them beyond the grave. Not at all. Not for a King's ransom." He paused. "Could I, Mortima?"

Hakim was angry. His coffee was cold, his mustache growing white, his talents underappreciated, his bank unsympathetic, and everyone knew him simply as Hakim. Not *Air Hakim*, not *Yaman Hakim*, not *Old Friend and Colleague Hakim*. There was a small sign on his office door to that effect; they would carve it on his coffin, "*Hakim the Forgotten*." Then they would forget him, the wife, the kids, the bosses, his bank manager. All of them. Especially his bank manager. He sipped the lukewarm mud in his coffee cup and pursed his lips in disgust. A lifetime's conscientious work and yet all he would have to take with him when the time came to go were his unfulfilled dreams.

He paused to consider. What would he most like to take with him into the afterlife? Young girls? Gold? An air-conditioned Mercedes? The vineyard he had always coveted? Probably young girls, he decided. No, on second thought he would take his bank manager. Then they could both burn.

He smiled to himself, then coughed painfully. The damned pollution was getting to his chest again. It was one of the many problems of building a capital city in the armpit of Anatolia where they burned filthy brown coal and choked the streets with gas fumes. And they were slowly, remorselessly congesting his lungs. A lifetime's service in order that he could choke to death. And be forgotten.

If he just locked the door from the inside and rotted, would anybody notice? His was a miserable office, even by the unexceptional standards of TNOOC, the Turkish National Oil Corporation—shelves crammed with old manuals and reports, walls plastered with charts covered in bizarre patterns, a desk dusted with coffee stains and cigarette ash, the dusty accompaniments of his work as a geophysicist. For all he knew the office's previous occupant might still be hiding within the bowels of the small document cupboard in the corner—even though this had been Hakim's office for fourteen years.

He turned back to the computer screen and reexamined the seismic cross sections that had started coming in from the survey. There seemed to be little of interest, everyone knew there was nothing in the seas around Cyprus—TNOC wouldn't have bothered buying in the seismic had Cypriot waters not abutted Turkey's own. All other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean seemed to have oil, not only the Turks but the Libyans, Syrians, Egyptians, even damned Greeks—everyone except little Cyprus, who perhaps needed it more than most. Dry as dust. God's mystery. A desert amid a sea of black gold. Such is the oil business.

He looked again. They all laughed at him, old Hakim the Forgotten, but he had the patience for the tedious work of analysis, not like these youngsters whose only interest was in football and fu...He stopped. He experienced a strange tingling in his fingers as they hovered over the keyboard, a sensation that he had been here before, or somewhere much like it. A long time ago. Where could it have been? He polished his glasses, giving himself time to remember. These were sedimentary rocks, that was for sure, but sedimentaries bearing oil were like Greeks bearing gifts. Rarely genuine. What type might they be?

Then he understood. He had not only seen it on geological logs, he'd even stuck his hand in the bloody mud. Thirty years ago, as a student at the Petroleum Institute when they had visited an exploratory well being drilled near the sea border with Cyprus. It had pulled up all the right geological formations, the sandwich of spongy sandstones that in theory might have held a billion barrels of oil but had yielded not a single drop. Now he thought he knew why. One of the seismic lines from the recent survey had been shot up to the site of the dry well and went straight through what was obviously a fault plane, a slippage in the earth's crust that played hell with the geology.

He started coughing again, nerves this time. Somewhere he reckoned he still had a copy of his Petroleum Institute report and its detailed findings from the old well. The document cupboard. The thin metal door squealed in protest as with shaking fingers he began ransacking the contents—no skeleton guarding the pirate's doubloons but ancient treasure nonetheless. It was in his hands, a slim ring-bound document that trembled like leaves in an autumn wind as he turned the pages.

It was all there. The right structures. Traces in the drill cuttings of residual

oil. But no accumulation, the raw wealth drained by some unknown action.

And the screen yelled at him. "*Fault!*"

Without the seismic revealing the fault plane there had been no way thirty years ago to understand why such suitable sandstones had been bone-dry. And without detailed knowledge of the sandstones revealed by the well, there was no way to understand from the seismic alone what the structures might portend.

But Hakim the Geophysicist knew, and he was the only soul in the world in a position to know.

The fault plane had fouled up everything. Trashing all the logic. Tilting the geological structures. Draining the sandstones dry.

And Hakim thought he knew where a billion barrels of oil had gone.

Six

I regard being called a hypocrite as something of a compliment. It means I can see both sides of the question.

“I hate memorial services. The cant. The falseness. The empty phrases and hollow praise. I *hate* memorial services.”

Urquhart was in one of those humors again. He had stamped impatiently as he had waited at the east door of St. Margaret’s Church to be escorted by the rector, and his face had been set in stone while walking to his appointed pew, past the acquiescent, nodding faces with their spaniel smiles and synthetic sympathies worn above black ties and scarves. They had thought his countenance denoted sadness, distress at the loss of such a good friend and colleague as Freddie, Baron Warburton, and indeed his emotions were fractured, but not in pity for others.

The turbid mood had begun the previous night when he had opened his red box to discover that his press officer, thinking it might be appropriate, had enclosed a few of old Freddie’s obituaries. The bloody fool. Reading that Warburton’s passing marked “the end of an era” and that he had been “the last of FU’s dirty dozen” had done little to enhance the Prime Minister’s enthusiasm about either the press or his press officer.

“Can’t stand it, Mortima. They hound a man into the grave then, soon as he’s dead and gone, reach for their sopping tissues and try to prove what a great man he was, how his loss somehow threatens culture, the country, civilization as a whole. The only reason I kept Freddie was because he followed like a lamb. Everybody knew that. But now he’s a dead lamb they speak of him as a lion. Not

a single mention anywhere that his veins had been swept quite clear of blood by alcohol. Nor of that little tangle in Shepherd Market when two ladies of the night abandoned him without either trousers, wallet, or his Downing Street pass.”

“He was loyal, Francis.”

“I had his balls in a vise, Mortima, of course he was loyal!” Urquhart brought himself to a sudden halt, closing his eyes. He’d gone too far. He should be used to honoring the dead at Westminster; there had been so many over the years, but such memories only brought out the worst in him. “Forgive me. That was unnecessary.”

“Forgiven.”

“It’s just that...what will they say about me, Mortima? When I’ve gone?”

“That you were the greatest Prime Minister of the century. That you rewrote the record books as well as the law books. And lived a long and contented retirement.”

“I doubt that. How many great leaders have ever truly found contentment in retirement?”

She searched for a name, but none came to her.

“I don’t want to grow old and bitter, after all this has gone. I just don’t have a vision of myself retiring, being replaced. Ever.” He waved a hand at her. “Oh, I know I’m being pathetic but...retirement for me isn’t filled with long summer evenings but endless nights dancing with ghosts. The ghosts of what might have been. And of what once was.”

“I understand.”

“Yes, I know you do. You’re the only one who does. I owe you so very much.”

She sat beside him now, in the church of St. Margaret’s at Westminster, which stood in the lee of the great Abbey, as they listened to the choristers singing a plaintive anthem. Mortima’s eyes were fixed on the young treble soloist, a boy of perhaps twelve with fair hair falling across his forehead and the tender voice of an angel that filled the church like the rays of a new sun. What a difference it might have made, he considered, if they had been able to have children; it could have touched their lives with a sense of immortality and brought music to their souls. Yet it was not to be. She had bound the wound until

it scarred and toughened, never complaining, though he knew the hurt at times cleaved her in two; instead she had invested all her emotional energy in him and his career. Their career, in truth, for without her he could not have succeeded or sustained. For Mortima it had been a barren crown, a sacrifice in many manners far deeper than death, and all for him. He owed her everything.

The choir had finished and she looked around at him, a fleeting softness in her eye that he knew brimmed with regret. How much easier retirement would be to contemplate, had they had children. Instead all they would leave behind them were a Library and the fickle judgment of history. *Après moi, rien*. Once he had thought that would be enough but, as the years passed and mortality knocked, he was no longer sure.

“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men...”

Clerical hyperbole and half-truth, a momentary suspension of political life in the pews behind him while piously they honored death and, like birds of prey, plotted more.

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure.”

Men sang such tunes in sleepy ritual then woke to ignore them so blithely. Yet, on the day of reckoning, what would be his own case? He suffered a pang of momentary doubt as ghosts crowded into the shadows of his mind, but then he was clear, as he had always been. That what he had done was not for himself, but for others, for his country. That the affairs of men require sacrifices to be made, and that the sacrifices he had made had always been motivated by public and national interest. Sacrifice of others, to be sure, sometimes in blood, but had not he and Mortima made sacrifices of their own, two lives devoted to one cause in the service of others?

“...that all things may be so ordered and settled by their endeavors, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established among us for all generations.”

Crap. Life was like setting sail in a sieve upon a wild and disorderly sea. Most people got sick, many drowned.

“In silence, let us remember Frederick Archibald St. John Warburton.”

Best damned way to remember the man. In complete bloody silence. But it was not the way Urquhart intended to go.

“Thy will be done on earth...”

And there he drew the line. No, that was not good enough, never had been good enough for Urquhart. Some men used morality as a crutch, an excuse—always the men who failed and achieved nothing. Morality was not the way through the swamp but the swamp itself, waiting to ensnare you, bind your limbs, drag you under. Great empires had not been built or sustained on such poor footings, or the British people protected from the plottings of envious foreigners by prayer. In the end, those who honored weakness were weak themselves. A great man was judged by how high he climbed, not by how long he could remain on his knees.

When the time came, he would not go in silence, he would depart with so much clamor that it would echo through the ages. Francis Urquhart would be master of his own fate.

“Amen.”

Geoffrey Booza-Pitt revealed an unusual degree of self-consciousness as he faced his Prime Minister across the desk of the Downing Street study, hands clasped together, knuckles showing white and a smile seeming painted and fixed. It was not unusual for him to seek a private audience, and within limits Urquhart encouraged it; Geoffrey was a notorious gossip and adept at stealing others' ideas, which he could either claim as his own or abandon with ridicule depending on the reception given to them by his master. He was without doubt the finest ankle-tapper in the Cabinet, displaying fastidious team loyalty in public while dexterous at sending his colleagues sprawling in front of goal,

usually clipping them from the blind side and always with an expression of pained innocence. A useful source of information and amusement for Urquhart, who relished the sport.

Urquhart had assumed that Booza-Pitt would be laying the ground for a change of responsibility at the next reshuffle. Geoffrey was a young man constantly on the move; ever since he had kicked open the door of the pen with a series of brilliant pyrotechnic displays at party conference he had proved impossible to pin down to any job or, for those who had memories for such things, to any guiding political principle. But in that he was not unique, and his effervescent energy, which is the hallmark of some slightly undersized men, more than made up for any lack of depth in the eyes of most observers. Geoffrey was going places—he left no listener in any doubt of the fact and such enthusiasm to many is infectious. And it was no secret around Westminster that Geoffrey would welcome a new job. As Transport Secretary for the last two years he had long since grown exasperated with the futility of trying to siphon twentieth-century cars through London's nineteenth-century road system and desperately wanted to escape the gridlock for some new challenge—any new challenge, so long as it came in the form of perceptible promotion. Move on before you grow roots and others grow bored was the Booza-Pitt rule, a creed he followed as much in love as in politics. He'd already scraped through two marriages; his ribald and envious colleagues referred to his Westminster house as the In & Out Club. Geoffrey's response had been to make a dubious virtue of necessity and to eschew further matrimonial entanglement, instead choosing his companions on an à la carte basis from the lengthy menu provided by the women of Westminster. Being single, it merely enhanced the dynamic impression.

Yet in the subdued lighting of Urquhart's study, the Transport Secretary belied his image. The neatly trimmed sandy hair had tumbled across his forehead, the eyes cast down, the broad and slightly crooked chin that normally afforded an aura of rugged athleticism tonight looked simply askew. A schoolboy come to confess.

“Geoffrey, dear boy. What news do you bring from the battle front? Are we winning?” He laid aside the gold-ribbed fountain pen with which he had been signing letters, forcing Booza-Pitt to wait, and suffer.

“Polls seem to be...not too bad.”

“Could be better.”

“Will be.”

Urquhart studied the other man. The eyes were rimmed in red; he thought he could detect the bite of whiskey on his breath. Trouble.

“Come to the point, Geoffrey.”

There was no resistance; his composure drained and the shoulders drooped. “I’ve got...a little local difficulty, FU.”

“Women.”

“Is it that obvious?”

The Minister was known to be a man of modest intellect and immoderate copulation; Urquhart had assumed it was only a matter of time before he stubbed his toe in public. “In this business it’s always either women or money—at least in our party.” He leaned forward in a gesture of paternal familiarity, encouraging confession. “She wasn’t dead, was she? Almost anything can be smoothed over, except for live animals and dead women.”

“No, of course not! But it’s...more complicated than that.”

More than a stubbed toe—a broken leg, perhaps? Amputation might be called for. “Well, so far we have one—one?—live woman. Tell me more.”

“The chairman of my local party is going to divorce his wife on the grounds of adultery, citing me.”

“It is true, I assume.”

Booza-Pitt nodded, his hands still clasped between his knees as though defending his manhood from the enraged husband.

“Embarrassing. Might make it difficult to get yourself reelected for the next election with him in the chair.”

Booza-Pitt sighed deeply and rapidly several times, expelling the air forcefully as though attempting to extirpate demons within.

“He says he’s not going to be there. He’s very bitter. Plans to resign from the party and go to the newspapers with the story.”

“A tangled web indeed.”

“And make all sorts of ridiculous allegations.” This was almost blurted. Control of his breathing had gone.

“That you seduced her...”

“And that I got her to invest money in property on my behalf.”

“So?”

“Property that was blighted by proposed road building schemes.”

“Let me guess. Schemes that were about to be canceled. Scrapped. So lifting the blight and greatly increasing the value of the property. Inside information known only to a handful of people. Including the Secretary of State for Transport. You.”

The lack of response confirmed Urquhart’s suspicions.

“Christ, Geoffrey, you realize that would be a matter for not only resignation, but also criminal prosecution.”

He wriggled like a worm on a hook. Piranha bait. Urquhart left him dangling as he considered. To convict or to assist, punish or protect? He had just buried one Cabinet member; to bury a second in such rapid succession could look more than unfortunate. He swiveled his pen on the blotter in front of him, like a compass seeking direction.

“You can assure me that these accusations are false?”

“Lies, all lies! You have my word.”

“But I assume there are land registry deeds and titles with dates that to the cynical eye will appear to be more than coincidence. How did she know?”

“Pillow talk, perhaps, no more than that. I...I may have left my Ministerial box open in her bedroom on one occasion.”

Urquhart marveled at the younger man’s inventiveness. “You know as well as I do, Geoffrey, that if this comes out they won’t believe you. They’ll hound you right up the steps of the Old Bailey.”

The fountain pen was now pointed directly at Booza-Pitt, like an officer’s sword at a court-martial, in condemnation. Urquhart produced a sheet of writing paper, which he laid alongside it. “I want you to write me a letter, Geoffrey, which I shall dictate.”

Awkwardly, with the movements of a man freezing in the Arctic desert, Booza-Pitt began to write.

“Dear Prime Minister,” Urquhart began. “I am sorry to have to inform you that I have been having an affair with a married woman, the wife of the chairman

of my local association.”

Geoffrey raised pleading eyes, but Urquhart nodded him on.

“Moreover, she has accused me of using confidential information available to me as a Government Minister to trade in blighted property and enrich myself, in breach not only of Ministerial ethics but also of the criminal law.’ New paragraph, Geoffrey. ‘While I have given you my word of honor that these accusations are utterly without foundation, in light of these allegations...’”

Booza-Pitt paused to raise a quizzical brow.

“...I have no alternative other than to tender my resignation.”

The death warrant. A sob of misery bounced across the desk.

“Sign it, Geoffrey.” The pen had become an instrument of punishment. “But don’t date it.”

A dawning of hope, a stay of execution. Booza-Pitt did as he was told, managed a smile. Urquhart retrieved the paper, examined it thoroughly, and slid it into the drawer of his desk. Then his voice sank to a whisper, like a vault expelling the last of its air.

“You contemptible idiot! How dare you endanger my Government with your sordid little vices? You’re not fit to participate in a Francis Urquhart Cabinet.”

“I’m so dreadfully sorry. And appreciative...”

“I created you. Made a space for you at the trough.”

“Always grateful...”

“Never forget.”

“Never shall. But...but, Francis. What are we going to do about my chairman?”

“I may, just possibly, be able to save your life. What’s his name?”

“Richard Tennent.”

“Have I ever met him?”

“Last year, when you came to my constituency. He chewed your ear about grants for tourism.”

Slowly, without taking his eyes off Booza-Pitt, Urquhart reached for his phone. “Get me a Mr. Richard Tennent. New Spalden area.”

And they waited in silence. It took less than two minutes for the operator to make the connection.

“Mr. Tennent? This is Francis Urquhart at Downing Street. Do you remember we met last year, had that delightful discussion about tourism? Yes, you put the case very well. Look, I wanted to have an entirely confidential word with you, if you’re agreeable. Bit unorthodox, but I have a problem. Did you know that you’ve been put up for an honor, for your political and public service?”

Evidently not.

“No, you shouldn’t have known, these things are supposed to be confidential. That’s why I wanted an entirely private word. You see, I’ve just been going through the list and, to be frank, after what you’ve done for the party I thought you deserved something a little better. A knighthood, in fact. Trouble is, there’s a strict quota and a bit of a waiting list. I very much want you to have the ‘K,’ Mr. Tennent, but it would mean your waiting perhaps another eighteen months. You can have the lesser gong straightaway, though, if you like.”

The voice dripped goodwill while his eyes lashed coldly across Booza-Pitt, who showed little sign of being able to breathe.

“You’d prefer to wait. I entirely understand. But you realize that this must remain utterly confidential until then. Won’t stop you and Lady Tennent attending a Downing Street reception in the meantime, though? Good.”

A tight smile of triumph.

“One last thing. These things get pushed through a Scrutiny Committee, look at each individual case to make sure there are no skeletons in the closet, nothing that might prove a public embarrassment, cause the honor to be handed back or any such nonsense. Forgive my asking, but since your name will be carrying my personal recommendation, there’s nothing on the horizon that might...?”

A pause.

“Delighted to hear that. I must just repeat that if anything were to leak out about your upcoming award...But then the party has always known it can rely on you. Sir Richard, I am most grateful.”

He chuckled as he threw the phone back into its cradle. “There you are! The old Round Table gambit always works; give ’em a knighthood and a sense of purpose and they always come aboard. With luck that’ll keep his mouth shut for at least another eighteen months and possibly for good.”

Geoffrey had just begun to imitate the Prime Minister’s bonhomie when

Urquhart turned on him with unmistakable malevolence. “Now get out. And don’t ever expect me to do that again.”

Geoffrey rose, a tremble still evident in his knees. “Why did you, Francis, this time?”

The light from the desk lamp threw harsh shadows across Urquhart’s face, bleaching from it any trace of vitality. One eye seemed almost to have been plucked out, leaving a hollowed socket that led straight to a darkness within.

“Because Francis Urquhart and *only* Francis Urquhart is going to decide when Ministers come and go from his Cabinet, not some shriveling cuckold from New Spalden.”

“I understand.” He had been hoping for some acknowledgment of his own irreplaceable worth.

“And because now I own you. Today, tomorrow, and for as long as I wish. You will jump whenever I flick my fingers, whether it be at the throats of our enemies or into your own grave. Without question. Total loyalty.”

“Of course, Francis. You had that anyway.” He turned to leave.

“One last thing, Geoffrey.”

“Yes?”

“Give me back my fountain pen.”

Seven

Some people prefer to pour oil on troubled waters. I prefer to throw a match.

The sun blazed fiercely outside the window, and the coffee on the table in small cups was dark and thick; in all other respects the office with its stylishly simplistic furniture and modern art trimmings might have been found on the Skeppsbron overlooking the harbor in Stockholm. Yet most of the books along the light oak bookshelves were in Turkish, and the two men in the room were of dark complexion, as were the faces in the family photographs standing behind the desk.

“Now, what brought you in such a hurry to Nicosia?”

“Only a fool tarries to deliver good tidings.”

There was an air of formality between them, two Presidents, one Yakar, chief of the Turkish National Oil Company, and the other, Nures, political head of the Republic of Turkish Cyprus. It was not simply that the oil man was a homosexual of contrived manner and the politician a man of robust frame, language, and humor; there was often a distance between metropolitan and islander that reflected more than their separation by fifty miles of sea. It had been a century since the Ottomans had ruled Cyprus, and differences of culture and perspective had grown. Mainlanders patronized and shepherded the islanders—had they not delivered their cousins from the clutches of Greek extremists by invading and then annexing one third of the island in 1974? At one moment during those confused days the Turkish Cypriots had found themselves on the point of a Greek bayonet, the next they had been in charge of their own state.

Except the Government in Ankara kept treating it as though it was *their* state.

Time to get rid of them, Mehmet Nures told himself yet again. For a thousand years mainland Turks and Greeks and the imperialist British had interfered and undermined, using the island as a well at which to quench the thirst of their ambitions. They'd sucked it dry, and turned an island of old-fashioned kindnesses and a million butterflies into a political desert. Perhaps they couldn't step through the looking glass, back to the ways of old, with bubble-domed churches standing alongside pen-nib mosques, but it was time for change. Time for Cypriots to sort out their own destiny, time for peace. The question was—whose peace?

“I have the honor to present to you a draft of the formal report that Seismic International will publish in a few days following their recent survey of the offshore waters.” The oil man removed a folder from a slim leather case and deposited it in front of Nures, who proceeded to rustle through its pages. The file contained many colored maps and squiggles of seismic cross sections with much technical language that was quite beyond him.

“Don't treat me like a tortoise. What the hell does all this mean?”

Yakar tugged at his silk shirt cuffs. “Very little. As expected, the seismic survey has revealed that beneath the waters of Cyprus there is much rock, and beneath the rock there is...much more rock. Not the stuff, I fear, of excited headlines.”

“I sit stunned with indifference.”

Yakar was playing with him, a reserved smile loitering around his moist lips. “But, Mr. President, I have a second report, one which neither Seismic International nor anyone else has—except for me. And now you.” He handed across a much slimmer file, bound in red and bearing the TNOC crest.

“Not the Greeks, you mean?”

“May my entrails be stretched across the Bosphorus first.”

“And this says...?”

“That there is a geological fault off the coast of Cyprus that has tilted the subsurface geology of the seabed to the north and west of the island. That the structure in that area does indeed contain oil-bearing rock. And that the fault has tipped all the oil into a great big puddle about—there.” He stretched and prodded

a bejeweled finger at the map Nures was examining.

“Shit.”

“Precisely.”

The tip of Yakar’s manicured nail was pointing directly at what had become known as “Watling Water”—the sea area contested between Greek and Turkish Cypriot negotiators and currently the subject of arbitration by the British professor’s panel.

Nures felt a current of apprehension worm through his gut. It had taken him years to balance the scales of peace, feather by feather, he didn’t know if he wanted tons of rock thrown at it right now, oil or no oil. The peace deal was important to him; by giving up so little to the Greek side he could gain so much for his people—peace, international acceptance, true independence, prosperity—and possibly a Nobel Peace Prize for himself. All in exchange for a little land and a stretch of water that was worthless. Or so he had thought.

A thick hand rasped across his dark chin. “How much oil?” he asked, as if every word had cost him a tooth.

“Perhaps a billion barrels.”

“I see,” he said, but clearly didn’t. “What does that mean?”

“Well, the international spot price for oil is around twenty dollars a barrel at the moment. Cost of extraction about five. In round terms—approximately fifteen billion dollars.”

The oil man was whimpering on about Turkish brotherhood and TNOG getting preferential access, teasing out the deal he wished to cement. Nures closed his hooded eyes as though to shut himself away from such squalor, but in truth to contemplate temptation. He had an opportunity—had created the opportunity—to turn a tide of history that had forced poison between the lips of Cypriots and had condemned his own son to be raised in a land of fear. For his grandson it could be different.

Would the world forgive him for endangering the peace process? Would his people forgive him for missing out on fifteen billion dollars’ worth of oil? But could he forgive himself if he didn’t try to grab both?

No contest.

“President Yakar, I think we want those rocks.”

“President Nures, I rather think we do.”

Yaman Hakim felt conspicuous. He had put on his best suit but it was modestly cut and he looked clumsy and otherworldly amid the style and self-assertiveness on the rue St. Honoré. Still, he reminded himself, he was not here for a fashion show.

He'd first thought of making the exchange in Istanbul with its cloudburst of humanity beneath which one solitary soul might disappear, but even among the labyrinth of *souks* and smoky bazaars the authorities had their men, the informers, and there was always the danger of his bumping elbows with someone he knew. He didn't trust his luck in such matters; he'd once gone off to Antalya on the excuse of an energy symposium in order to spend two nights with Sherif, a nubile young girl from Personnel who was into older men, only to discover that a neighbor had booked into the next room. Praises to God, the man had been engaged on a similar mission of deceit, allowing them to share the solidarity of sinners. Yet he felt the presence of prying eyes everywhere in his homeland, and this was worth so much more than a quick scramble between the sheets.

He had chosen Paris because he had once visited it as a student many years before, because there was no chance of his being recognized—and because the French understood what was required. The English were too stuffy and of constricted sphincter, while the Americans were all cowboys. If he were to survive, Hakim needed discretion, a partner who could be trusted to keep his mouth shut and not be found after two drinks and an encouraging smile bragging about it in the bar of the Hilton. In matters of corporate espionage, tax evasion, and fraud the French had all the necessary finesse, they also had bank accounts untraceable by the Turkish authorities; pity about their limp coffee.

Anxiety had made him early and he sat in the sidewalk café swirling the dregs in his cup, waiting. His mind danced with thoughts—of drowsy islands set in mystical seas that shimmered as though studded with a treasury of diamonds; of bougainvillea-clad villas overlooking the sacred Bosphorus and tinkling to the sound of female laughter; of oil wells trembling in the Mediterranean breeze

beneath their plumes of black gold—and of the fetid rat-filled walls of Istanbul’s notorious Yedi Giile prison, echoing with the cries of those who had come too late to repentance. It was not too late for him, not yet, he could still get out, go home, be back in the office tomorrow. Back to being Hakim the Forgotten. The man whose skill and experience had single-handedly uncovered one of the great natural treasure troves of his lifetime—without whom none of this great adventure in exploration would have been possible! But even as he had handed them his report and analysis, his chest heaving with pride, they had told him it was all in a day’s work, what TNOC paid him for, he shouldn’t expect any recognition or thanks. And he had received none.

An executive Citroën with immaculate black paintwork drew up on the roadway beside him and a window of darkened glass wound down.

“Mr. Hakim, over here. Quickly, please!”

Already the Volkswagen behind was sounding its horn impatiently. They had told him about the café, said nothing about a car. Disconcerted, untrusting, but seemingly with little option, the Turk scurried across the pavement. The rear door opened and he settled into the deep leather seat. A hand extended, cuffed in a timepiece of Swiss gold.

“Delighted to meet you at last, Mr. Hakim.”

He had insisted on meeting the top man, face-to-face, not being fobbed off with aides and underlings. He needed decisions; he wanted to deal with the man who made them.

“Forgive the caution. Couldn’t be sure you didn’t have—how can I put it?—somebody else watching us at the café. A news photographer. A competitor, perhaps? I thought a little privacy might assist our discussions.”

Hakim grunted. The man reeked of authority, money; Hakim was well out of his league.

“We were very interested in the material you sent us, Mr. Hakim”—carefully selected pages from the report, crumbs to whet the appetite but not enough to chew on—“interested enough to check you out. You’re genuine. But is your report?”

In response Hakim took a single folded sheet of paper from his suit pocket and, with only the slightest hesitation for a final thought, passed it across. It was

the report's summary page, giving the estimates of the potential beneath the seabed.

"Fascinating. And I assume there is a price for this material."

"A heavy price," Hakim growled, snatching back the single sheet. "But a very fair price."

"How much?"

"For the entire report?" He chewed his thumbnail. "A million dollars."

The other man didn't flinch. His stare was direct, examining Hakim as if some clue to their business might be found in his leathered face; defiantly the Turk stared back.

"This matter is very simple, Mr. Hakim. Your information is of no value to anyone unless it is accurate, and of no value to my company unless we get the license to drill."

"When the time comes you will buy the license. With this report you will know how much to pay—and who to pay."

"That time is some way off."

"Sadly for you, I am not a patient man."

"Then let me get to the point. My proposal—which is also my final proposal—is this." An envelope had appeared in his hands. "Here is fifty thousand dollars, for sight of the report. If after studying it we believe its contents to be genuine, there will be another two hundred thousand dollars." He held up a hand to stay the objection beginning to bubble within the Turk. "And if my company succeeds in obtaining the license and striking oil, there will be a payment to you of not one, but two million dollars. Worth that, if what you say is true."

It was the Turk's turn to consider, agitatedly squeezing his salt-streaked mustache as though wishing to pluck it from his lip. "But how can I trust you?"

"Mr. Hakim, how can I trust you? How am I to know you're not hawking this same document around every one of my competitors? There has to be a measure of mutual trust. And look at it this way, what would be the point of my trying to cheat you of millions when there are potentially billions at stake?"

The Turk was breathing heavily, trying to encourage the supply of oxygen to his thought processes.

"If your document is genuine, I shall be giving you a quarter of a million

dollars with only your word that it's the sole copy in circulation. A costly mistake for me if your word is false." The Frenchman paused. "But it would be a still more costly mistake for you."

"What?" Hakim mocked. "You are threatening to break my legs?"

"Not at all, my friend. I would simply let the Turkish authorities know of your activities. I imagine your legs would be the least of your problems."

The Frenchman smiled, raised the envelope with its fifty thousand dollars, and gently proffered it.

Hakim stared, debated, twisted, and tore at himself, but the exercise was pointless. It was too late now, neither conscience nor caution could argue with fifty thousand dollars and more, much more, to come. From within his briefcase of imitation crocodile he extracted his report and handed it across.

Eight

What is the point of conquering mountains? It's bloody cold, the food is appalling, and who wants to do everything roped helplessly to some stumbling idiot?

No, not mountains. Better to conquer men.

A glorious spring dawn brimming with rose-tinged enthusiasm had advanced across London, delighting most early risers. Mortima Urquhart could not know her husband shared none of the collective spirit.

“Good morning, Francis. The weather gods seem to be smiling in celebration. Happy birthday.”

He didn't move from his position staring out from the bedroom window and at first offered only a soft “Oh, dear” and a slight flaring of the nostrils in response. He lingered at the window, captured by something outside before shaking his head to clear whatever pest was scratching at his humor. “What have you got for me this year? Another Victorian bottle for the cabinet? What is it—eighteen years of bloody bottles? You know I can't stand the things.” But his tone was self-critical, more irony than ire.

“Francis, you know you have no interests outside politics and I'm certainly not going to give you a bound copy of *Hansard*. Your little collection has at least given you something for the hacks to put in their profiles, and this particular piece is rather lovely. A delicate emerald green medicine bottle that is supposed to have belonged to the Queen herself.” She puckered her lips, encouraging him along. “Anyway, I like it.”

“Then, Mortima, if you like it, so shall I.”

“Don’t be such a curmudgeon. I’ve something else for you, too.”

At last he turned from the window and sat opposite her as she held forth a small package with obligatory ribbon and bow. Unwrapped, it teased from him the first sign of pleasure. “Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. And an early edition.” He fingered the small leather-bound volume with reverence.

“A first edition,” she corrected. “The pioneer volume for the Urquhart Library, I thought.”

He took her hands. “That is so typically thoughtful. And how appropriate that our Library should start with one of the finest anti-French tirades ever written. You know, it might inspire me. But...I have to admit, Mortima, that this talk of birthdays and libraries smacks all too much of retirement. I’m not yet ready, you know.”

“The young pretenders may seem fleeter of foot, Francis, but what’s their advantage if you are the only one who knows the route?”

“My life would be so empty and graceless without you.” He smiled, and meant it. “Well, time to give the ashes a rake and discover whether the embers still glow.” He kissed her and rose, drawn again to the view from the window.

“What is out there?” she demanded.

“Nothing. As yet. But soon there may be. You know the Thatcher Society wants to erect a statue to the Baroness on that piece of lawn right out there.” He prodded a finger in the direction of the carefully manicured grass that lay beyond the wall of the Downing Street garden, opposite St. James’s Park. “You know, this is a view that hasn’t much changed in two hundred and fifty years; there’s a print hanging in the Cabinet Room and it’s all there, same bricks, same doors, even the stones on the patio are original. Now they want to put up a bloody statue.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “And the erection fund is almost fully subscribed.” He turned sharply, his face twisted by frustration. “Mortima, if the first thing I’m going to see every morning of my life when I draw my bedroom curtains is that bloody woman, I think I shall expire.”

“Then stop it, Francis.”

“But how?”

“She doesn’t merit a statue. Thrown out of office, betrayed by her own

Cabinet. Is the statue going to show all those knives in her back?”

“Yet almost all of them are hacked from office, my love. By their colleagues or the electorate. Like Caesar, taken from behind by events they hadn’t foreseen. Ambition makes leaders blind and lesser men bloody; none of them knew when the time had come to go.”

“There’s only one Prime Minister who should have a statue there, and that’s you!”

He chuckled at her commitment. “Perhaps you’re right—but flesh and blood turn to stone all too soon. Don’t let’s rush it.”

He turned himself to stone two hours later, as fixedly as if he had spent the night wrapped in the arms of the Medusa. It was his press secretary’s habit to arrange on a regular basis a meeting with representatives of charities—ordinary members, not experienced leaders—inviting them to the doorstep of Number Ten but not beyond, a visit too brief to allow for any substantial lobbying but long enough to show to the cameras that the Prime Minister cared—the “Click Trick,” as the press secretary, a hockey player and enthusiast named Drabble, termed it. Having been at his desk since six collating the morning’s press, extracting from it selected articles he thought worthy of note and preparing a written summary, he met Urquhart in the entrance hall shortly before nine thirty.

“What is it today, Drabble?” Urquhart inquired, striding briskly down the red-carpeted corridor from the Cabinet Room.

“A birthday surprise, Prime Minister. This week it’s pensioners, they’re going to make a presentation.”

Somewhere inside Urquhart felt part of his breakfast liquefying. “Was I told of this?”

“You had a note in your box last weekend, Prime Minister.”

“Sadly, kept from me by more pressing letters of state,” Urquhart equivocated. Damn it, Drabble’s notes were so tedious, and if a Prime Minister couldn’t rely on professionals to sort out the details...

The great door swung open and Urquhart stepped into the light, blinked, smiled, and raised a hand to greet the onlookers as though the street was filled with a cheering crowd rather than a minor pack of world-weary journalists huddled across the street. A group of fifteen pensioners drawn from different

parts of the country were gathered around him, arranged by Drabble, who was giving an advanced simulation of a mother hen. The mechanics were always the same: Urquhart asked their names, listened with serious-smiling face, nodded sympathetically before passing on to the next. Soon they would be whisked off by one of Drabble's staff and a junior Minister from an appropriate department to be plied with instant coffee and understanding in a suitably impressive Whitehall setting. A week later they would receive a photograph of themselves shaking hands with the Prime Minister and a typed note bearing what appeared to be his signature thanking them for taking the trouble to visit. Their local newspapers would be sent copies. Occasionally the discussions raised points or individual cases that were of interest to the system; almost invariably the majority of those involved went back to their pubs and clubs to spread stories of goodwill. A minor skirmish in the great war to win the hearts and votes of the people, but a useful one. Usually.

On this occasion Urquhart had all but completed the ritual of greeting, moving on to the last member of the group. A large package almost five feet in height was leaning against the railings behind him and, as Urquhart swung toward him, so the pensioner shuffled the package to the fore. It turned out to be a huge envelope, addressed simply: *To the Prime Minister*.

"Many happy returns, Mr. Urquhart," the pensioner warbled.

Urquhart turned around to look for Drabble, but the press officer was across the street priming the cameramen. Urquhart was on his own.

"Aren't you going to open it then?" another pensioner inquired.

To Urquhart's mind the flap came away all too easily, the card slipped out in front of him.

"*We are for you, FU*" was emblazoned in large red letters across the top. Across the bottom: "*65 Today!*"

The group of pensioners applauded, while one who was no taller than the card itself opened it to reveal the message inside.

"*Welcome to the Pensioners' Club,*" it stated in gaudy script. "*OAP Power!*" The whole thing was decorated with crossed walking sticks.

Urquhart's eyes glazed like marble. Rarely had the photographers seen the Prime Minister's smile so wide, yet so unmoving, as if a chisel had been taken to

hack the feature across his face. The expression lingered as he was drawn across the street, more to lay his hands upon the wretched Drabble than to go through the ritual of bantering with the press.

A chorus of “Happy Birthday!” mingled with shouts of “Any retirement announcement yet, Francis?” and “Will you be drawing your pension?” He nodded and shook his head in turn. The mood was jovial and Drabble enthusiastic; the fool had no idea what he’d done.

“Are you too old for such a demanding job at sixty-five?” one pinched-faced woman inquired, thrusting a tape recorder at him.

“Churchill didn’t seem to think so. He was sixty-five when he started.”

“The American President is only forty-three,” another voice emerged from the scrum.

“China’s is over ninety.”

“So no discussions about retirement yet?”

“Not this week, my diary is simply too full.”

Their slings and arrows were resisted with apparent good humor; he even managed to produce a chuckle to indicate that he remained unpricked. Politics is perhaps the unkindest, least charitable form of ritualized abuse allowed within the law; the trick is to pretend it doesn’t hurt.

“So what do you think of today’s poll?” It was Dicky Withers of the *Daily Telegraph*, an experienced hand known for concealing an acute instinct behind a deceptively friendly pint of draft Guinness.

“The poll.”

“Yes, the one we carried today.”

Drabble began an unscheduled jig, bouncing from foot to foot as though testing hot coals. He hadn’t included the poll in his digest, or the intemperate editorial in the *Mirror* titled “*It’s Time to Go.*” Christ, it was the man’s birthday, one day of the year to celebrate, to relax a little. And it wasn’t that Drabble was an inveterate yes-man, simply that he found it easier to accept the arguments in favor of circumspection. All too frequently messengers who hurried to bring bad news from the battlefield were accused of desertion and shot.

“Forty-three percent of your own party supporters think you should retire before the next election,” Withers elaborated.

“Which means a substantial majority insisting that I stay on.”

“And the most popular man to succeed you is Tom Makepeace. Would you like him to, when the time comes?”

“My dear Dicky, when that time comes I’m sure that Tom will fight it out with many other hopefuls, including the bus driver.”

“*Makepeace = Bus Driver,*” Withers scribbled, noting the uncomplimentary equivalence. “So you intend to go on, and on, and on?”

“You might say that,” Urquhart began, “but I wish you wouldn’t. I’m enjoying a successful career and, though I’m not greedy for power, so long as I have my wits and my teeth and can be of service...”

“What do you intend to do when eventually you retire, Mr. Urquhart?” Pinch Face was thrusting at him again.

“Do?” The creases of forced bonhomie turned to a rivulet of uncertainty. “Do? Do? Why, be anguished and morose like the rest of them, I suppose. Now, you’ll excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. I have a Cabinet meeting to attend.”

He turned and embarked upon what he hoped was a dignified retreat back across the street—like a lion regaining his den, Drabble decided, tail thrashing ominously. He declined to follow.

Urquhart brushed into his wife as she was emerging from the lift to their private apartment. “Everything went well?” she inquired before she had noticed his eyes.

“They say it’s time for a change, Mortima,” he spat, grinding his teeth. “So I’m going to give ’em change. Starting with that bloody fool of a press secretary.”

“Astonishing,” Urquhart thought to himself as the Cabinet filed in around the great table, “how politicians come to resemble their constituencies.”

Annita Burke, for instance, an unplanned Jewish suburb full of entangling one-way systems. Richard Grieve, a seedy run-down seafront (which he had once plastered with election posters stating “*Grieve for Rushpool*” and had somehow managed to live it down). Arthur Bollingbroke, a no-frills Northern workingmen’s club with a strong tang of Federation bitter. Colin Catchpole, the

member for the City of Westminster, a ruddy face with the redbrick architectural style of the Cathedral, while other parts of his anatomy were rumored to linger in the backstreets of Soho. Geoffrey Booza-Pitt—yes, Geoffrey, an invented showman for the invented show town of New Spalden. Middle class and entirely manufactured, lacking in roots or history—at least any history Geoffrey wished to acknowledge. He had been born plain Master Pitt to an accountant father with a drinking problem; the schoolboy Geoff had invented an extended name and some mythical South African origin to explain away untidy gossip about his father that had been overheard by friends across a local coffee shop. And it had stuck, like so many other imaginative fictions about his origins and achievements. You could fool some of the people all of the time, and Geoffrey reckoned that was enough.

Then there was Tom Makepeace, with the flat humor of the East Anglian fens, the stubbornness of its clays, and the moralizing tendencies of its Puritan past. He was an Old Etonian with a social conscience Urquhart ascribed to an overdeveloped sense of guilt, unearned privilege in search of unidentified purpose. The man had undoubted talent but was not from Urquhart's mold, which is the reason he had been dispatched to the Foreign Office where his stubbornness and flat humor could bore for Britain and help fight the cause in the tedious councils of Brussels, and where his moralizing could do little harm.

Urquhart's Cabinet. "And few of you seem to be keeping your eye on the ball, if I may be frank." The mood was all flint; Drabble had gone missing, the ghost of his folly not yet exorcized.

"We must finish in ten minutes; I have to be at the Palace for the arrival of the Sultan of Oman." He looked slowly around the long table. "I trust it will be rather more of a success than the start of the last state visit."

His gaze set upon Annita Burke, Secretary of State for the Environment. She was both Jew and female, which meant that the doors of power started off double-locked for her. She had stormed the drawbridge by sheer exuberance but now she sat rigid, head lowered. Something on her blotter appeared to have become of sudden importance, monopolizing her attention.

"Yes, it was a great pity, Environment Secretary. Was it not?"

Burke, the Cabinet's sole female, raised her head defiantly but struggled for

words. Had it been her fault? For months she had planned a great campaign to promote the virtues and dispel the tawdry myths surrounding the nation's capital; from their corners and quiet tables in some of London's finest restaurants the publicity men had examined the runes and pronounced; a press conference and brass band had been organized, a fleet of billboards assembled, and seven million leaflets printed for distribution around the city on launch day.

“Making a Great City Greater.”

What they had not foreseen—could not have foreseen, no matter how many slices of corn-fed chicken and loch-reared salmon they had sacrificed—was that launch day would also coincide with the most catastrophic failure of London's sewer system, a progressive collapse of an entire section of Victorian brickwork that had flooded the Underground and shorted the electrical control network. Points failure, and humor failure, too. A million angry commuter ants had erupted onto the streets, creating a gridlock that had extended beyond the city to all major feed roads. On one of those feed roads, the M4 from Heathrow Airport, had sat the newly arrived President of Mexico, expecting a forty-minute drive to the royal and political dignitaries already assembled for him at Buckingham Palace. But nothing had moved. The truck-borne poster hoardings had been stuck and defaced. Most of the leaflets had been dumped undelivered in backstreets. The press conference had been canceled; the brass band had not arrived. And neither had the Mexican President, for more than three hours.

It was a day on which the dignity of the capital died, swept away in a torrent of anger and effluent. Failure required its scapegoat, and “Burke” fitted the tabloid headlines so well.

“Great pity,” she concurred with Urquhart, her embarrassment exhumed. “The Ides were against us.”

“And you've come up with a new idea for reestablishing our reputation for caring environmentalism. The Fresh Air Directive. Article 188.” He made it sound like a charge sheet.

“Health & Safety at Work. Sensory pollution.”

“Smells.”

“Yes, if you like.”

“And we're against them, are we?”

“The European Commission has proposed that all urban workplaces be monitored for excessive sensory pollution with a strict enforcement code for those sites that don’t meet the set standards.”

“You know, there’s a curry shop at the end of my street...” Bollingbroke began in his usual homespun fashion, but Urquhart drove right through him.

“Clean up or close down. And you approved of this.”

“Wholeheartedly. Cleaner air, better environment. Honors our manifesto commitment and gives us a ready answer to those who claim we’ve been dragging our feet on Europe.” She tapped her pen on her blotter for emphasis, betraying her unease. He seemed in such acid humor.

“Have you ever been to Burton-on-Trent, Environment Secretary?”

“I visited for two days when I was sixteen, for a sixth-form symposium.” Her dark eyes flashed; she wasn’t going to let him patronize her.

“And it hasn’t changed very much in the many years since. Still five breweries and a Marmite factory. On a hot summer’s day the High Street can be overpowering.”

“Precisely the point, Prime Minister. If we don’t make them clean up their act they’ll not lift a finger themselves.”

“But the entire town lives on beer and Marmite. Their jobs, their economy, breakfast and tea, I suppose. And far be it from me to remind you that the brewers are among the party’s staunchest corporate supporters.”

The Environment Secretary became aware that the two Ministers seated on either side, though still in the same claret leather seats, had yet managed to distance themselves physically from her, as though fearful of getting caught by a ricochet.

“And you’d close them down. Wipe the entire town off the map. My God, not even Göring was able to do that.”

“This is a European proposal that we are obliged to...”

“And how many towns will those ill-begotten French close down? In August the whole of Paris reeks when the water level drops. Small wonder they all flee to the seaside and abandon the city to the tourists.”

“This is a collective decision arrived at after careful study in Brussels. Our future lies in Europe and its...”

There she was, driving up her one-way street again, in the wrong direction. “Bugger Brussels.” He could no longer contain his contempt but he did not raise his voice, he must not seem to lose control. “It’s become nothing more than a bureaucratic brothel where the entire continent of Europe meets to screw each other for as much money as possible.”

Bollingbroke was rapping his knuckles on the table in approval, tapping out his fealty. The curry shop could stay.

“If you had spent as much time there as I have, Prime Minister, you would realize how”—she reached for a word, considered, weighed the consequences and compromised—“exaggerated that description is.” One day, one day soon, she promised herself, she would no longer hold back the strength of her views. She wouldn’t let herself be emasculated like most of the men around the table. She was the only woman, he daren’t fire her. Dare he? “This directive is about chemical plants and refineries and...”

“And fish markets and florists’ shops! Environment Secretary, let me be clear. I am not going to have such Euro nonsense pushed through behind my back.”

“Prime Minister, all the details were in a lengthy position paper I put to you two weeks before the Council of Ministers in Brussels approved the measure. I’m not sure what more I needed.”

“Instinct. Political instinct,” Urquhart responded, but it was time to back off, move on. “I can’t be expected to take note of every tiny detail buried in a policy document,” he parried, but the effect was ruined as he fumbled for his reading glasses in order to locate the next item on the agenda.

What motivated Makepeace to join the fray even he had trouble in identifying. He was by nature an intervener. A friend of Annita and strong supporter of Europe, he didn’t care for Urquhart’s arguments or attitude. Perhaps he felt that since he occupied one of the four great offices of state he was in a strong position to conciliate, lighten the atmosphere, pour oil on troubled waters.

“Don’t worry, Prime Minister,” he offered lightheartedly as Urquhart adjusted his spectacles. “From now on we’ll have all Cabinet documents typed in double space.”

The oil exploded. It was as if he had offered an accusation that Urquhart was

—what? Too old? Too enfeebled for the job? Fading? To Urquhart, deep into humor failure, it sounded too much an echo of the demands for change. He rose with such sudden venom that his chair slid back on the carpet.

“Don’t deceive yourself that one opinion poll gives you special privileges.”

The air had chilled, grown exceptionally rarefied, thinned by rebuke. Makepeace was having difficulty breathing. A tableau of deep resentment had been drawn in the room, growing in definition for what seemed several political lifetimes. Slowly Makepeace also stood.

“Prime Minister, believe me I had no intention...”

Others grasped the opportunity. Two Cabinet Ministers on their feet must indicate an end to the meeting, a chance to bring to a close such extraordinary embarrassment. There was a general rustling of papers, and as rapidly as seemed elegant they departed without any further exchange of words.

Urquhart was angry. With life, with Drabble, Burke, and Makepeace, with them all, but mostly with himself. There were rules between “the Colleagues,” even those whose ambition perched on their shoulders like storm-starved goshawks.

“Thou shalt honor thy colleagues, within earshot.”

“Thou shalt not be caught bearing false witness.”

“Thou shalt not covet thy colleague’s secretary or job (his wife, in some cases, is fair game).”

“Thou shalt in all public circumstances wish thy colleagues long life.”

Urquhart had broken the rules. He’d lost his temper and, with it, control of the situation. He had gone much further than he’d intended, displayed insufferable arrogance, seeming to wound for the sake of it rather than to a purpose. In damaging others, he had also damaged himself. There was repair work to be done.

But first he needed a leak.

It was as he was hurrying to the washroom outside the Cabinet Room that, near the Henry Moore sculpture so admired by Mortima, he saw a grim-faced Makepeace being consoled by a colleague. His quarry had not fled, and here was an opportunity to bind wounds and redress grievances in private.

“Tom!” he summoned, waving to the other who, with evident reluctance, left

the company of his colleague and walked doggedly back toward the Cabinet Room. “A word, please, Tom,” Urquhart requested, offering the smallest token of a smile. “But first, a call of nature.”

Urquhart was in considerable discomfort, all the tension and tea of the morning having caught up with him. He disappeared into the washroom, but Makepeace didn't follow, instead loitering outside the door. Urquhart had rather hoped he would come in; there can be no formality or demarcation of authority in front of a urinal, an ideal location for conversations on a basis of equality, man-to-man. But Makepeace had never been truly a member of the club, always aloof, holding himself apart. As now, skulking around outside like a schoolboy waiting to be summoned to the headmaster's study, damn him.

And damn this. Urquhart's bladder was bursting, but the harder he tried the more stubborn his system seemed to grow. Instead of responding to the urgency of the situation it seemed to constrict, confining itself to a parsimonious dribble. Did all men of his age suffer such belittlement, he wondered? This was silly—hurry, for pity's sake!—but it would not be hurried. Urquhart examined the porcelain, then the ceiling, concentrated, swore, made a mental note to consult his doctor, but nothing seemed to induce his system to haste. He was glad now that Makepeace hadn't joined him to witness this humiliation.

Prostate. The old man's ailment. Bodily mechanics that seemed to have lost contact with the will.

“Tom, I'll catch you later,” he cried through the door, knowing that later would be too late. There was a scuffling of feet outside and Makepeace withdrew without a word, taking his resentment with him. A moment lost, an opportunity slipped. A colleague turned perhaps to opponent, possibly to mortal enemy.

“Damn you, come on!” he cursed, but in vain.

And when at last he had finished, and removed cuff links and raised sleeves in order to wash his hands, he had studied himself carefully in the mirror. The sense inside was still that of a man in his thirties, but the face had changed, sagged, grown blemished, wasted of color like a winter sky just as the sun slips away. The eyes were now more bruised than blue, the bones of the skull seemed in places to be forcing their way through the thinning flesh. They were the

features of his father. The battle he could never win.

“Happy birthday, Francis.”

Booza-Pitt had no hesitation. In many matters he was a meticulous, indeed pedantic, planner, dividing colleagues and acquaintances into league tables of different rank that merited varying shades of treatment. The First Division consisted of those who had made it or who were clearly on the verge of making it to the very peaks of their professional or social mountains; every year they would receive a Christmas card, a token of some personal nature for wife or partner (strictly no gays), an invitation to at least one of his select social events and special attention of a sort that was logged in his personal secretary’s computer. The cream. For those in the Second Division who were still in the process of negotiating the slippery slopes there was neither token nor undue attention; the Third consisted of those young folk with prospects who were still practicing in the foothills and received only the encouragement of a card. The Fourth Division, which encompassed most of the world who had never made it into a gossip column and were content in life simply to sit back and admire the view, for Geoffrey did not exist.

Annita Burke was, of course, First Division but had encountered a rock slide that would probably dump her in the Fourth, yet until she hit the bottom of the ravine there was value to be had. She was standing to one side in the black-and-white-tiled entrance hall of Number Ten, smoothing away the fluster and composing herself for the attentions of the world outside, when Geoffrey grabbed her arm.

“That was terrible, Annita. You must be very angry.”

There were no words but her eyes spoke for her.

“You need cheering up. Dinner tonight?”

Her face lit at the unexpected support; she nodded.

“I’ll be in touch.” And with that he was gone. Somewhere intimate and gossipy, he thought—it would be worth a booth at Wiltons—where the flames of wounded feelings and recrimination might be fanned and in their white heat could be hammered out the little tools of political warfare, the broken

confidences, private intelligences, and barbs that would strengthen him and weaken others. For those who were about to die generally preferred to take others with them.

Dinner and gossip, no more, even though she might prove to be vulnerable and amenable. It had been more than fifteen years since they'd spent a romping afternoon in a Felixstowe hotel instead of in the town hall attending the second day of the party's youth conference debating famine in the Third World. They both remembered it very keenly, as did the startled chambermaid, but a memory it should remain. This was business.

Anyway, Geoffrey mused, necrophilia made for complicated headlines.

Nine

I will trust him when I hold his ashes in my hand.

It stood in a backstreet of Islington, on the point where inner city begins to give way to north London's sprawling excess, just along from the railway arches that strained and grumbled as they bore the weight of crowded commuter trains at the start of their journey along the eastern seaboard. During the day the street bustled with traffic and the bickering and banter from the open-air market, but at night, with the poor street lighting and particularly when it was drizzling, the scene could have slipped from the pages of Dickens. The deep shadows and dark alleyways made people reluctant to pass this way, unless they had business. And in this street the business after dusk was most likely to be Evangelos Passolides's.

His tiny front room restaurant lay hidden behind thick, drawn curtains and a sign on the grimy window that in loud and uncharitable voice announced that the establishment was closed. There was no menu displayed, no welcoming light. It appeared as though nothing had been touched for months, apart from a well-scrubbed doorstep, but few who hurried by would have noticed. Vangelis, as it was known, was unobtrusive and largely unnoticed, which was the point. Only friends or those recommended by friends gained access, and certainly no one who in any life might have been an officer of the local authority or Customs & Excise. For such people Vangelis was permanently closed, as were his accounts. It made for an intimate and almost conspiratorial atmosphere around the five small tables covered in faded cloths and recycled candles, with holly-covered paper napkins left over from some Christmas past.

Maria Passolides, a primary school teacher, watched as her father, a Greek Cypriot in his midsixties, hobbled back into the tiny open-plan kitchen from where with gnarled fingers and liberal quantities of fresh lemon juice he turned the morning's market produce into dishes of fresh crab, sugar lamb, suckling pig, artichoke hearts, and quails' eggs. The tiny taverna was less of a business, more part hobby, part hideaway for Passolides, and Maria knew he was hiding more than ever. The small room was filled to chaos with the bric-a-brac of remembrance—a fishing net stretched across a wall and covered in signed photographs of Greek celebrities, most of whom were no longer celebrities or even breathing; along cluttered shelves, plates decorated with scenes of Trojan hunters fighting for control with plaster Aphrodites and a battalion of assorted glasses; on the back of the door, a battered British army helmet.

There was an abundance of military memorabilia—a field telephone, binoculars scraped almost bare to the metal, the tattered and much-faded azure blue cloth of the Greek flag. Even an Irish republican tricolor.

In pride of place on the main wall hung a crudely painted portrait of Winston Churchill, cigar jutting defiantly and fingers raised in a victory salute; beneath it on a piece of white card had been scrawled the words that in Greek hearts made him a poet the equal of Byron: *I think it only natural that the Cypriot people, who are of Greek descent, should regard their incorporation with what may be called their Motherland as an ideal to be earnestly, devoutly, and feverishly cherished...*

It was not the only portrait on the wall. Beside it stood the photograph of a young man with open collar, staring eyes, and down-turned mouth set against a rough plaster wall. There was no sign of identity, none needed for Michael Karaolis. A promising village boy educated at the English School. A youthful income tax clerk in the colonial administration, turned EOKA fighter. A final photograph taken in Nicosia Jail on the day before the British hanged him by his neck until he was dead.

“Vangelis.”

Since he had buried his wife a few years before, Evangelos Passolides had been captured more than ever by the past. Sullen days were followed by long nights of rambling reminiscence around the candlelit tables with old comrades

who knew and young men who might be willing to listen, though the numbers of both shrank with the passing months. He had become locked in time, bitter memories twisting both soul and body; he was stooped now, and the savagely broken leg that had caused him to limp throughout his adult life had grown noticeably more painful. He seemed to be withering even as Maria looked, the acid eating away inside.

The news that there was to be peace within his island only made matters worse. “Not my peace,” he muttered in his heavy accent. He had fought for union, *Enosis*, a joining of all Greeks with the Motherland—one tongue, one religion, one Government no matter how incompetent and corrupt, so long as it was our Government. He had put his life on the line for it until the day his fall down a mountain ravine with a thirty-pound mortar strapped across his back had left his leg bones protruding through his shin and his knee joint frozen shut forever. His name had been on the British wanted list so there was no chance of hospital treatment; he’d been lucky to keep his leg in any condition. The fall had also fractured the spirit, left a life drenched in regret, in self-reproach that he and his twisted leg had let his people down, that he hadn’t done enough. Now they were about to divide his beloved island forever, give half of it away to the Turk, and somehow it was all his fault.

She had to find a distraction from his remorse, some means of channeling the passion, or sit and watch her father slowly wither away to nothing.

“When are you going to get married?” he grumbled yet again, lurching past her in exaggerated sailor’s gait with a plate of marinated fish. “Doesn’t family mean anything to you?”

Family, his constant refrain, a proud Cypriot father focused upon his only child. With her mother’s milk she had been fed the stories of the mountains and the village, of mystical origins and whispering forests, of passions and follies and brave forebears—little wonder that she had never found a man to compare. She had been born to a life illuminated with legend, and there were so few legends walking the streets of north London, even for a woman with her dark good looks.

Family. As she bit into a slice of cool raw turnip and savored its tang of sprinkled salt, an idea began to form. “*Baba.*” She reached out and grabbed his

leathery hand. “Sit a minute. Talk with me.”

He grumbled, but wiped his hands on his apron and did as she asked.

“You know how much I love your stories about the old days, what it was like in the village, the tales your mother told around the winter fires when the snow was so thick and the well froze. Why don’t we write them down, your memories. About your family. For *my* family—whenever I have one.” She smiled.

“Me, write?” he grunted in disgust.

“No, talk. And remember. I’ll do the rest. Imagine what it would be like if you could read the story of *Papou*, your grandfather, even of his grandfather. The old way of life in the mountains is all but gone, perhaps my own children won’t be able to touch it—but I want them to be able to know it. How it was. For you.”

He scowled but raised no immediate objection.

“It would be fun, *Baba*. You and me. Over the summer when school is out. It would be an excuse for us to go visit once more. It’s been years—I wonder if the old barn your father built is still there at the back of the house, or the vines your mother planted. And whether they’ve ever fixed that window in the church you and your brothers broke.” She was laughing now, like they had before her mother died. A distant look had crept into his eyes, and within them she thought she saw a glint of embers reviving in the ashes.

“Visit the old family graves,” he whispered. “Make sure they’re still kept properly.”

And exorcize a few ghosts, she thought. By writing it all down, purging the guilt, letting in light and releasing all the demons that he harbored inside.

He sniffed, as though he could already smell the pine. “Couldn’t do any harm, I suppose.” It was the closest he had come in months to anything resembling enthusiasm.

Ten

I see no point in compromise. It's rather like suggesting jumping as a cure for vertigo.

Mortima despaired of trying to check her face in the flicker of passing street lights as the car made its way up Birdcage Walk. "So what kind of woman is Claire Carlsen?" she asked, snapping away her compact.

"Different." Urquhart paused to consider. "Whips don't much care for her," he concluded, as though he had no identifiable opinion of his own.

"A troublemaker?"

"No. I think it's more that the old boys' network has trouble in finding the right pigeonhole for a woman who is independent, drives a fifty-thousand-pound Mercedes sports car and won't play by their rules. Has quite a tongue on her, too, so I'm told."

"Not something of which you as a former Chief Whip would approve. So why are we going to dinner?"

"Because she's persistent, her invitation seemed to keep creeping to the top of the list. Because she's different."

"Sounds as if you *do* approve, Francis," she probed teasingly, her curiosity aroused.

"Perhaps I do. As Chief Whip I welcomed the dunderheads and do-nothings, but as Prime Minister you need a little more variety, a different perspective. Oh, and did I say she was under forty and extremely attractive?" He returned the tease.

"Thinking of giving her a job?"

“Don’t know. That’s why we’re going this evening, to find out a little more about her. I could do with some new members of the crew.”

“But to make room on the life raft you have to throw a few old hands overboard. Are there any volunteers?”

“I’d gladly lash that damned fool Drabble around the fleet. And Annita Burke was born to be fish bait.”

“I thought she was loyal.”

“So is our Labrador.”

“Go further, Francis. Much further. Bring it back.”

“What?”

“Fear. They’ve grown idle and fat these last months, your success has made things too easy for them. They’ve found time to dream of mutiny.” They were passing Buckingham Palace, the royal standard illuminated and fluttering proud. “Even a King cannot be safe on his throne.”

For a moment they lost themselves in reminiscence.

“Remind them of the taste of fear, the lash of discipline. Make them lie awake at nights dreaming of your desires, not theirs.” The compact was out again, they were nearing their destination. “We haven’t had a good keelhauling for months. You know how those tabloid sharks love it.”

“With you around, my love, life seems so full of pointed opportunity.”

She turned to face him in the half light. “I’ll not let you become like Margaret Thatcher, dragged under by your own crew. Francis, you are greater than that.”

“And they shall erect statues to my memory...”

She had turned back to her mirror. “So make a few examples, get some new crew on board. Or start taking hormone therapy like me.”

The door of the buttermilk stucco house set in the middle of Belgravia was opened through the combined effort of two brushed and scrubbed young girls, both wearing tightly wrapped dressing gowns.

“Good evening, Mrs. Urquhart, Mr. Urquhart,” said the elder, extending a hand. “I’m Abby and this is Diana.”

“I’m almost seven and Abby is nine,” Diana offered with a lisp where soon

would be two new teeth. “And this is Tangle,” she announced, producing a fluffy and much-spotted toy dog from behind her back. “He’s very nearly three and absolutely...”

“That’s enough, girls.” Claire beamed proudly from behind. “You’ve said hello, now it’s good-bye. Up to bed.”

Stereophonic heckling arose on either side.

“Pronto. Or no Rice Pops for a week.”

Their protest crushed by parental intimidation, the girls, giggling mischievously, mounted the stairs.

“And I’ve put out fresh school clothes for the morning. Make sure you use them,” their mother called out to the retreating backs before returning to her guests. “Sorry, business before pleasure. Welcome, Francis. And you, Mrs. Urquhart.”

“Mortima.”

“Thank you. I feel embarrassed knowing your husband so much better than you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not the jealous type. I have to share him with the rest of the world. It’s inevitable there should be a few attractive young women among them.”

“Why, thank you,” Claire murmured, acknowledging the compliment. In the light of the hallway’s chandelier she seemed to shimmer in a way that Mortima envied and which she had thought could only be found in combination with motherhood between the pages of *Vogue*. Was Claire also the type that had herself photographed naked and heavily pregnant, just to show the huddled, sweating masses with backache and Sainsbury’s bags just how it was done?

Claire introduced her husband, Johannis, who had been standing back a pace; this was his wife’s event and, anyway, he gave the impression of being a physically powerful man who was accustomed to taking a considered, unflustered view of life. He also had the years for it, being far nearer Urquhart’s age than his wife’s, and spoke with a distinctively slow though not unpleasant accent bearing the marks of his Scandinavian origin. Carlsen’s self-assured posture suggested a man who knew what he wanted and had got it, while she displayed the youthful vitality of a woman with ambitions still to be met.

Contrasts. Yet it took only a few moments for Mortima to become aware that in spite of the superficial differences, somehow the Carlsens seemed to fit, have an understanding, be very much together. Perhaps she hadn't married him simply for the money.

Claire led the way through to a reception room of high ceiling and pastel walls—ideal for the displayed works of contemporary European artists—in which the other eight guests had already assembled. Urquhart knew only one of them, but knew of them all; Claire had provided him with a short and slightly irreverent written bio of every diner, including Johannis. She'd made it all very easy, had chosen well. A bluff Lancashire industrialist who did extraordinary things with redundant textile mills that kept his wife in Florida for half the year and in racehorses for the rest. The editor of *Newsnight* and her husband, a wine importer who had provided the liquid side of the meal, which he spiced with spirited stories of a recent trip to vineyards in the mountains of Georgia where, for three nights, he had resided in a local jail on a charge of public drunkenness until he had agreed to take a consignment of wine from the police chief's brother. The wine turned out to be excellent. There was also an uninhibited Irishman-and-American-mistress partnership who had invented the latest departure in what was called “legal logistics”—“profiling alternative litigation strategies,” he had explained; “Lawyers' bullshit, it's witness coaching and jury nobbling,” as she had offered.

And Nures. Urquhart had known he would be there, a relatively late addition to the guest list while on a private visit to London for dental treatment; his family's fruit firm had used Carlsen freight facilities for more than a decade. The Foreign Office would normally have expressed qualms about his meeting the President of Turkish Cyprus in this manner, without officials present, but Nures was no longer an international pariah. Anyway, the Foreign Office couldn't object because Urquhart hadn't let them know; they would have felt obliged to parley with Nicosia, Ankara, Athens, Brussels, and half a dozen others in a process of endless consultation and compromise to ensure no one was offended. Left to the Foreign Office, they'd all starve.

Claire thrust a malt whiskey into Urquhart's hand—Bruichladdich, she'd done her homework—and propelled him toward the *Newsnight* editor and the

developer, neither of whom would be sitting next to him during the meal.

“Pressure groups are a curse,” Thresher, the developer, was protesting. “Am I right, Mr. Urquhart?” He pronounced it Ukut, in its original Scottish form, rather than the soft Southern Urkheart so beloved of the BBC, who at times seemed capable of understanding neither pronunciation nor policy. “Used to be there was a quiet, no-nonsense majority, folks that mowed their lawns and won the wars. But now everyone seems to belong to some minority or other, shouting t’odds and lying down in t’road trying to stop other folk getting on with life. Environmentalists”—Thresher emphasized every syllable, as though wringing its neck—“will bring this country to its knees.”

“We have a heritage, surely we must defend it?” Wendy the *Newsnight* editor responded, accepting with good grace the fact that for the moment she had been cast in the role of lonesome virtue.

“Green-gabble.” Urquhart pounced, joining in the game. “It’s everywhere. Knee-jerk nostalgia for the days of the pitchfork and pony and trap. You know, ten years ago the streets of many Northern towns were deserted, now they’re congested with traffic jams as people rush to the shops. I’m rather proud of those traffic jams.”

“Could I quote you, Prime Minister?” Wendy smiled.

“I doubt it.”

“Here’s something you might quote, but won’t, lass.” Thresher was warming to his task. “I’ve got a development planned in Wandsworth centered around one old worm-eaten cinema. Neither use nor ornament, practically falling to pieces it is, but will they let me knock it down? The protesters claim they prefer the knackered cinema to a multimillion-pound shopping complex with all the new jobs and amenities. Daft buggers won’t sit in t’cinema and watch films; no, all they do is sit down in t’sreet outside, get up petitions and force me to a planning inquiry that’ll take years. It’s a middle-class mugging.”

“Not in my house, I trust.” Claire had returned to usher them to the dining room. As they followed her bidding, Urquhart found himself alone with Thresher.

“So what are you going to do, Mr. Thresher?”

“Happen I’ll take my money away, put it in some Caribbean bank and buy

myself a pair of sunglasses.”

“A great pity for you. A loss for the country, too.”

“What’s Government going to do about it then, Prime Minister?”

“Mr. Thresher, I’m surprised that a man of your worldly experience should think the Government is capable of doing anything to help.” Urquhart had a habit of talking about his colleagues in the manner of a world-weary headmaster confronted with irresponsible schoolboys who deserved a thrashing.

“So it’s off t’ Caribbean.”

“Perhaps the answer might lie a little closer.”

“How close?”

“Brixton, perhaps?”

“You interest me.”

“I was merely wondering why, if the protesters want a cinema, you don’t give them a cinema.”

“But that’s not the game. Anyway, nobody comes.”

“You’re obviously showing the wrong films. What do you think would occur if, for instance, you started showing cult films with a strong ethnic flavor? You know, Rasta and dreadlocks?”

“I’d have to start giving the tickets away.”

“Lots of them. Around the black community, I’d suggest.”

“God, the place’d start swarming with ’em. But what would be the point?”

Urquhart plucked the other’s sleeve to delay him at the entrance to the dining room, lowering his voice. “The point, Mr. Thresher, is that after four weeks of Bob Marley and juju, it wouldn’t surprise me if the good burghers of Wandsworth changed their minds about your cinema; indeed, I harbor the strongest suspicion they’d crawl to you on hands and knees, begging you to bring in the bulldozers.” He raised a suggestive eyebrow. “It’s a pathetic fact of middle-class life that liberalism somehow fades with the nightfall.”

Thresher’s jaw had dropped; Claire had appeared once more at their side to organize them. “This is a decent house. So whatever you two are plotting had better stop,” she instructed genially. “Otherwise no pudding.”

“I think I’ve just ’ad that, pet. You know, your boss is a most remarkable man.” Thresher’s voice vibrated with unaccustomed admiration.

“I’m glad you agree. Does my feminine intuition sense a substantial check being written out to party headquarters?” she inquired, twisting his arm as she led him to his place.

“For the first time in my life, I think I might.”

Claire found her own seat at the head of the table, flanked by Urquhart and Nures. “I’m impressed, Francis. I’ve been trying for five years to get him to open his wallet, yet you did it in five minutes. Did you sell the whole party, or just a few principles?”

“I merely reminded him that among the grass roots of politics are to be found many weeds.”

“And in the bazaar there are many deals to be done,” Nures added.

“A touch cynical for someone who’s off duty, Mehmet,” she suggested.

“Not at all. For what is the point of going to the market if you are not intending to deal?” he smiled.

“Window-shopping?”

His eyes brushed appreciatively over her, taking in the subtle twists of silk—she had no need of excessive ornamentation—not lingering to give offense, before running around the dining room, where modern art and soft pastel had given way to Victorian classic displayed upon bleached oak paneling. “You do not leave the impression of one who spends her life with her nose pressed up against the window, Claire.”

“That’s true. But at least it enables me to lay my hand on my heart and deny any ambition of grabbing your job, Francis.”

“How so?” he inquired, in a tone that suggested he wouldn’t believe a word.

She puckered her nose in distaste. “I couldn’t possibly live in Downing Street. It’s much too far from Harrods.”

And the evening had been a great success.

It was as Urquhart and his wife were preparing to leave that Nures took him to one side.

“I wanted to thank you, Prime Minister, for everything you have done to help bring about peace in my island. I want you to know we shall always be in your debt.”

“Speaking entirely privately, Mr. President, I can say how much I have

admired your tenacity. As we both know to our cost, the Greeks have never been the easiest of people to deal with. Do you know, the Acropolis is falling down around their ears yet still they demand the return of the Elgin Marbles? Intemperate vandalism.”

“The Greek Cypriots are different, of course.”

“Accepted. But Balkan blood runs thicker than water. Or logic, at times.”

“And oil.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know the seismic report of the offshore waters has been published?”

“Yes, but it didn’t show any oil, did it?”

“Precisely.” Nures paused, a silence hung between them. “But I wanted you to know that if there were any oil, and if that oil were under my control, I would very much want my British friends to help us exploit it.”

“All this talk of oil, you sound as if you expect it. But there was nothing in the report.”

“Instinct?”

“I hope for your sake those instincts are right. But it would then depend upon the outcome of the boundary arbitration.”

“Precisely.”

“Oh, I think I begin to see.”

“I have very strong instincts in this matter, Mr. Urquhart. About the oil.”

Urquhart was clear that his feet were now standing directly in the middle of the bazaar. “I cannot interfere, even if I wanted to,” he replied softly. “The arbitration is a judicial process. Out of my hands.”

“I understand that completely. But it would be such a pity if my instincts were right yet the arbitration went wrong, and the Greeks gave all the exploitation rights to their good friends the French.”

“A tragedy.”

“Great riches for both your country and mine”—why did Urquhart feel he really meant “for both you and me”? Instinct, that was it—“great riches lost. And I would lose most. Imagine what would happen to me if my people discovered that I had given away a fortune in oil? I would be dragged through the streets of Nicosia.”

“Then we must hope that fortune smiles on you, and wisdom upon the judges.”

“I would have so many reasons to be exceptionally grateful, Mr. Urquhart.”

Their confidences balanced carefully on a narrow ledge; any move too swift or aggressive, and they would both fall—would Urquhart attempt to run, or would he push? They spoke in whispers, taking care to maintain their poise, when suddenly they were joined by a new and uninhibited voice. “Such a rare commodity in politics, don’t you think, gratitude?” It was Mortima who, farewells indulged, had been hovering. “You’d rather be flayed alive than let the French run off with anything, Francis. You really must find a way of helping Mr. Nures.”

“I shall keep my fingers crossed for him.” And, nodding farewell to the Turk, Urquhart crept back off the ledge.

Claire was waiting for him by the front door. “A truly exceptional evening,” he offered in thanks, taking her hand. “If only I could organize my Government the way you organize your dinner parties.”

“But you can, Francis. It’s exactly the same. You invite the guests, arrange the menu, decide who sits where. The secret is to get a couple of good helpers in the kitchen.”

“As it happens I’ve been thinking of rearranging the table, playing a bit of musical chairs. But you make a good point about the backstage staff. What do you think?”

“You want me to be indiscreet.”

“Of course. Drabble, for instance?”

“A disaster.”

“Agreed. And Barry Crumb?”

“So aptly named.”

“No Crumbs in the kitchen Cabinet, you think?” He laughed, enjoying the game.

Barry Crumb was the Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary. The PPS is a Member of Parliament but in the view of many the lowest form of parliamentary life. The job is that of unofficial slave to a Minister, performing any function the Minister may request from serving drinks to spying on

colleagues. As such it is unpaid, but the cost to the individual is high since the PPS is deprived of any form of independence, being required to follow the Government line on all matters of policy. Thus it is an excellent means of shutting up a backbencher who is becoming troublesome.

Yet the job is more, and much sought after, for it provides privileged insights into Ministerial life and is regarded as the first step on the ladder, the training ground from which new Ministers are plucked. Those involved in the process liken themselves to a “Tail End Charlie,” a rear gunner who with luck may survive and move forward through the ship to become a navigator, perhaps one day even the captain. Those of more cynical disposition suggest that it is merely the start of the process whereby a backbencher is deprived of the capacity for independent thought and action, thereby making him suitable to be selected for higher office.

A PPS dwells in the shadow of the Minister and has no independent existence. But that shadow may be long, and the PPS has rights of access, both in the Palace of Westminster and at the Department of State, even at times in the Minister’s private life.

And to have access in abundance to a great Minister, let alone a Prime Minister, to hover at the right hand and to sit in the rear seat, is one of the most fascinating opportunities available to any young parliamentarian, which is why so blithely they trade their independence for insight and opportunity, and the rudimentary beginnings of influence.

It was a pity about Barry Crumb. He jumped when he should have tarried, hovered when he should be gone, an enthusiast but a man so afraid of getting it wrong that self-consciousness deprived him of initiative and any ability to read Urquhart’s mind or moods. The man had no subtlety, no shade. No future.

“He’s not up to it, is he?” Urquhart stated.

“No. But I am.”

He took his coat and chuckled at her impudence. In the whole of Christendom there had never been a female PPS, not to a Prime Minister. The boys wouldn’t like it, lots of bad jokes about plumbing and underwear. But, Urquhart reflected, it was his intention to shake them up, so what if it upset a few, all the better. Remind them who’s in charge. He needed a fresh pair of legs, and at the very

least these would be a young and extremely attractive pair of legs, far easier to live with than Crumb's. And he had the feeling she might prove far more than merely a mannequin.

“Would you get rid of the Mercedes and start buying your suits at Marks & Spencer?”

“No. Nor will I as your PPS shave my head, grow hair on my legs, or allow myself headaches for three days every month.”

He waved good-bye to the rest of the guests, the business of departure replacing the need to reply. “Time to depart.” He summoned Mortima who was bidding Nures farewell, but Claire was still close by his shoulder, demanding his attention.

“I am up to it, Francis.”

He turned at the door. “You know, I do believe you are.”

Eleven

All politicians are cuckoos. I betray, therefore I am.

There was no longer pleasure for her, nothing but dark childhood memories dragged from within by the rhythmic protest of a loose bedspring. She couldn't hide it, he must have noticed, even as his frantic climax filled the bedroom with noise.

That is much how she remembered them, the childhood nights in a small north London duplex with Victorian heating and walls of wafer, filled with the sounds of bodies and bedsprings in torment. When the eight-year-old had inquired about the noises, her mother had muttered sheepishly about childish dreams and music. Perhaps that's what had inspired Harrison Birtwistle, although by preference she'd rather listen to the torturing of bedsprings.

Did anybody still sleep in those classic cast-iron bedsteads full of angry steel wire and complaints, she wondered? It had been so many years since she had, and no regrets at that. Nor did she miss the sitting room carpet, a porridge of cigarette burns and oil blots and other stains for which there had never been any explanation. "I'll go down to Hardwick's and get you another," her father had always promised her mother. But he never did.

Claire Carlsen had left so much behind, yet still the distant echoes tugged at her; she remembered the fear more than the physical pain and abuse, the disgust where later she learned there might have been love, the tears made scarcely easier to bear by the fact they were shared among all three children. She had escaped, as had her sister, but not her younger brother, who still ran a small fish wholesalers around the street markets of south London in between extended

bouts of hop-induced stupefaction and wife beating. Like his father. He'd probably go the same way, too, unless his drunken driving intervened. Their father had come home late for Sunday dinner as usual, had cursed them all and thrown his overcooked food away, slumped on the floor in front of *The Big Match*, belched and closed his eyes.

The doctor later declared it had been a massive coronary. "No pain, Mrs. Davies," he had assured. Better than the bastard deserved. They had burned the sitting room carpet on the same day they'd burned him.

The memories sprouted like weeds and she knew that no matter how much she hacked and raked, the roots would always remain buried deep inside.

"Where were you?" Tom Makepeace, still breathless, raised his flushed head from the pillow.

"Oh, a million miles away and about thirty years ago. Sorry," she apologized, gently levering his weight off her.

"In all the years I've known you I don't think I've ever heard you talk about your childhood. Locked doors." With a finger he began rearranging the blond hair scattered across her forehead. "I don't like you having secrets from me. When I'm with you like this, I want to have you all. You know you're the most important thing to happen in my life for a very long time."

She looked at him, those kind, deep, affectionate eyes, still retaining a hint of the small stubborn boy that made both his politics and personality emotional and so easy to embrace. And she knew now was the moment, must be the moment, before too much damage was done.

"We've got to stop, Tom."

"You've got to get back to the House?"

"No. Stop for good. You and me. All this."

She could see the surprise and then injury overwhelm his face.

"But why...?"

"Because I told you from the start that falling into bed with you did not mean I was going to fall in love with you. I can't fill the gaps in your life; we've got to stop before I hurt you." She could see she already had.

He rolled onto his back and studied the ceiling, anxious that she should not see the confusion in his eyes; it was the first time in many years he wished he

still smoked. “You know I need you more than ever.”

“I cannot be your anchor.” Which was what he so desperately needed. As the currents of politics had swirled ever more unsteadily around him, some pushing him on, others enviously trying to snatch him back, the lack of solid footing in his private life had left him ever more exposed. His youngest son was now twenty and at university, his academic wife indulging in her new freedom by accepting a visiting fellowship at Harvard that left her little more than a transient caller in his life with increasingly less to share. He was alone. Fifty had proved a brutal age for Makepeace.

“Not now, Claire. Let’s give it another month or so, talk about it then.” He was trying hard not to plead.

“No, Tom. It must be now. You have no marriage to risk, but I do. Anyway, there are other complications.”

“Someone else?” Pain had made him petulant.

“In a way. I spent an hour with the PM this morning. He wants me to be his PPS.”

“And you accepted?”

“Don’t make it sound like an accusation, Tom. For God’s sake, you’re his Foreign Secretary.”

“But his PPS, it’s so...personal.”

“You’re jealous.”

“You seem to have a weakness for older men,” he snapped, goaded by her observation.

“Damn you, leave Joh out of this!” Her rebuke hit him like a slap in the face and hurt more.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean...It’s just that I’m concerned for you. Don’t get too close to Francis, Claire. Don’t lash yourself to a sinking ship.”

“Dispassionate concern for my welfare?”

“I’ve never advised you badly before.”

Which was undeniable. Makepeace had guided Claire in her first political steps, sustaining her when successive selection committees had determined that her looks were too distracting or that her place was with the children. When she had persevered and her persistence paid off, he’d helped her find her feet around

the House and prepared her for its sexual bombast, had even tried to gain her entry to one of the exclusive dining clubs that generate so much useful contact and mutual support around the House of Commons—“like smuggling an Indian into Fort Apache,” he had warned. He’d been a constant source of encouragement—although, she reflected, he had never suggested that she become his PPS.

“PPS to Francis Urquhart,” he continued, “is such a compromising position. Politically.”

“We all have to compromise a little, Tom. No point in being the virgin at the feast.”

“Moral ends justifying compromising means?” He was accusing again.

“Do you mind if I get out from between the damp sheets of your bed before we discuss morality? Anyway, you know as well as I do that politics is a team game, you have to compromise to have any chance of winning. No point in pretending you can score all the goals by yourself. I want my chance on the team, Tom.”

“Some of the games Urquhart wants to play I have no desire to join, let alone help him win.”

“Which is another reason why we have to stop seeing each other like this. There’s so much talk about the two of you being set on collision course, you must have heard the whispers.”

“Drumbeats accompanied by a native war dance, more like. Tony Franks on the *Guardian* bet me that either I or Urquhart would be out of Government within a year. He’s probably right.” His face hovered above hers, creased in pain. It would hurt, losing his place in politics. He came from a long line of public servants; his great-grandfather had been a general who had insisted on leading from the front, and in the mud of Flanders had died for the privilege. But politics was so much more dangerous than war; in battle they could kill you only once. “Is that the real reason you want us to stop? Divided loyalties? Are you backing Urquhart against me?”

She took his head in her hands, thumbs trying to smooth away the lines of distress. “I am becoming his PPS, Tom, not his possession. I haven’t sold my principles, I haven’t suddenly stopped supporting all the things you and I have

both fought for. And I haven't stopped caring about you."

"You mean that?"

"Very much. In another life things might have been much closer between us; in this life, I want to go on being friends."

She kissed him, and he began to respond passionately.

"One last time?" he whispered, running his hand from neck to navel.

"Is that what we've been about? Just sex?"

"No!" he retorted.

"Pity," she replied, and kissed him again.

Passolides put down his cup with a nervous jolt, caught unawares by the high double beep of the electronic pager that summoned them. Maria leaned across the table to mop up the spilled coffee with her napkin.

"That's us, *Baba*. It's time."

They had been waiting a little more than half an hour in the small coffee shop of the Public Record Office in Kew, Evangelos refusing to take his eye for one instant off the red-eyed pager issued to all searchers after truth—at least, what passed as truth in the official British archives. Anything that smacked of British officialdom made him nervous and aggressive, a habit he'd not lost since the old days in the mountains. Even in Islington they had always wanted to snoop, to control him, sending him buff-colored envelopes that demanded money with menaces. Why should he, of all people, pay the British when they owed him so much? A health inspector had once spent an entire week spying on his front door, convinced Passolides was running a business, refusing to give up his vigil until he was dragged away by influenza and other more pressing hazards to the health of the citizens of Islington. He hadn't known about the back door.

While he'd been suffering on the cold dank street, behind the tightly drawn curtain the friends of Evangelos Passolides had spent their evenings toasting his victory over the old enemy. "To Vangeli!"

The aging Cypriot had little faith that the enemy would help him now. It had been Maria's idea, something to pursue his interest in the old days, to refresh his memories, an excuse to get him out from behind the drawn curtains by

suggesting they might see what information, explanation, or excuse the British documents of the time might offer. So they had traveled across London to the PRO in Kew, a concrete mausoleum of the records of an empire gained, grown, and ultimately lost once more.

The amiable clerk in the reference room had not been optimistic. “The EOKA period in Cyprus? That’ll have a military or security classification. Used to be a standard fifty-year embargo on those. You know, anything marked SECRET and vital to the continued security of the country. Like old weather forecasts or if the Greek President picked his nose.” He shrugged. “But they review the records every ten years now, and since the cutbacks at the Ministry of Defense I think they’re running out of bomb shelters to store all the boxes. So when they can they throw them away or throw them at us. You might be lucky.”

And they were. In Index WO 106. Directory of Military Operations and Intelligence. “7438. Report on security situation and EOKA interceptions in Troodos Mountains, April–October 1956.”

Passolides stabbed his finger at the entry. “They chased us across the mountains for two days, with me on a stretcher and rags stuffed in my mouth to stop me screaming,” he whispered. “That’s me.”

They had entered their order for the file on the reference computer terminal. And waited.

And been disappointed.

The PRO at Kew is not all that it seems. Away from the reference room, behind the scenes in the repository, computerization hands over to dusty fingers and cardboard boxes. Nearly a hundred miles of them. In a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment and to the strains of Roy Orbison and Lulu blaring over the loudspeakers (the whole point of the PRO is that it is not up to date) a young man had sorted through the vast banks of shelving in search of one file among the millions. Once found, it had been transported slowly on a system of electric trolleys and conveyor belts to the general reading room, when Maria and her father had been summoned.

But it was not there. Beneath the air-conditioned hush and white lighting they had searched WO 106/7438 for any reference to the pursuit of Evangelos and his EOKA comrades during those days of high summer. How they had hidden in

an underground hide with British soldiers less than six feet away and where one grenade would have killed them all. How he had begged his comrades to shoot him rather than abandon him to the clutches of the enemy. How they would have done it anyway, to avoid any risk of his betraying what he knew.

There was nothing. The tired manila folder was stuffed with individual sheets of paper secured with a string tag, mostly fuzzy carbon copies that appeared to have been retained at random rather than with any sense of logic or in an attempt to preserve a comprehensive record of events. Particularly difficult period, the clerk had explained. The Suez War had erupted in October and everything had been chaos as the British Army turned its attention from the defense of Cyprus to the attack on Egypt. Entire regiments had been transferred and the island had become a churning transit point for the armies of invasion. Paperwork, never the greatest strength of soldiers at war, in many cases had simply been abandoned. For the British, it seemed, Passolides didn't exist, had never existed.

But there was something else. A memory. His finger was once again pointing at the single sheet index at the front of the file.

Item 16. May 5. Above the village of Spilia.

The date. The location. He had difficulty scrambling through the file to locate the reference; when he had done so, he trembled all the more. A single photocopied sheet of paper, an intelligence report of an action in the mountains near to where it was believed an extensive EOKA hideout was located. Two unidentified terrorists intercepted while transporting weapons and other supplies. An exchange of fire, the loss of a British private. The killing of the two Cypriots. Burning and burial of their bodies to reduce the risks of reprisals. No further indication as to the location of the hideout. A recommendation that further sweeps be conducted in the area. Signed by the officer in charge of the operation.

The officer's name had been blanked out.

"That's why it's photocopied. To protect the identities of British personnel," the clerk had explained. "Not a cover-up, just standard procedure. No way the name will be released, not while he's still alive. After all, imagine if it had been you."

But it had been me, and my brothers!

Passolides had tried to explain, to insist, to find out more, but his voice and clarity were cracked by emotion and the clerk was bemused by the old man's talk of murder on a mountainside. In any event, there was nothing more to be found. No other archive, no other records. Whatever the British system had to offer was all here; there was nothing more to be found, except the name. And that he couldn't have.

"They were only boys, buried in those graves," Passolides groaned.

"You don't need Records," the clerk had offered, convinced the old man with tears in his eyes was a little simple. "You need a War Crimes Commission."

"But first I need a name."

Twelve

Never sleep with a politician. When they turn their back on you, they take the duvet with them.

“Damn it! D’you think they’ve got a new editor or something, Mortima?”

She looked up from her crispbread and letters.

“*The Times* crossword has become so”—he searched for the word—“elusive. Impenetrable. They must’ve changed the editor.”

No, she thought, it’s not the crossword that has changed, Francis. It’s you. There was a time when you would have slain the allusions and anagrams before porridge.

Irritably he threw the newspaper to one side. The front page was miserable enough, now the back page, too. He searched around the crowded breakfast table and retrieved another sheet of paper. “Fewer problems with this one,” he muttered with considerably more enthusiasm, and began marking off items like so many completed clues. He paused in search of inspiration. “Four or five down, d’you think?”

“Give me a hint of what we’re talking about, Francis.”

“A bit of Byng. Time to shoot a few admirals in full view of the fleet to encourage the others, I thought. Just as you recommended—to bring back a bit of fear?”

“I see. A reshuffle.”

“Four or five to go, I thought. Enough to cause a real stir, yet not so many as to look as though we’re panicking.”

“Who are you volunteering?”

“The Euro drones and iron wits. Carter. Yorke. Penthorpe—he’s so abrasive that every time he opens his mouth he all but sharpens the blade for his own throat. And Wilkinson. Do you know he actually spends almost as much time in France as he does in his constituency? Judgment’s addled by cheap wine and fraternizing.” With a decisive thrust he ran another name through with his pen.

“What about Terry Whittington? I never know whether he’s half-cut or simply sounds it.”

“Yes, a problem when the Minister in charge of the Citizens’ Charter can’t even pronounce the words without drenching the interviewer. Dull dog but, oh, such a sparkling and well-connected wife. Haven’t I told you?” He looked over his glasses in remorse. “It seems she’s been indulging in what are known as continental conversations with the Industry Commissioner in Brussels while dear old Terry’s been lashed down in all-night session with nothing more diverting than his fellow Ministers.”

“*Quelle finesse*. Be a pity to lose such an interesting point of leverage within the Commission.”

“Particularly with harsh words on car quotas coming up.”

She bit into the crispbread, which crumbled and fled, and for several seconds she distracted herself with reassembling the pieces.

“So who else?”

“Annita, of course. I know she’s the only woman, but she sits twittering at the end of the Cabinet table and I can barely hear a word.” He shook his head in exasperation. “It’s not me, is it, Mortima?”

“Francis, selective hearing is not only a Prime Minister’s prerogative but also one of his most useful weapons. You’ve had years of developing it to a fine art.”

It was more than that, she thought, but he seemed reassured. She picked up a knife and, with a deft flick of the wrist that seemed unnatural on a lady, sliced off the top of a soft-boiled egg. “And what of Tom Makepeace?” The yolk flowed freely.

“Dangerous to get rid of him, Mortima. I’d prefer to have him on board with his cannon firing outward than on another ship with his sights trained on me. But there might be some”—he waved his hand in the manner of a conductor encouraging the second violins—“rearrangement around the deck. Find him a

new target. Environment, perhaps.”

“Kick him out of the Foreign Office? I like that.”

“Let him struggle with the wind and waters of our green and pleasant land. Purify the people, that sort of thing. What greater challenge could a man of conscience want?” He was already practicing the press release. “And meanwhile remind the buggers in Brussels we mean business by giving the foreign job to that hedgehog Bollingbroke. He suffers from flatulence. Late nights locked in the embrace of our European brethren seems the obvious place for him.”

“Excellent!” She stabbed at the heart of the egg with a thin sliver of crispbread.

“And put Booza-Pitt into the Home Office.”

“That little package of oily malevolence?” Her face lit in alarm.

“And so he is. But he’s crass and vulgar enough to know what the party faithful want and to give it to them. To touch them where it matters.”

“As he does half the Cabinet wives.”

“But I in turn am able to touch him where it matters. I hold his loyalties in the palm of my hand and all I have to do is squeeze. There will be no trouble from Geoffrey.” Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair, sniffing the air, as a ship’s captain senses the arrival of new weather from disturbed skies.

“Francis...?”

“That’s it! Don’t you see? Eight down. ‘European emergency.’ Twelve letters.”

“What, ‘Bollingbroke’?” She was counting off the letters on her fingers, bewildered by his sudden switch of priorities.

“No. *Nein. Nein. Nein!*” He gave a triumphant chortle and swooped once more upon his newspaper, filling in blank spaces on a flood tide of enlightenment. “You see, Mortima. Old Francis still has what it takes.”

“Of course you do.”

Just in case, however, she decided a measure of insurance might be in order.

The corridors of power resemble a Gordian knot of interwoven connections—relationships matrimonial, familial, frequently carnal, bonds of blood, school,

and club (beware the man who has been turned away by the Garrick), ties of privilege and prejudice that run far deeper than the seasonal streams of professional acquaintance or achievement. The nectar of tradition sipped at birth or grudges indulged during afternoons on the playing field or evenings in the dorm may provide a framework for a life, sometimes even a purpose. The British Establishment is no accident.

In unravelling these inner mysteries and tracing the origins of influence, no tool is of more use than a copy of *Who's Who*. Most of the gossamer threads of acceptability are to be found within its pages, as well as the raucous buzzing from the occasional brash interloper who, like the insect charging the spider's web, rarely lasts.

Mortima's copy was a couple of years old, but still gave her most of what she needed to know. It told her that Clive Watling was going to be a problem. He had no family of note, no schooling of eminence, no breeding, merely endeavor and honest accomplishment. Which, for Mortima's purposes, wasn't enough. He was proud of his humble origins in the small community of Cold Kirby, which lay at the edge of the Yorkshire Moors; his primary school had been given a place of honor in the list, as had his presidency of the Cold Kirby Conservation Society and membership of other local groups. This was a man whose booted feet were stuck very firmly to the moors, where gossamer threads were as rare as orchids. Yet...

As luck—no, the fortune of family connection—would have it, a second cousin to the mother of Mortima Urquhart (*née* Colquhoun) still owned substantial Northern acreages in the vicinity of Cold Kirby, along with the hereditary titles pertaining thereto, and Mortima had engaged her noble cousin to extend an invitation to drinks on the terrace.

The terrace of the Palace of Westminster fronts the northern bank of the great river where once had strolled Henry VIII, through the blossom trees and hedging of what at that time had been his palace garden. It was always a problem site, being immediately adjacent to the medieval City of London with its teeming humanity and overflowing chamber pots. Perhaps it was on some fetid summer's day while walking through the overpowering air that the King grew envious of the sweet-scented palace that stood further upstream at Hampton Court, where

his Lord Chancellor lived, Cardinal Wolsey, a man whose fortunes and grasp on his home were to decline as the tidal flow of the Thames washed its noisome waters beyond, and then back again, past the King's door. In any event, the spot never achieved great popularity until those mightiest of urban redevelopers, the Victorians, built both sewers and solid embankment and thereby transformed its attractions. By the side of the river the architects Barry and Pugin erected a great orange-gold palace for Parliament in the manner of a sand castle by the beach, complete with flags and turrets. On its fringe they formed a terrace where on warm summer days members of either House of Parliament might sit and sup, the lapping waters easing the passage of time and legislation instead of launching, as in days of old, an assault on their senses.

Major the Lord "Bungy" Colquhoun traveled to London infrequently, but when he did he found the House of Lords a most convenient club. He had therefore been amenable to his cousin's prompting that he should hold a small drinks party on the terrace and invite a few carefully selected guests. He did not know his near-neighbor and soon-to-be-noble brother from Cold Kirby, but was happy to meet him. As was Mortima.

Watling was an affable man, courteous but cautious, feeling his way on uncertain soil. He was not a man to rush. For a while on the terrace he stood quietly, staring across the silt-brown river to where an army of worker ants were transforming what had been St. Thomas's Hospital into what was to become an office and shopping complex with multiscreen cinema.

"Progress?" she inquired, standing at his elbow.

"You mean the fact that if my heart were to stop right now they'd take an additional fifteen minutes to get me to treatment?" He shook his head. "Since you ask, probably not."

"But it wouldn't, you know, not in the House of Lords. Every Gothic nook and cranny in the place seems to be stuffed with all sorts of special revival equipment. Every closet a cardiac unit. You're not allowed to die, you know. Not in a royal palace. It's against the rules."

He chuckled. "That's reassuring, Mrs. Urquhart. I suppose as a judge I'd better stick to the rules."

"I don't profess to understand the legal system..."

“You’re not supposed to. Otherwise what’d be the point of all us lawyers beavering away at the taxpayers’ vast expense?”

He was shy, mellowing a little; it was her turn to laugh. “And are you taking the King’s shilling at the moment?”

“The Cyprus shilling, to be precise.”

“Oh, that one’s yours?” She allowed the breeze to ruffle through her hair, anxious not to appear—well, anxious. “Is the case a difficult one?”

“Not unduly. The areas of difference are clear and not especially large; it’s a finely balanced matter. So the panel sits in judgment for about twelve hours a week, the rest of the time we go off and...compose our thoughts.” He raised his glass of champagne in self-mockery.

“So there’s a panel? For some reason I had the idea it was an entirely British affair.”

“And it would have been all the better for it. Sometimes I find the Entente Cordiale neither an *entente* nor particularly *cordiale*.” The previous day Rodin, the Frenchman, had been at his most persistently illogical and truculent. But then he usually was.

“So the French are involved, too?”

“And a Malaysian, an Egyptian, and a Serb. In theory the heat we generate is supposed to reforge swords for the service of a better world, although in practice the plowshares often have edges like razors.”

“I suspect you’re secretly very proud of what you do. But—forgive my ignorance—doesn’t having such a mixture of nationalities, and particularly the French, in this case make your task a little...awkward?”

“In every case,” he agreed with vehemence. “But why especially in this?”

“I mean, with the oil...”

“Oil? What oil?”

“Don’t you know? Surely you must. They will have told you.”

“Told me what? The seismic showed no oil.”

“But apparently there’s another report, very commercially confidential, or so I’ve heard—perhaps I shouldn’t have?—which says the place is floating on a vast reservoir of oil. And if it goes to the Greek side, the French have been promised the exploitation rights.” She looked puzzled. “Doesn’t that make it

difficult for a French judge?”

So that’s what the bastard Breton’s been up to. Watling’s face clouded with concern, while the great River Thames, and Mortima beside it, rushed on.

“Forgive me. Forget everything I’ve said. It was probably something I overheard and shouldn’t have—you know, I never really take much notice of these things, whether I should know or shouldn’t know.” She sounded flustered. “I’m a silly woman stumbling into areas I don’t understand. I should stick to dusting and *Woman’s Hour*.”

“It is probably something we shouldn’t be talking about,” he conceded, his face soured as though his drink had been spiked. “I have to deal with the facts that are presented to me. Impartially. Cut myself off completely from extraneous material and—forgive me—gossip.”

“I hope I haven’t embarrassed you. Please say you’ll forgive me.”

“Of course. You weren’t to know.” He spoke softly but had become studiously formal, the judge once more, gazing again across the river, at nothing. Working it out.

Mortima held silence for a moment as she fought to recompose herself, twirling the long stem of her glass nervously. It was time to occupy new territory, any new territory, so long as it wasn’t sitting on oil. She offered her best matronly smile. “I’m so glad you could bring your mother; I understand Bungy gave you both tea.”

He nodded gently. “My mother particularly enjoyed the toasted tea cakes. Couldn’t stand the Earl Gray, though. Said she was going to bring her own tea bags with her next time.” Watling experienced a sudden twinge of anxiety —“next time.” Had the baron-to-be let slip a confidence by appearing to assume too much? Would the Prime Minister’s wife know about New Year? But surely the invitation to tea and the terrace was simply a means of easing him into The System?

“And your father?”

“No longer with us, I’m afraid. Indeed, to my enduring regret I never knew him, nor he me.”

“How very sad.” Once more she was ill at ease, flushed, seeming incapable of finding the right topic, distressed by her clumsiness. She took a deep breath.

“Look, all my nonsense about oil, please don’t think I was implying that it might affect the opinion of the French judge. I respect the French; they’re a nation of brave and independent spirits. Don’t you agree?”

Watling all but choked on his champagne. She took his arm, fussing with concern. His eyes bulged red, his complexion bucolic. She began to wonder about the revival equipment.

“My apologies,” he coughed, “but I’m afraid I don’t entirely share your opinion about the French. A little personal prejudice.”

“So, you’re a Yorkshire-pudding-and-don’t-spare-the-cabbage man, are you?”

“Not quite, Mrs. Urquhart. You see, my father died in France. In 1943.”

“During the war...?” Her face had become a picture of wretchedness but this was not a subject from which, once engaged, he was to be easily diverted.

“Yes. He was an SOE agent, parachuted behind the lines. Betrayed to the Gestapo by the local French mayor who was a quiet collaborator. Most of them were, you know. Until D-Day. The French got back their country, and in return my mother got a small pension. Not much on which to bring up four children in an isolated Yorkshire village. So you will understand and forgive, I hope, my little personal prejudice.” There was no mistaking the restrained hint.

But there was more. The oil. The French. The Breton bastard. Now Watling knew why Rodin was being so stubborn. Suddenly it was all a mess. How could he impugn the integrity of a fellow judge? He had no proof, nothing but suspicions, which some would call prejudice. In any event, the smallest reference to oil would throw the proceedings into chaos. No, he would have to resign, wash his hands of it, his own judgment undermined by gossip and private doubt. But that would also cause chaos. Inordinate delay. Endanger the peace, perhaps. And he could kiss the barony of Cold Kirby-by-the-edge-of-the-Moors good-bye.

“But I know your reputation for impartiality, Professor Watling,” he heard the silly woman protesting. “I feel certain none of this will affect your views...”

There was one other way. He could stay quiet. Pretend he hadn’t heard. Get the job done, as everyone was begging him to do. Dispense justice, in spite of the French.

“And your father—I’m so sorry,” she continued. “I had absolutely no idea.”

At least, no more idea than had been supplied by *Who’s Who* and a few minutes spent perusing Watling’s press cuttings.

He crossed himself in the laborious manner of the Orthodox and knelt in the new-cropped grass beside his wife’s grave, positioning his bones like a man older than his years. “*Eonia mnimi—may her memory live forever,*” he muttered, running his hand along the lines in the marble, ignoring the complaints of his splayed leg. At his elbow, Maria replaced the fading flowers with fresh, and together they reached back with silent thoughts and memories.

“This is important,” he said, “to do honor to the dead.”

Greek legend is built around the Underworld, and for a man such as Passolides who knew he must himself soon face the journey across, the dignities and salutations of death were matters of the highest significance. Throughout the history of the Hellenes, life has been so freely cast aside and the dark ferryman of the Styx so frequently paid that elaborate rituals of passage have been required in order to reflect a measure of civilization in a world that was all too often uncivilized and barbaric. Yet for George and Eurypides there had been no ritual, no honor, no dignity.

Since their metaphorical stumble across the brothers’ graves an appetite for his own life seemed to have been conjured within Passolides. He had gained a new fixity of purpose, and if for Maria it seemed at times to be excessively fixed, at least it was a purpose, a mission, a renewed meaning, which had produced within him a degree of animation she had not witnessed since the happier times before her mother had passed away. Even his leg seemed to have improved. During the day he had begun to leave the shadows of his shrine, taking frequent walks on a limp leg through Regent’s Park, often muttering to himself, relishing the open green spaces once again, the arguments of sparrows along the hawthorn paths, the rattle of limes beside the lake. It was as close as he could get in the center of London to the memories of a mountainside.

As Maria polished the cool marble headstone she examined her father carefully, sensing how much he had changed. His small round face was like a

fruit taken too long from the tree, wizened, leathered by age and ancestry, his hair sapped steel white, cheeks hollowed by the pain of his clumsy and uncomfortable body. Yet the eyes glowed once more with a renewal of purpose, like an old lion woken from sleep, hungry.

“What was the point, *Baba*? What were the British hiding?”

“Guilt.”

He knew his subject well. Guilt had filled his own life to exclusion, the feeling that somehow he had failed them all, comrades and kin. He had failed as the eldest son to protect his younger brothers, failed again as a cripple to pick up the banner of resistance dropped by them. He would never admit it to anyone and only rarely to himself, but secretly he resented his martyr brothers, even as he loved them, for George and Eurypides were the honored dead while Evangelos was inadequate and miserably alive. He struggled in their shadow, unable to live up to his brothers’ memory, uncertain whether he could have found the same courage as they had, and deprived of any chance to try. He would never be a hero. He’d spent a lifetime trying to prove to the world that his dedication was the equal of his brothers’, even while in his cups blaming them. He blamed them and in turn blamed himself for the worm of envy and unreason that turned inside him. Yet now, it seemed, and at last, there was hope of relief, somebody else to blame.

“Guilt,” he repeated, rubbing his leg to help the blood circulate. “What else does a soldier hide? Not death, that’s his business. Only guilt has to be buried away. Burned.”

She plucked a few stray strands of grass from around the grave as she listened. He thought she knew nothing of his hidden shame but she had lived with it all her life and understood, even though she could do nothing about it. “Go on, *Baba*.”

“They had a right to kill my brothers, under the British law. George and Eurypides had guns, bombs; who but a few toothless Greeks would have complained? The British once hanged an eighteen-year-old boy, Pallikarides, because he was found carrying a gun. It was their law. Mandatory.” He had trouble with the word, but not its meaning. “No, it was not their death they tried to hide. It must have been the manner of their dying.”

“So that’s why they burned the bodies, because of what they had done to them. Torture?”

“It happened.” He stopped, his eyes focused on a land and a point in time far away. “Maybe they weren’t bodies when they burned them. Maybe they were still alive. That happened too.” On both sides, although he didn’t care to remember and it was something else he would never admit to his daughter. But even after all these years it had proved impossible to wipe his memory of the figures soaked in gas and vengeance. “*Prodótes!*” Traitors, Greek convicted of informing on Greek, stumbling down the village street, still screaming their innocence through charred lips, eyes no longer sighted, burned out, their bodies turned to bonfires that branded a terrible message of loyalty into all who saw. But George and Eurypides had betrayed no one, weren’t *prodótes*, hadn’t deserved to die like that.

“You know what this means, *Baba*? There may be more hidden graves.”

For the Greeks of Cyprus, on long winter’s nights when the womenfolk stoked the fires of remembrance and told stories of the life of old, no memory cut so deep as that of “the missing ones.” In 1974 Greek extremists in Athens, frustrated at the lack of progress toward *Enosis*, union between island and mainland, had conspired to overthrow the Nicosia Government of Archbishop Makarios. It was a fit of madness from which Cyprus would never recover. Five days later the Turks had retaliated and invaded the island, dividing it and breaking up the ethnic jigsaw in a manner that ensured it could never be remade. During that time a thousand and more Greek Cypriot men had disappeared, swept up by the advancing Turkish Army and swept off the face of the known world. Their suspected fate had always been a source of unfeigned outrage to the Greeks and embarrassment to the Turks—such things happened in war, misfortunes, examples of isolated barbarity, even wholesale mistakes, but who the hell liked to admit it afterward? Yet in the quest for peace the Turks *had* admitted, surrendered all they knew about “the missing ones,” which after nearly a quarter century was painfully little—a few scattered graves, old bones, fragmentary records, faded memories—but even a small light shining upon the island’s darkest hour brought understanding and helped ease the suffering, had allowed families to mourn and do honor to the dead. *Myrologhia*. Yet now it

seemed there were more graves. Dug even earlier, by the British.

For Maria, who had never known her uncles and could therefore not share fully in their loss, the issue was a matter of politics and of principle. Yet for her father it was so much more. A matter of honor and of retribution. Cypriot honor. Vangelis retribution.

“We must find out what we can about these hidden graves, *Baba*.”

“And about the crimes they tried to bury in them.” He heaved his bent body up straight, like a soldier on parade. “And which bastard did the burying.”

Thirteen

Trial by ordeal is a system of feudal torture that has been done away with everywhere, except in Westminster.

At the south-facing entrance to the Chamber of the House of Commons stands an ornate and seemingly aged archway, the Churchill Arch. Its antiquity is exaggerated, the smoky pallor having been produced not by the passage of time but by its presence so close to one of Reichsmarshal Göring's bombs, which razed the Chamber to the ground on 10 May 1941. On either side of the archway stand bronze statues of the two great war leaders of modern times, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Lloyd George's pose is eloquent, Churchill's more aggressive, as though the old warrior were hurrying to deliver a booted blow to the backside of the enemy. A little further along is a plinth bearing no statue, perhaps left as an act of encouragement to all those who pass and who hope, by dint of endeavor and great achievement, to join the rank of revered statesmen.

Roger Garlick would not, in any passage of lifetimes, number among them. Of course, he had a high opinion of himself that fit his role as a Junior Whip, one of those whose task it was to round up Government MPs and herd them through the voting lobbies. Garlick was a man of considerable girth but limited oratorical ability; he recognized that his chances of achieving high public acclaim were thereby limited and relished the opportunity to exercise his influence more privately, through the dark arts of whipping. He feasted on abuse, his favorite diet being new members and any woman.

"Roger!" The cry of recognition came from Booza-Pitt, making his way

through the Members' Lobby where MPs gather to collect messages and exchange gossip and other materials necessary to their work. Booza-Pitt reached out and squeezed the Whip's arm in greeting but didn't stop. Garlick was a useful contact, a man who was willing in private and under pressure from a second bottle of claret to share many of the personal secrets he had unearthed about his colleagues, but the middle of the Members' Lobby was not the place. The Transport Secretary made off in search of other indiscretions.

The Lobby was crowded, as was always the case in the half hour before Prime Minister's Question Time when Members assembled for the ritual spilling of blood—occasionally Urquhart's, more frequently that of the questioner and particularly that of Dick Clarence, the youthful and ineffectual Leader of the Opposition who had a tendency to appear as a schoolboy attempting to be gratuitously rude to his long-suffering headmaster. There had to be order in class, and it was Garlick's job as one of the form prefects to impose it. Thus, when he spotted Claire entering the Lobby, his eyes extended like the glass beads on the face of a child's bear.

"Missed you at the vote last night, my dear. I stood up for you, of course, but the Chief Whip threw a terrible tantrum. Took me half a bottle of whiskey to calm him down." He pinned her up against the base of Lloyd George.

"Sorry, Roger. Pressing engagement, I couldn't get out of it."

"Not good enough, you know, old girl. I put my arse on the line for you, now you owe me. How about saying sorry over dinner tomorrow night?" He leaned his thick arm on the statue behind her, bringing them closer together, an intimacy he claimed by right as a Whip. He reeked of Old Spice and other things less sweet. She was searching the Lobby for someone else—anyone else—to distract her attention, but he did not notice, his own eyes were clamped firmly upon her blouse.

"Sorry, Roger, can't do tomorrow. I'm having my hair done. Following night's out, too, I'm hoping to go to assertiveness class. If my husband lets me." She smiled, hoping he might take the hint.

"Next week, then," he persisted. "It'd be fun. There's a hint of a reshuffle coming up, new jobs going, we could discuss your future. Might even be able to get you added to the Whip's List of new stars."

As he spoke, a fellow Member squeezed past and Garlick took the opportunity to move his body still closer, trying to brush against her. Claire voiced no objection; in this hothouse of stretched emotions and endless nights it was not uncommon for her to be propositioned, particularly after Members had indulged in a good dinner, and alienating every colleague who had put a hand on her knee or an amorous arm around her waist would leave her a member of a drastically reduced party. Boys' club rules, and she had asked to join. But she didn't have to take Garlick's crap.

"Not next week, Roger. I'm having a new kitchen fitted." She continued to smile, but with great firmness she placed her fingers on his chest and pushed him away.

Both his attitude and the corner of his lip turned with the rejection. "Bloody women! You're all the same in this place. Useless. How the hell can we run the country with you crying off every time you get a migraine or one of the kids goes down with mumps." Other Members standing nearby had begun to tune in; he was aware he had acquired an audience and raised his voice. "It's about time you got something straight. This isn't a knitting class or a crèche, it's the House of Commons, and you're here to do as you're told. Leg up. Lie down. Roll over. Adopt as many different positions as a missionary in a pot. You were elected to support the Government, not to wander through the voting lobbies as though you're picking and choosing underwear at Marks & Spencer. You turn up when we tell you and do as you're told!"

The blood was flowing early today; from among the colleagues gathered around came a shuffling noise, a mixture of embarrassment and expectation, like the sound of a butcher's apron being passed.

"I am very sorry I missed last night's vote, Roger. I had no choice." She took great care to squeeze out any tremble or trace of emotion that might have crept into her voice.

"What was so important, then, that you had to let us all down? For God's sake don't tell me you had a pressing engagement with your bloody gynecologist."

"No, I wasn't on my back, Roger. I was with Francis. You know, the Prime Minister? He asked me to become his PPS."

The audience around them stirred and Garlick's jowls began to take on a deeper hue of crimson. He appeared to be having trouble controlling his lower jaw. "The Prime Minister asked you to become his..." He couldn't finish.

"His Parliamentary Private Secretary. And you know what kind of girl I am, Roger. Couldn't possibly say no."

"But the Chief didn't know anything about it," he stammered. He prayed he was being wound up.

Of course the Chief Whip didn't know, couldn't possibly have been brought in on the discussion. He was one of those marked to end up in the pot beside the missionary. Along with several of the Junior Whips.

"FU was planning to mention it to him over lunch today. It obviously hasn't come down the line yet. At least, not as far as you."

A senior member of the audience plucked at Garlick's sleeve. "Game, set, and testicles, I'd say, old boy," and walked off chortling.

Garlick appeared like a punctured Zeppelin, arms flapping uselessly, making gushing noises, deflating, half the man he had just been yet, as she knew, more than the man he was shortly to be. She had come upon the privilege of access and inside information, and Claire realized how much she loved it. Incapable of speech, all communications facilities shot away, Garlick turned and shuffled off in the direction of the Whips' Room and its bottle of whiskey.

"I'm really delighted, Claire, always thought you were overdue for recognition. Put a word in for you with the Boss some time ago. Glad to see it helped." Out of nowhere Booza-Pitt was at her elbow; his antennae were awesome.

"I can't believe all the good words that have been put in for me recently," she replied cryptically.

"I hope I can be one of the first to congratulate you. Let's have dinner. Soon."

The invitation. Which would be followed by solicitous inquiries about her husband and a small gift for the kids. In one bound she had jumped from Division Three straight into Division One, leapfrogging over the heads of some two hundred—mostly male—colleagues. It filled Geoffrey with unease. She had short-circuited his system, the system he had designed to protect him and promote his cause. She didn't fit and he didn't understand her, couldn't control

her. He might have the authority of Ministerial office but she had the influence of access—she'd practically be living at Number Ten. She was competition, raw and naked—talking of which, there was no point in trying to get her to bed, he'd already tried.

The whispered news had already circumnavigated the Lobby and Geoffrey became aware that many eyes were upon them. In proprietorial fashion he took her by the arm. "You and I are going to have so much fun," he said, and led her into the Chamber.

Urquhart stumbled into his place on the Government Front Bench, clutching his red folder. He would have preferred to stride into the Chamber, making a grand entrance from behind the Speaker's Chair, but the place was always packed for his appearances and he had to squeeze past bodies, elbows, legs, and other outstretched impedimenta of Members who hadn't seen him coming. He'd almost made it to his seat, stepping high like a dressage exercise, leaning on Tom Makepeace's shoulder for support, when a Junior Treasury Minister experienced a cramp spasm and kicked his Prime Minister in the shin. Another volunteer for the view from the backbench gods.

In spite of it, Urquhart felt good, very positive. Over lunch he had informed the Chief Whip that his services as bosun would no longer be required on the voyage. The man had understood what it portended. The great ship of state rarely stopped to pick up those who had fallen overboard, let alone any who had been deliberately dropped; he'd've been better off as a barnacle. Yet at his point of greatest misery he had been thrown a life belt, the promise of a peerage after the next election if he kept his mouth shut and caused no trouble in the meantime. So with that he had sat down and made a reasonable show of enjoying his final meal, in between the soup and fish helping his Prime Minister complete the final tally of those who would join him over the side. The sense of duty and discipline is instilled sufficiently deep within the psyche of most Whips that the sight of blood, even their own, does not appear to affect their appetite.

As he sat in his seat by the Dispatch Box, gazing at the army of Opposition assembled in layered ranks before him, Urquhart was struck by how much like a

fairground shooting gallery it all appeared. Row upon row of ducks who in good order would flutter to their feet and present themselves for—well, dispatch, with the umpires of the press lobby gazing down in impartial anticipation as they waited to count the scorched feathers. He intended they should have a busy day. His eyesight might be going, but not his instinctive aim.

The first duck to squawk and break cover was a Welshman whose voice conveyed the gentle lilt of the Clwyd coastline and a wit of solid coal. With vigor and at seemingly interminable length, he was expressing his concern that the Prime Minister cared too little for matters European. Urquhart drew a deep breath of boredom and raised his eyes to examine the ceiling, his thoughts passing through it to the roof terrace above... Quickly he wrenched himself back to the business of the House.

“Finally, the Prime Minister says he believes in a single economic market, and so do I. But if he truly does believe, why oh why does he turn his back on a single currency? All these pounds, schillings, and pesetas are so w-w-wasteful.”

He says it beautifully, Urquhart thought, practically eisteddfod standard. All Welsh wind. He rose and leaned an elbow on the Dispatch Box to give himself better aim.

“If I might be allowed to intervene in the Honorable Gentleman’s soliloquy...” He smiled to show there were no hard feelings. Then with a decisive flick he closed the red folder in front of him, which contained his civil service briefing. Apparently this was not to be a civil service answer. “I would like him to know that I entirely agree with him.”

There was a buzz of consternation. Since when did Urquhart agree with the Opposition?

“Well, almost entirely, on his main point. Which I take to be”—adroitly and without the Welshman being fully aware of it, Urquhart was moving the goal posts, wanting to play an entirely different game—“which I take to be what we have to do in order to bring about an effective single market in Europe? Although I fail to see why he should be so keen to do away with the British pound and banish the King’s head from the coin of our realm.”

The Welshman was flapping his wings; that’s not what he had meant at all. And who the hell was Francis Urquhart to put on the armor of Royal champion?

“But let me tell him.” Urquhart’s finger was pointing, taking aim. “If we want to build a single market, get rid of waste and inefficiency, there is something far more important than a single currency. And that’s a single language.”

There was a stunned silence as the House digested this entirely new morsel. In the box reserved for civil servants to the side of the Speaker’s Chair, an aide began riffling through the pages of his brief like a prompter desperately trying to return the play to the lines of its script.

“Oh, yes,” Urquhart continued, raising his voice and preparing to hit the adverbs and adjectives. “There is nothing more wasteful and expensive for business than having to deal in a multitude of different languages. The cost runs into billions every year, measure it in whatever currency you will. The economic logic is indisputable, our first priority must be to talk with one voice.” He shrugged his shoulders as if confronted with a problem he could do nothing about. “I suppose it is simply an accident of history that the only language capable of meeting that bill is English.”

From his position along the Front Bench, Bollingbroke gave a roar of delight—his Saturday night special, as Urquhart termed it, a noise several octaves above steak and kidney pudding and more appropriate to celebrating a victory by Manchester United. Urquhart was grateful nonetheless and turned to acknowledge the cheer, which was being picked up widely behind him. He noticed that Tom Makepeace displayed little desire to join the celebrations.

“So, when the Europeans come and start talking to me about a single currency in English, that’s when I’ll start listening,” he declaimed. He was enjoying himself thoroughly. Sod the diplomatic etiquette. Was it his fault if Brussels had no sense of humor? “And I shall expect the Honorable Gentleman’s unflinching and Welsh-hearted support.” A nice touch; that’ll go down in his constituency like a slut on a slide.

Urquhart beamed at the uproar all around and resumed his seat. Even before he had done so, the Opposition Leader was on his feet, stretching at his Armani seams, his face flushed with outrage. Urquhart nestled back on the leather. Having seen his colleague blown away in a flurry of feathers, only a complete turkey would be so eager to take his place. But Clarence was a complete turkey, practically oven-ready.

“I have rarely heard views expressed in this House that have been so unworthy and un-European. The Prime Minister’s performance today has been a national disgrace. In a few days’ time he is to fly to a meeting with the French President. Does he not realize the sort of greeting he will have to endure? What will it do to the reputation of this country to have its Prime Minister booed through the streets of Paris?” Paradoxical cheers came from his supporters behind, which quickly died in confusion as Urquhart accepted them graciously. Clarence battled on. “When will the Prime Minister realize how much damage he is doing to the interests of this country with his stubbornness, his constant veto of new ideas, his abject refusal to be a good European?”

Tumult. It took a considerable time and the repeated intervention of the Speaker before Urquhart had any chance of being heard. He saw no reason to rush.

“Perhaps it’s the Right Honorable Gentleman’s youth that makes him so impetuous. Perhaps, too, it explains his apparent willingness to come to this House every week and learn by the good old Victorian method of a sound thrashing. But youth alone isn’t enough to excuse ignorance.” Urquhart eased back the sleeves of his suit in the manner of a teacher preparing to chalk a blackboard. “He seems to have climbed so high up his European Tower of Babel that he’s become giddy and disorientated. Once more I shall have to bring him down to earth. Remind him of the other times when the world had cause to be grateful that we in Britain set our face against the fashion in Europe. When we exercised our veto. Said ‘No,’ ‘No,’ and ‘No’ again. Showed ourselves stubborn and utterly unwilling to bend. As we did in 1940. We stood alone, backed only by God and the seas when all the rest”—he dismissed them with a broad wave of his hand—“had capitulated.”

Bollingbroke was going all but berserk, determined that his support should be heard above the volleys of disorder being fired from the benches around. As he paused in the din, Urquhart was reminded of the pose adopted by the statue of Churchill beyond the doors of the Chamber and he decided to give it a try, left foot to the fore, jacket sides swept back, hands grasping hips, leaning forward to face the sound of gunfire.

“Our *stubbornness*—I believe that was the word he used—our stubbornness

saved Europe then. And the British Prime Minister wasn't booed in the streets after we'd liberated Paris, they got down on their knees and gave thanks!"

God, that would cause chaos in France, but he could live with that. The French had not a single vote that counted on election night. Overhead he could see eager faces in the press gallery leaning out for a better view; more importantly, the benches behind him had become a raging sea of white Order Papers, as though to a man the Government Party was preparing to ward off another threat of invasion. Well, almost to a man. Makepeace was sitting, legs stiff and outstretched, dour expression cast in cement. He would be a problem when he unfroze. But Urquhart thought he had the solution to that.

Urquhart strode briskly down the corridor leading to his office in the House of Commons, composing headlines.

"What d'you think? 'FU Blasts Brussels Babble'? 'Francis 6, France 0'? How about 'To Be or Not to Be—That is the Language'? Yes, I like that."

Claire struggled to keep up. He had left the Chamber with the zest of a soprano buoyed by a dozen curtain calls, motioning her to follow. Normally he would have been surrounded by a pack of civil servants but they had decided to fall into a protective huddle and linger while they counted their dead. He swept into his room, held the heavy oak door for her then slammed it shut with the crash of an artillery barrage. He stood to attention, facing her, presenting himself for inspection.

"How was I?"

"You were completely..." She searched for the word. What could she say? His mastery over the House amazed and inspired her in the same measure as the rabid jingoism of his words offended all she held dear. But her views, for the moment, didn't matter; she was here to learn. "Francis, you were completely bloody impossible."

"Yes, I was, wasn't I? Feathers everywhere. Best pillow fight in ages." He bounced on his toes, a younger man by forty years, unable to contain his enthusiasm.

"Francis, were you serious? About a single language?"

“Course not. It’ll never happen. But it’ll bugger up all this nonsense about a single currency for a while, and our voters will love it. Worth another three percent in the polls by the end of the month, you wait and see.”

He was unusually animated, the adrenaline still pumping. Question Time was trial by ordeal, when the most powerful man in the land was dragged to the edge of a great cliff and made to look down upon the fate that must one day await him on the rocks below. She had heard that in order to endure the ordeal some Prime Ministers had drunk, others had been physically sick beforehand, but in the Chamber Urquhart seemed always in control, almost nerveless. Yet here behind closed doors she could feel the tension flooding through his pores. His blood was hot, his passions high, a lover at orgasm. She was being permitted to share a moment of great intimacy.

“You are my lucky charm, Claire. I can feel it.”

He reached out, held her by the arms, claiming her, and at the same time seeking support from her as the fire within him slowly began to subside. She tried to pretend there was nothing sexual in the moment but in vain—here was power, the most potent of forbidden fruit, and authority, passion, vulnerability, all mixed as one, every indulgence she had ever dreamed about in politics and of which she was now part. She stared into his eyes, awed by the privilege of the moment, knowing that her political life would never be as simple again.

The moment was broken by the sounds of protest coming from outside the door and the hurried and unannounced entrance of a figure in a state of considerable agitation. It was Tom Makepeace. His agitation seemed only to grow as he caught the wake of the intimate moment between his leader and his former lover. He had been about to offer a cursory apology for bursting in but decided to dispense with any of the tattered formalities, glaring first at Claire before turning on the Prime Minister.

“Francis, that performance was little short of a disgrace. An insult to our European partners. In one afternoon you’ve managed to unravel everything I’ve achieved in my time as Foreign Secretary. And all for the sake of gratuitous parliamentary fisticuffs.”

“You’ve got to learn, Tom, that it’s not all Queensberry Rules in Europe. Occasionally you need a bit of pepper on the gloves.”

“You can’t go screwing around with foreign policy without having the courtesy to consult me first, I won’t have it. How can you expect me to deal in good faith with my counterparts after that?” He tossed back the forelock that had fallen across his brow, trying to recompose his temper.

“Ah, good point. I don’t.”

Claire took a step back. She knew what was coming and felt as if she were intruding. She experienced a strong twinge of embarrassment, too. Was it because Makepeace had until a few days previously been her lover, or because she was as yet unaccustomed to the rituals of humiliation? His gaze of suspicion followed her.

“Tom, you are one of my most capable and pious of Ministers, a great source of strength. Potentially. You are also the Government’s most passionate Euro-enthusiast, a source of considerable confusion. Potentially. So—I’m moving you to Environment, where your piousness can find its reward and your enthusiasm can inflict less harm.”

The blow had been landed but the effect was not instantaneous. By degrees the forelock tumbled forward once more and his expression turned to confusion. Stiffly, his head began to shake from side to side as though trying to shake itself free from sudden confusion and disbelief.

“Think about it, Tom. You’re a man of great administrative ability and considerable social conscience in a Government believed by most to be utterly heartless. That must cause you as much distress as it does me. So where better to display your personal credentials and the Government’s best intentions than in the field of Environment? Good for you, good for us all.”

The head was still shaking. “I’ll not accept.”

“It’s not a matter for debate.”

“Environment or Out?”

“If that’s the way you want to put it.”

Makepeace drew a deep breath, struggling for composure that, after a few moments, he found. “Then I resign.”

Claire looked afresh at him; God, he really meant it. He wouldn’t compromise. He was wrong, but she found herself appreciating more than ever that streak of stubbornness, both noble and naive, which was the most endearing

and aggravating feature of Tom Makepeace. Urquhart, however, seemed less impressed. His euphoria had gone, to be replaced by unadorned exasperation.

“Tom, you can’t resign! For God’s sake stop being so petulant and look at what it means. It won’t be so very long before I decide to retire and the party starts looking for a new leader. My guess is they’ll go for a change of style, too. Someone with a little less stick and a bit more sugar than me. Someone who has a different bias to his politics, just for the joy of a change. Sounds like a pretty good description of Tom Makepeace. Environment is a great opportunity for you—grab it with both hands!” He allowed the thought to take root for a moment. “What the party won’t do, Tom, is to hand over its destiny to someone who’s spent the last couple of years sulking on the backbenches.”

Makepeace was wound tight as a piano wire, feet spread apart for support, his arms knotted lest his hands betray the trembling emotions inside, his features set rigid as he struggled for control. Slowly, at the very edges of his mouth, Claire noticed the traces of a wistful smile beginning to appear, the picture of a man saying farewell to something of great importance to himself. But what? Position? Or principle?

“Francis, your logic is almost impeccable. It has only one small fault.”

“And what is that?”

“You underestimate how much I have come to dislike you.” And with that he was gone.

The silence he left behind grew oppressive. “I suppose that meant no,” Urquhart muttered at last.

“Shall I go after him?”

“No. I’ll not beg.” Nor would he forgive. “And it was threatening to be such a pleasant day.”

It might, perhaps, have made a difference if Makepeace had been allowed a few quiet moments for thought and reflection, an opportunity to set practicality alongside his sense of wounded pride in order to discover which would finish the day stronger. But the wind of fate blows capricious in Westminster, and it was not to be. The corridor from the Prime Minister’s House of Commons office

emerges directly beside the stairwell leading down from the press gallery. In his careless anger Makepeace all but bowled over Dicky Withers as the pressman emerged from the stairs.

“Arrest this ruffian, Sergeant!” Withers demanded of the policeman who guarded this sensitive section of palace corridor.

“Not likely, Dicky. I’ve just put five quid on him becoming the next Gaffer.”

“A pity,” Makepeace responded as he dusted down the pressman in apology. “You’d have got much better odds in the morning.”

Withers eyed his assailant carefully, noting the unusually discomfited expression. “That’s one hell of a hurry, Tom. Tell me, are you flying or fleeing?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Sure. When a Foreign Secretary is caught charging around like that it must be either a woman or a war. Which is it? You know you can confide in me. I’ll only tell about a million people.”

Makepeace finished straightening the carnation at the pressman’s lapel. Everything in its order. “Get the boys together for me, Dicky. Lobby Room in fifteen minutes. Then we can tell the whole bloody world. Can’t give you an exclusive, but you’ll get the first interview afterward.”

“Sounds like war.”

“It is.”

**MAKEPEACE DECLARES WAR ON URQUHART
FOREIGN SECRETARY
“QUITS IN DISGUST”**

By Richard Withers, Political Editor

•••

Foreign Secretary Thomas Makepeace left the Government yesterday amid bitter recriminations with Downing Street over the direction of Government policy. There was also controversy as to whether he had resigned or been sacked.

“I’ve walked out on him in disgust,” Makepeace told a hurriedly convened Westminster press conference.

Downing Street sources later went to considerable effort to deny this, stating that he had been “consistently out of step” with Government policy on Europe, and the Prime Minister had no choice but to dismiss him. One Government loyalist last night described Makepeace as “a Euro crank.”

It was a day of extraordinary excitement at Westminster. The sensational resignation/dismissal followed immediately upon scenes of uproar within the House of Commons after the Prime Minister Francis Urquhart had denounced great rafts of European orthodoxy.

Last night Makepeace announced the formation of a new pro-European group within the Government party called “the Concorde Club.” “It will be modern, progressive, and entirely up-to-date. It will be opposed to political Neanderthalism,” he said. Observers were left in no doubt that the political Neanderthal he had most in mind was Francis Urquhart.

It is unclear how much support the Concorde Club will gain but if the widely respected Makepeace is able to gain a substantial following, it will represent a most serious threat to the Prime Minister and his chances of continuing long in office.

One senior party source commented that it “was nothing less than a declaration of war.”

Fourteen

Beware the politician who talks about his political principles. He is usually picking your pocket.

She rapped at the door. “He’s on, Francis.”

From within the bathroom there was the sound of water being swirled and agitated as Urquhart eased himself back to the present. “Leave the door open, would you? And switch it up.”

She did as he asked, and also refilled his glass. They made such a balanced team, she mused, with their instincts so intertwined, facing the world and its foibles practically as one. She couldn’t remember the last time they had indulged a serious difference of opinion. Was it the redecoration of the apartment at Downing Street or the sacking of his first Chancellor? He’d played both in traditional fashion, while she had encouraged him to be more adventurous with both the decor and the ax. They’d compromised; she’d changed the furniture and he’d kept his Cabinet colleague (but only for another six months, she remembered. Francis had sacked him on her birthday—beneath it all he could be such a romantic).

He wasn’t often wrong—hadn’t been that morning when he’d offered a few predictions over breakfast. “It’ll be a busy weekend for Tom,” he had forecast. “Standard rules of engagement for poor losers. Friday they run to the arms of their constituents for a show of moral support. Saturday it’s a walk in the garden with the wife and waifs for a display of family values, then off on Sunday to the vicar to parade the conscience—a personal and intensely spiritual odyssey that somehow always seems to be accompanied by a makeup man and the mongols

of the camera pack. Lord, how it must turn the stomach of picture editors, but somehow they seem to manage.”

“His wife’s buried away in America, isn’t she?”

“True. Maybe he has a girlfriend tucked away somewhere. You know, I think we should keep an eye on young Tom. Perhaps he has hidden depths.”

Now, as the early evening news announced that the once-and-maybe-future Cabinet Minister had been greeted enthusiastically by his Women’s Luncheon Committee meeting, a shout of derision and the noise of parting waters came from the bathroom. Urquhart emerged wrapped in a towel.

To the apparent excessive interest of the pursuing news crew, Makepeace was shown purchasing a bag of oranges in his local market.

“Nice touch. From high ministry to lowly market place—our man of the people,” Urquhart reflected.

“Bet he pays with a twenty-pound note. He won’t have the slightest idea how much they cost,” Mortima muttered less charitably.

“Mr. Makepeace, what are your plans now?” a breathless interviewer pressed as Makepeace produced his wallet.

“To go home and relax. It’ll be the first weekend in almost ten years I haven’t been surrounded by red boxes; I’m rather looking forward to it.”

“But you’ll miss being in office, surely? Do you want to return to Government at any time?”

“I’m only fifty. I hope there’ll be a chance to serve again sometime.”

“But not under Francis Urquhart. Yesterday you called his Government unprincipled. Do you think it’s time for the Prime Minister to step down? Or be pushed?”

Makepeace made no immediate response. He stood with his hand extended, waiting for his change. It came in a great handful of coins, which he did not bother to count.

“Mr. Makepeace, should the Prime Minister be forced to go?” the interviewer pressed.

He turned to face his interrogator and the nation, his brow darkened as though considering a dilemma of enormous consequence. Suddenly he broke into an impish grin.

“You might say that,” he offered. “But at this stage I wouldn’t care to comment...”

Urquhart reached for the remote control and silenced his tormentor. “I’ve handled this matter badly,” he reflected. “Should’ve handled him better. Never wanted him out. But...politicians of principle. They’re like a hole in the middle of the motorway.”

“This morning’s press was fine,” she added supportively.

“It was no better than a draw, Mortima. A Prime Minister should do better than merely a draw.”

He was being so ruthlessly honest with himself. But could he also be honest about himself, she wondered? Clad in nothing more than a bath towel he looked so vulnerable, and she began to ruminate yet again on his passing years, the glorious days of summer turned fading autumn, a time when even a great oak tree must lose its leaves and stand bare before the pitiless winds. He had given so much, they had both given so much, yet as the seasons of their lives changed they would have so little to look forward to. There was no joy in watching him grow old.

Approaching winter. A patchwork of creases and crevices. Thin emaciated finger-twigs, parchment skin of bark, when the sap begins to wane and the nights grow longer in a landscape covered with axmen.

“Why do you want to go on, Francis?”

For a moment he looked startled. “Because it’s the only thing I know. Why, do you want me to stop?”

“No, but it may cost you more than ever to continue, and I think you should know why you continue.”

“Because I honestly believe I am the best man for the job. The only man, perhaps. For the country—and for me—I must go on. I’m not ready to spend the rest of my days looking back. There are too many memories, those things we ought not to have done.”

“You won’t be able to go on forever, Francis.”

“I know. But soon I shall become the longest-serving Prime Minister in modern times. Francis Urquhart’s place in history will be secure. Not a bad thing for us to have achieved, Mortima. Something for us to share, I suppose, after all

this has been put by.”

“To justify the sacrifices past.”

“As you say, to justify the sacrifices past. And those still to come.”

“Mummy, why didn’t Mr. Urquhart lock up Toad?”

Claire put down the book and gave her youngest daughter, Abby, a cheerful hug. “I don’t think Mr. Urquhart was around then, darling.”

“But he’s been around forever.”

It dawned on Claire that Francis Urquhart had been Prime Minister since before either Abby or Diana had been born. A long time. A lifetime.

“I think Mr. Urquhart is Toad,” the oldest child joined in from the other side of the sofa.

“Don’t you like Mr. Urquhart?” her mother inquired.

“No. He’s not very kind and never listens. Just like Toad. And he’s so *old*.”

“He’s not that old,” Claire protested. “Only a little older than Daddy.”

“A very little older than Daddy,” Johannis commented wryly. He was examining the financial pages of the evening newspaper while managing to watch the news and eavesdrop at the same time.

“Did your Mummy read *The Wind in the Willows* to you when you were a girl?” Diana inquired.

“No, darling. She didn’t.”

“Did you have an unhappy childhood, Mummy?” Diana was beginning to pick up so many of her mother’s unspoken thoughts, much as Claire had when she was a child. Her own mother had spoken so little to her, not wanting to share the pain, trying to protect her from the truth. But the pain had come, even when there had been no beatings, for when there was no abuse there was silence. That’s how it had been for Claire and how it would never be for her own children. Screaming matches, hysterical argument, voices and fists raised until she thought her heart would crack. Then long periods of silence. Complete silence. Meals that were spent in silence, long days in silence, even her mother weeping in silence. The silence of the hell cupboard beneath the stairs where on occasions she was locked and more frequently she hid. A childhood of abuse and

silence, the noise of wounding and the yet more wounding sound of silence—perhaps it all evened out in the end. She had survived. She was a survivor.

“Buy shares in him, d’you think?” Joh asked, his attention now upon the television news. “Or has he gone the way of all flesh?”

Tom Makepeace paid for his oranges.

She wondered how much Joh knew, or guessed. Before they had married they’d discussed openly his fears that a husband twenty-three years older than a wife would inevitably be found deficient, lacking in some important respects, that one day he would be a pensioner while she was still in her prime and in almost all such relationships there was bound to develop a gulf that could only be bridged by trust and immense understanding. “You cannot keep a marriage warm if both sides of the bed go cold,” he’d said. How well he had foreseen. But that had been a long time ago; had he in the years since made the crossover in his mind from abstract theory to fact? If he had, as she suspected he had, he’d offered no hint of it. Loyal knight, husband, guide, father-confessor, never inquisitor. It made her respect and love for him all the stronger.

“No,” she responded to her husband’s question. “Not yet at least.”

“But Tom Makepeace could be a danger.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I am a businessman, my love, not a politician. But make your own market analysis. How long do most Prime Ministers last—three, four, five years? He’s already lasted more than ten. No one can defy the odds forever; the chances of your Francis still being in office in two years’ time are very small. Age, accident, ill health, unpopularity. Time has many unpleasant allies.”

“But he seems at the height of his power.”

“So was Alexander when he fell from his horse.”

“What are you saying, Joh?”

“I suppose I’m saying be careful. That there’s every likelihood of Francis Urquhart falling beneath the chariot wheels while you are his PPS—correction, not falling, more likely being thrust beneath by a baying mob. And all his handmaidens with him. Don’t tie yourself too closely.”

“And you think that Tom Makepeace will do the thrusting?” She found the terminology peculiarly uncomfortable.

“Makepeace, or someone like Makepeace. You should keep an eye on him.”

His logic was, as always, impeccable; a shiver of distress passed down her spine.

“How would you do that, Joh? Keep an eye on him?”

He appeared not to have heard, setting aside his newspaper in order that he could embrace his daughters before sending them off to bed accompanied by the normal chorus of complaint. Only when Abby and Diana had departed, towing soft toys and endearments, did he turn once again to his wife. “How? Depends how important it was.”

“According to you, very.”

He massaged his hands, a vizier warming them above a campfire on some damp, starless night, his lips moving as though sucking at the pipe he used to love before he met Claire and loved her more. “A talkative friend. Close colleague, perhaps. Nothing electronic or illegal. That sort of thing, you mean?”

She stared at him, afraid to acknowledge what she meant, even to herself.

“A driver. Drivers know all the secrets. They could’ve abolished the CIA in exchange for one driver in the Kremlin motor pool. I’d get a friendly businessman to offer him a driver with big ears inside the car and a big mouth out of it.”

“Not illegal?”

“More an accident.”

She bit her bottom lip, puckering her face as though tasting lemons. “Suppose, Joh, just suppose for the sake of argument that a businessman was impressed by the Concorde Club and wanted to offer Tom some gesture of support—a small donation for administrative support, the loan of a car and driver to replace the Ministerial car he’s just lost...”

“A driver of incontinent tongue and divided loyalty.”

“What would you say, Joh?”

“I’d say that would alter the odds significantly in Mr. Urquhart’s favor. For a little while.”

“How might that be done?” she asked softly.

He examined her closely, probing, hypothesis spilling into resolution. He needed to be certain.

“Rather easily, I would guess. But I’m sure a busy girl like you wouldn’t want to be bothered with such detail.”

“I suspect you’re right.”

He paused, contemplating the new door that had opened up on their lives. “Seems it’s not only your job that’s changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you rather liked Tom Makepeace.”

He knew, she was sure. At times he seemed to have a mirror into her mind and she had no hiding place from him, even inside.

“I did. I suppose I still do.”

“But?”

“But...” She shrugged, grown suddenly weary. “But politics.” It seemed to explain everything. Yet it excused nothing.

Fifteen

The Mediterranean is a full, confused sea, littered with wrecks and old ruins.

Evangelos Passolides sang a song of ancient honor as he invoked the miracle of the mallet, beating short strips of pig into what by later that evening would have become cuisine. Thud—squish—smash, and another thousand bygone warriors were tossed to the Underworld.

Maria prepared the evening tables. She'd turned up again after another long day's teaching for no better purpose than to watch over him and to indulge her growing concern. His moods had become increasingly capricious, occasionally malevolent, an appearance of determination followed by outbursts of bitterness when it seemed that the forces of authority were once again standing guard over his brothers' graves, fending him off with their rules of silence. They'd tried to find out more about the unknown officer and the precise location of the burial site, but no one in authority displayed any spark of interest. It was all so very long ago, miss, by now there'd be nothing to dig up but problems. Put the details in writing and we'll see what can be done. So Maria had written but there had been no reply, the letter left to circulate through the corridors of power until it dropped from exhaustion.

Meanwhile Passolides cooked, sang mournful songs, and grew ever more resentful.

And it was her fault. She had interfered with his silent grief, stirred his hopes and, with them, dark memories. She couldn't drop it now, any more than he could.

Family. The bonds of loyalty. Bondage. Links that had chained her for so many years, the finest hour of her womanhood, first to a dying mother then to a grieving father. And for him, a ligature tied so tight it had all but strangled the life from him. For both their sakes, she had to find help from somewhere. From someone who could break through the artifice and excuses, someone who could find out about the brothers' graves, and whether there were any other graves. But who?

As the television news flickered on the small monochrome screen perched above the coatrack, she saw a man of authority and responsibility, a man who talked of principle and his determination to defend the rights of ordinary men and women against insensitive and arrogant Government, even as he bought his oranges...

Clive Watling looked around the lunch table and wondered why he had been so naive. He'd swallowed the Ponsonby line that it would be an easy task, the issues simple, the evidence direct, the conclusions all but self-evident. Yet they couldn't even agree on what to eat. Two Muslims, one of whom had an ulcer, a vegetarian, a native of Yorkshire who liked his food like his law—ample in quantity and unambiguously honest. And then, of course, there was Rodin, who insisted on kosher food and scowled upon whatever was presented on the plate with a look of Jacobin condescension. About most things in this world, it seemed, Rodin had already formed his inflexible opinion.

There was so little certainty to international law; so much was left to textual interpretation, to confusing precedent, hopefully to common sense and fundamental principle. How it could be left to unreconstructed tribalists like Rodin he would never fathom.

For weeks the academics, geologists, politicians, historians, maritime experts, and professional lobbyists garbed as lawyers had trooped before their sittings and expounded on the matter, which in essence was simple. Beyond the breeze-kissed beaches of Cyprus lay two disputed areas of continental shelf, east and west. Hand them to the Greeks, or to the Turks, or find some means of division that could be dressed in a cloak of equity and natural justice. Miles of salt water,

sea anemones, and sand.

And oil.

Watling was sure of it now. And he was sure the Frenchman knew. Whatever else could explain his utter unreason? Any proposal that the Turks might gain a substantial proportion of the continental shelf was resisted with vehemence, even the suggestion that they draw a straight line down the middle and split it in equal halves was disparaged and denounced. The “share of lions,” as he put it, must go to the Greeks. While they waited in the private dining room for their first course Rodin had been pressed for his defense—what new principle of international justice could he possibly invoke to justify such an imbalance of objectivity?

“It is simple and irrefutable,” he had pronounced, swirling the water in his glass as though inspecting a dribble of English wine. “The Turks invaded, took their territory by force. At the cost of many lives and in defiance of the United Nations. It would be appeasement of the worst kind to offer them reward for their bloody actions.”

“We are not here to deliberate upon the war,” Osman the Egyptian had scolded.

“That is exactly what we are doing!” Rodin spat. “If we show favor to the Turks we sanctify future acts of international terrorism. What would we be saying to the world—grab territory, rape and pillage the inhabitants into exile, and in twenty years’ time the international courts will offer you congratulation and confirm the spoils?”

“That’s how frontiers have been fixed throughout the ages, for goodness’ sake,” the Malaysian muttered.

“I’d hoped we could find a rather less medieval means of settlement,” Rodin replied icily. “Oh, don’t quote me your Bering Seas and Beagle Channels, why should we hide behind ancient precedent?”

“Because it’s the law,” Osman responded quietly.

“But it isn’t justice.”

Justice, Watling mused to himself, he talks of justice. And this the man who had so vehemently argued the case of French fishermen in their attempt to force themselves upon the fishing grounds of Guernsey, quoting in his public cause Napoleonic treaty and national honor while arguing grubby compromise behind

closed doors. Now compromise of whatever kind that left the Turk within a hundred miles of oil shale he condemned with the mock virtue of a *tricoteuse* hearing the clatter on cobbles of approaching tumbrels.

Watling eyed the Frenchman. Of course Rodin knew! Watling found himself wondering whether Rodin actually took money for his views, or was the merest sniff of French national interest sufficient to turn him? Whichever, it mattered little, the result would still be the same. If Watling allowed it.

French justice. Of the type that had been meted out to his father. For a few mouthfuls Watling fought the urge within that was attempting to drench his own views in prejudice—but there was no conflict here, he decided, no contradiction, his sense of principle was entirely in accord with his antagonism. French bigotry and self-interest was not to be confused with fair play, not in Watling's court. Rodin spoke glibly of justice, so on the stake of justice the Frenchman would be impaled. Watling would see to it. As a matter of high principle. And pleasure.

Sixteen

All politics are the search for advantage.

Cabinet Government frequently resembled a herd of pigs flying in close formation, he thought. In the Orwellian world of Westminster there was one prerogative above all accorded to the Chief Pig, that of choosing his companions for the flypast, and it was something of a pity that the resignation of Makepeace had taken the edge off the reshuffle, implying an element of enforced necessity instead of presenting it as unadulterated Urquhart. Makepeace was an overweight boar, he'd insisted, fattened to excess on a diet of Brussels and scarcely capable any longer of liftoff let alone the aerial gymnastics required for public esteem on the British side of the Channel. Market time. "Should remind others of the constant need to remain lean and hungry," he'd told his new press officer, Grist. "And the blessings of the bacon slicer."

Grist had made a good start to such a significant day, suggesting that the Prime Minister conduct a brisk walk around the lake in St. James's Park in order to supply appropriate images for the benefit of photographers, a mixture of purpose and vigor. One of the cameramen had suggested the Prime Ministerial hands might be placed around the neck of a domesticated goose, "just to give the public an idea of how it's done, Mr. Urquhart." He declined.

By the time he returned to Downing Street an impatient flock of reporters and lobby correspondents was perched along the barriers, waiting upon first prey. Blood was about to be splashed over their boots and they squabbled among themselves, fighting for the first morsel, launching thrusts at the Prime Minister from across the road. He responded with nothing more than a wave and a look of

sincerity practiced to perfection before retreating toward the glossy black door.

“Cry God for England and St. George?” It was Dicky Withers. The wise old bird was saving his energies and his thoughts to hang upon a special moment.

Urquhart turned in the doorway to look once more upon the scene, and nodded in Dicky’s direction. Dicky knew what this was all about.

“And warm beer, white cliffs, and flying pigs,” Urquhart muttered. He said no more before disappearing inside. There was work to be done.

It would be a long day. With long knives.

For Geoffrey Booza-Pitt, the day had started in admirable fashion. He’d gone fishing at the Ritz, casting champagne and scrambled egg upon the familiar waters until she had risen innocently for the bait. Breakfast with Selina would in any event have been a pleasure, but the attractions of her body were as little for the Transport Secretary compared with those of her mind—or, more specifically, her memory. She was a secretary in the office of the Party Chairman and was one of several in similar political employment whom Geoffrey regularly fed and flattered. In all such cases he preferred breakfast to bed, being cautious about sleeping with women of naive years where sex could be seen as a prelude either to emotional entanglement or to the insinuations of a gossip column, neither of which Geoffrey could countenance. Sharing breakfast offered much more robust reward, pillow talk without the cigarette ash and mascara smears, information *sans* ejaculation.

Booza-Pitt’s political philosophy was unorthodox. He did not believe, for instance, that information attracted ownership, at least the ownership of anybody who was lax enough to let it slip. So Geoffrey would acquire a little bit here and a little bit there, not wholesale robbery, but in the end it all added up—as it had done when he was a student. He’d written to every Jewish charity he could find explaining that he was a devout student struggling to make ends meet, that he was £200 short on his tuition money. He’d work nights, of course, for his living expenses, but he did want to make sure of his tuition and could they please help? And, with a little bit here and a little bit there, the trickles of help had become a flood. If he’d had a conscience it certainly wasn’t of Jewish origin since both his

parents were casual Methodists. Anyway, he'd slept well in a bed of considerable comfort.

Information was wealth around the labyrinths of Westminster, of a value greater than money, and Selina had paid for breakfast in generous fashion. She'd typed every draft of the new campaigning document being prepared at party headquarters, every addition and amendment, every thought and rethought, the paragraphs of analysis and argument, all the conclusions. And her recall was stupendous, even as the bubbles tickled her nose and made her giggle. The new campaign, it seemed, would not be radical in approach—a little direct mail, a lightweight slogan—but it had been based on new opinion research and, like Selina, was attractively packaged. She was ebullient, unsuspecting, and tender enough to believe he really wanted to help.

Geoffrey had smiled, poured, and committed it all to his excellent memory.

The car ferrying them back to their separate offices was stuck in the morning snarl. The fool of a driver had decided to take the rapid route to nowhere around Trafalgar Square, where ranks of one-eyed pigeons stood morose and diseased on guard duty. The Transport Secretary wound up the window and settled back into his seat, for once in his life content to remain obscure, trying to avoid the attentions of fellow jammers with their acrid fumes and equally corrosive tempers. Beside him on the backseat Selina was rearranging her elegant legs, causing him to undertake a rapid reassessment of his priorities—he was a fool for thighs, perhaps he should suggest dinner next time?—when the phone began to burble. From the other end of the line came the voice of his House of Commons secretary. The guest list for his box at the Albert Hall. The promenade concert late next week. A late cancellation, the Trade Secretary off trying to pluck leaves from the tree of Japanese abundance, where he would surely discover like all his predecessors that when it came to promises of freer trade, in the Orient it was always autumn.

The interruption soured Booza-Pitt's mood, distracting him from his scrutiny of delicate ankles and contemplation of indulgence. He hated last-minute cancellations that disturbed what was often months of planning; he went into a sulk, like the Duke of Wellington receiving a scrap of paper informing him that Blücher wouldn't make it in time for Waterloo. He decided to shoot the

messenger.

“So what have you done?” he demanded querulously.

“Well, I assume we’d like another top-level politician, so I’ve been checking the list. You’ve done every other member of the Cabinet in the last twelve months apart from Tom Makepeace...”

“This is a box at the Albert Hall, not a bloody crypt.”

“And Arthur Bollingbroke. I’ve already called his secretary to check, she thinks he and his wife might be free on that evening.”

“Bollingbroke! The man’s a bloated bore, why the hell do you think I haven’t invited him to anything else? I can’t sit him down next to the American Ambassador and Chairman of ITN, he’d fart all through the overture while swilling down vast quantities of my champagne. Have you any idea how much that’d cost me?”

The secretary was trying to justify herself but Booza-Pitt was in no mind to listen. The motorist stuck in the next vehicle had recognized him and was offering a two-fingered salutation; the Transport Secretary struggled to balance discretion against a sudden compulsion to get out of the car and rearrange the guy’s nasal passages.

“Perhaps we’d better wait until tomorrow, anyway,” he heard her suggest.

“What on earth for?”

“Until the reshuffle is finished.”

“Reshuffle...?” He choked. Selina wondered if a stray salmon bone had become lodged in his throat.

“Didn’t you know? It’s on television right now.”

Reshuffles had always had an adverse effect on Booza-Pitt, they made him twitch. That first time, he’d been in Parliament less than eighteen months and had refused to stray more than twenty yards from the phone throughout the day, even though his second wife had told him there was no credible chance of his finding promotion so early in his career. Yet the phone had rung while he was out in the garden—“Downing Street,” his wife had announced in awe through the kitchen window. He had run—rushed, tripped, fallen, broken his finger, and ripped the knee from his trousers, yet nothing would stop him from taking the call. The Prime Minister’s office. Wondering whether he could help. *Of course,*

of course I can! A speaking engagement in a neighboring constituency the Prime Minister had planned to undertake, yet which he must now sadly decline. The reshuffle, you understand. Could Geoffrey fill in, tomorrow night? His eyes blurred red with pain, Geoffrey had expressed his unencumbered delight at having been asked, while his soon-to-be former wife had collapsed in convulsions.

You couldn't keep him down, though. He'd been involved in every reshuffle since and now the hounds of hazard had slipped the leash again. Alarms would be ringing all around Westminster, causing grown men to cringe. He studied the telephone in his hand, his features drenched in disbelief. He hadn't known it was today, right this minute, with calls reaching out from Downing Street to summon the good and the gone while she jammed the line with waffle about how it was such a pity because she truly admired Tom Makepeace and...

"Get off the bloody phone!" he screamed.

Seventeen

Loyalty is like instant coffee: it's cheap and ultimately unsatisfying.

He was still in his shirt sleeves when he opened the front door. By the lack of subtlety in the creases, she suspected he might have ironed it himself.

“You’re going to hate me for pestering you at home.”

From two steps up Tom Makepeace studied her, still munching his toast. She was tossing her dark hair nervously, the morning sun catching colors of polished coal. The lips were full, puckered in concern, her arms clutched around her in a troubled manner that seemed to lift her breasts toward him. Her coyness was a rarity in Westminster, so were the jeans.

“I hope it’s something important, Miss...?” He’d noticed the lack of a ring.

“Maria Passolides. A matter of life and death, in a way.”

But, damn it, this was the middle of his breakfast. “If you have a problem, perhaps it would be best if you wrote to me with the details.”

“I have. I got a letter in return from an assistant saying thanks but you were too busy to deal with individual predicaments at the moment. He couldn’t spell ‘predicaments.’”

“We’ve had an enormous number of letters in the last few days. Mostly supportive, I’m glad to say, but far too many for me to handle personally. I apologize. Perhaps you’d care to telephone my office to arrange an appointment.” He brushed his hands dismissively of the crumbs.

“Done that, too. Five times. You’re always engaged.”

He was losing this game to love, and on his service. “It seems I’m likely to spend the whole morning apologizing to you, Miss Passolides. Tell me briefly

how I might be able to help.” He did not forsake his high vantage point or invite her inside; there were so many troubled individuals, so little politicians could do, and already too many distractions from the extraordinary pile of unopened envelopes that had taken over his dining table. Yet as she talked, she touched something inside him, a pulse of interest. It was several minutes before he recognized it as lust.

“You must understand, Miss Passolides, it’s a difficult time for politicians to get into the matter of missing graves, just when we seem to be on the point of peace in Cyprus.”

“That’s where you couldn’t be more wrong.” As she talked her diffidence had completely disappeared. “It’s not openness that will threaten peace but continuing uncertainty and any hint of a cover-up. Even the Turks have recognized that.”

He reflected on the force of her argument, his energies still weighed down by the thought of the unopened letters and unanswered calls that would pursue him for weeks to come. Life without the Ministerial machine was proving extraordinarily tiresome, with little scope for new crusades. “It’s all a long way from my constituency,” he offered weakly.

“Don’t be so sure. There are nearly three hundred thousand Greek Cypriots in this country and a kebab shop or taverna in every high street. Overnight a politician could have an army at his side.”

“Or at his throat.”

“Beware of Greeks bearing grudges.” She stood laughing on the pavement. There was an unhewn energy, enthusiasm, impatience, passion, commitment, the raw edge of life in this woman. He liked that, and he liked her.

“It seems that the only way I’m going to get you and your army off my doorstep is to invite you in for a cup of tea. Then perhaps we can discuss the matter of whose side.” He stood aside to let her pass. “And whose throat.”

He declined his head as Urquhart strode across the threshold of Number Ten. Over the years the doorman had noticed that what had started as his brief nod of respect had developed into something closer to a cautious bow; as a good trade

unionist he'd fought the tendency but found it irresistible, built upon generations of inbred class attitudes that instinctively recognized authority. Damn 'em all. The atmosphere had changed in Downing Street, especially when Mortima Urquhart was around, growing more formalized with the passage of time and Parliaments, a royal court dressed in democratic image. One day, the doorman reassured his wife, the great unwashed would stir and shake like a million grains of sand beneath Urquhart's feet and he would slip to his knees and be gone, buried beneath the changing tide of fortune. One day, someday, maybe soon. But in the meantime the doorman would continue to smile and bow a little lower, the better to inspect the shifting sands.

The door closed, shutting out the cries of inquisitive hunger from the press corps. They'd be thrown a few bones later. Before then, there were dishes to carve. Urquhart studied his watch. Good, the timing was perfect. He'd've kept Mackintosh waiting for exactly twenty minutes.

Jasper Mackintosh was standing in the corner of the hallway, tapping his handcrafted shoe on the black-and-white floor tiles, trying with little success to hide his irritation. As the owner and publisher of the country's second largest and fastest-growing newspaper empire, he was more accustomed to being waited on than waiting, and after a lifetime of building and breaking politicians he was left in no undue awe by his surroundings. Several months previously he'd concluded that the time had come to start pulling the plug on Francis Urquhart—not that the Prime Minister had done anything politically damaging or offensive, simply that he'd been around so long that stories about him no longer sold newspapers. Change and uncertainty sold newspapers, and business dictated it was time for a little turmoil. Mackintosh was on a high, and in a hurry. Only last week he'd finally agreed to the terms of purchase for the *Tribune* chain of newspapers, a lumbering loss-making giant staffed by worn-out journalists working in worn-out premises for a worn-out readership, yet which offered well-known titles and great potential. The journalists could be paid off, new premises could be constructed, a new readership bought through heavy advertising and discounting, but the cost was going to be high, many tens of millions, and there was no room in Mackintosh's world for standing still. He had to get the money men off his back. That meant headlines, happenings, histrionics, and new heroes.

Sentimentality was a sin.

Mackintosh had already decided that Urquhart had lost this morning's game, and not simply for starting it twenty minutes late. He assumed the Prime Minister wanted to rekindle the relationship, perhaps give him an exclusive insight into the reshuffle in exchange for sympathy. No chance. In Mackintosh's world of tomorrow, Francis Urquhart didn't feature. Anyway, where was the courtesy, the deference he expected from a supplicant? Urquhart simply grabbed him by the elbow and hustled him along the corridor.

"Glad you could make it, Jasper. I haven't got a lot of time, got to dispatch a few of the walking wounded, so I'll come straight to the point. Why have you directed your muck spreaders into Downing Street?"

"Muck spreaders?"

"Driven by your editors."

"Prime Minister, they are souls of independent mind. I have given countless undertakings about interfering..."

"They are a bunch of brigands and whatever the state of their minds, you've got them firmly by the balls. Their thoughts tend to follow." Suddenly Urquhart called a halt to the breathless charge down the passageway. He hustled Mackintosh into the alcove by the Henry Moore and looked him directly in the eye. "Why? Why are you writing that it's time for me to go? What have I done wrong?"

Mackintosh considered, and rejected the option of prevarication. Urquhart wanted it straight. "Nothing. It's not what you've done, it's what you are. You're a giant; your shadow falls across the political world and leaves others in the shade. You've been a great man, Francis, but it's time for a change. Let others have a chance to grow." He smiled gently; he'd put it rather well, he thought. "It's business, you understand. The business of politics and of newspapers. Nothing personal."

Urquhart seemed unaffected by the obituary. "I'm obliged to you, Jasper, for being so direct. I've always thought we had a relationship that was robust and candid, which could withstand the knocks of changing times."

"That's extremely generous of you..." Mackintosh began, but Urquhart was talking straight through him.

“And speaking of the knocks of changing times, I thought it only fair—in equal candor and confidence—to share with you some plans the Treasury is proposing to push forward. Now you know I am not a man of high finance, I leave that to the experts like you. Extraordinary how the nation entrusts the fate of its entire national fortune to politicians like me who can scarcely add up.” He shrugged his shoulders, as though trying to slough off some unwelcome burden. “But as I understand it you’ve undertaken to buy the *Tribune* and are going to pay for it all by issuing a large number of bonds to your friends in the City.”

The newspaper man nodded. This was all public knowledge, a straightforward plan to raise the money by huge borrowings, with the interest payments being set off against his existing company’s profits. Overall his profits would plummet but so would his tax bill, and in effect the Inland Revenue would end up paying for the expansion of the Mackintosh empire, which in a few years’ time would be turned into one of the biggest money spinners in the country. Debt today, paid for by the tax man, in exchange for huge profit tomorrow, paid directly to Mackintosh. Creative accounting and entirely legal. The money men loved it.

“The point is,” the Prime Minister continued, “and this is just between the two of us, as old friends...”

Somewhere inside, at the mention of friendship, Mackintosh felt his muesli move.

“...the Treasury is planning to make a few changes. As from next week. Something about the losses of one company no longer being able to be set off against the profits of another. I don’t profess to understand it, do you?”

Of course Mackintosh understood. So well that he grabbed the wall for support. It was a proposal to slash the canvas of his creative accounting to shreds. With those rules his tax bill would soar and even the dullest underwriter would realize he’d no longer be able to repay the debt. He was already committed to buying the *Tribune*, no way out of it, yet at the slightest hint of a rule change the money men would wash their hands of the whole plan, walk away to their champagne bars and Porsches, leaving him with...

“Ruin. You’d ruin me. I’d lose everything.”

“Really? That would be a pity. But the Treasury button counters are so very

keen on this new idea, and who am I to argue with them?"

"You are the bloody Prime Minister!"

"Yes, I am. But, apparently, one not long for this world. On the way out."

"Oh, God." Mackintosh's shoulders had slumped, the tailored suit seeming to hang like sacking. A man reduced. He raised his eyes in search of salvation but all he could find were the long drapes that stood guard beside the tall sash windows of the hallway, colored like claret, or blood. His blood. Time to swallow pride, words, self-respect. He cleared his throat with difficulty. "It seems my editors have badly misjudged you, Prime Minister. You appear to have lost neither your acumen nor your enthusiasm for office. I shall inform them of their error immediately. And I think I can assure you that no editor who holds anything but the highest regard for your many and varied talents will ever work for one of my newspapers."

For an endless breath Urquhart said nothing. The lips closed, grew thin, like the leathery beak of a snapper turtle, and the eyes ignited with a reptilian malevolence and a desire to do harm that Mackintosh could physically feel. It was the stuff of childish nightmares; he could taste his own fear.

"Good." At last the lips had moved. "You can find your own way out." Urquhart had already turned his back and was a step away from the dejected Mackintosh when he spun around for one final word, the features now bathed in a practiced smile.

"By the way, Jasper. You understand, don't you? All this. It's business. Nothing personal."

And he was gone.

Eighteen

The Greeks have a history of heroic failures. No one has yet discerned what their future might be.

It was a night out for the boys. Loud, rumbustious, earthy, scarcely diplomatic, not at all ecclesiastical. Hardly the place one expected to find His Grace the Bishop of Marion and the High Commissioner of the Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But the Cypriot Bishop was one of the new breed of clerics who sought orthodoxy only in their religion.

“Welcome, most high of high commissioners.” The Bishop, clad in the black of the clerical cassock, spread his arms in greeting and chuckled. As Hugh Martin, the British diplomat, entered, three of the four men who had been sitting alongside the Bishop rose and melted to the sidelines. The fourth, who was as broad as the Bishop was tall, was introduced as his brother, Dimitri.

“I’m delighted you could come and enjoy what, with God’s grace, will be a night of momentous victory for my team,” the Bishop continued, while two girls who said nothing through enormous smiles offered trays of wine and finger food.

“Your team, your Grace?” Martin inquired lightheartedly.

“Indeed,” the Bishop responded in his most earnest of tones. “I own the team. In the name of the bishopric, of course. A fine way of extending God’s bounty to the masses, don’t you think?”

On cue the thousands of ardent football supporters packed into Nicosia’s Makarios Stadium erupted into a stamping war cry of delight as twenty-two players filed onto the pitch. The Cyprus Cup Final was about to get under way.

In the corner of the private box high up in the stadium a mobile phone warbled and one of the besuited assistants began muttering into the mouthpiece. Martin looked afresh at the scene. He was new to the posting in the Cypriot capital yet already had heard of the extrovert Theophilos, still only in his forties, who controlled an empire that covered not only hearts and souls, but also pockets—a newspaper, two hotels, several editors, still more politicians, and a vineyard that was arguably the finest on the island. But Martin hadn't known about the football team. Clearly there was much to learn about this Harvard Business School-educated, well-groomed cleric.

The Englishman was grateful for the whirring fans that spilled the air around the box. Nicosia was one of those capitals that seemed to be in the wrong place, tucked behind the Kyrenia Mountains on the wide plains of Mesaoria, touched by neither rippling sea breeze nor fresh mountain air, where even as early as May the heat and exhaust fumes built to oppressive levels. The Makarios Stadium had become a concrete cauldron nearing the boil, bringing sweat and fanatical passion to the brows of the packed crowd, yet beneath his ankle-length bishop's robes Theophilos remained cool. Elegantly he dispatched instructions via the assistants who sat behind him, all of whom were introduced as theology teachers yet who, judging by their frequent telephone conversations, were equally at home in the world of Mammon. Only his brother Dimitri, a highly strung man of fidgeting fingers whose tongue ceaselessly explored the corners of his cheeks, sat alongside the Bishop and the High Commissioner; the others remained in a row of chairs behind, except for a single man who neither spoke nor smiled but stood guard beside the door. Martin thought he detected a bulge beneath the armpit, but surely not with a man of the cloth? He decided that the sweet, heavy wine they were drinking must be affecting his imagination.

The game proceeded in dogged fashion, the players weighed down by the heat and the tension of the occasion. Martin offered diplomatic expressions of encouragement but Dimitri's hand language betrayed his growing impatience, his cracking knuckles and beaten palms speaking for all the Cypriots in the box as, down on the field, nervous stumble piled upon wayward pass and slip. Only the Bishop expressed no reaction, his attentions seemingly concentrated on the shelling of pistachios and the flicking of husks unerringly into a nearby bowl. A

dagger pass, sudden opportunity, raised spirits, a waving flag, offside, another stoppage. Then stamping feet. Jeers. Irreverent whistles. From within the plentiful folds of the Bishop's cassock a finger was raised, like a pink rabbit escaping from an enormous dark burrow.

"Fetch the manager" were the only words spoken; with surprising haste for a man whose spiritual timing was set by an ageless clock, one of the students of theology disappeared through the door.

It was more than fifteen minutes to halftime, yet less than five before there was a rapping at the door and a flushed, tracksuited man was permitted to enter. He immediately bowed low in front of the Bishop. To Martin's eye, unaccustomed as he was to the ways of the Orthodox, there seemed to be a distinct and deliberate pause before the Bishop's right hand was extended and the manager's lips met his ring.

"Costa," the Bishop addressed the manager as he rose to his feet, "this is God's team. Yet you permit them to play like old women."

"My apologies, *Theofiléstate*, Friend of God," the manager mumbled.

The Bishop's voice rose as though warning a vast crowd of the perils of brimstone. "God's work cannot be done without goals, the ground will not open to swallow our opponents. Their left back has the tinning speed of a bulk carrier, put Evriviades against him—get behind him, get goals."

The manager, scourged, was a picture of dejection.

"There's a new Mercedes in it for you if we win."

"Thank you. Thank you, *Aghie*, Saintly One!" He bowed to kiss the ring once more.

"And you'll be walking to the bus stop if we don't."

The manager was dismissed in the manner of a waiter who had spilled the soup.

Martin was careful to conceal his wry amusement. This was a theater piece, although whether put on for his benefit or that of the manager he wasn't completely sure. He had little interest in football but a growing curiosity in this extraordinary black-garbed apparition who appeared to control the destiny of souls and cup finals as the doorkeeper of hell controls the hopes of desperate sinners. "You take your football seriously," Martin commented.

The Bishop withdrew a packet of cigarettes from the folds of his cassock; almost as quickly an aide had ignited a small flame thrower and the Bishop disappeared in a fog of blue smoke. Martin wondered if this were a second part of the entertainment and he was about to witness an Ascension. When the cleric's face reappeared it was split with a smile of mischief.

“My dear Mr. Martin. God inspires. But occasionally a little extra motivation assists with His work.”

“I sincerely hope, your Grace, that I never have cause to find myself in anything other than your favor.”

“You and I shall be the greatest of friends,” he chortled. One of the young girls refilled their glasses; she really was very pretty. Theophilos raised his glass. “Havoc to the foes of God and Cyprus.”

They both drank deep.

“Which reminds me, Mr. Martin. There's a small matter I wanted to raise with you...”

“And there's another small matter I wanted to raise with you, Max.”

Maxwell Stanbrook thought he truly loved the man. Francis Urquhart stood framed against the windows of the Cabinet Room, gazing out like the admiral of a great armada about to set to sea. Stanbrook had arrived less than twenty minutes before at his office in MAFF, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food, to be told by his agitated private secretary that he was wanted immediately at Downing Street.

“So what is it, Sonia?”

“I don't know, Minister—no, really I don't.”

Stanbrook was firmly committed to the proposition that Government was a quiet conspiracy of civil servants who pulled all of the strings and most of the wool, and he took an active and incredulous dislike to those who claimed they didn't know or suggested there was no alternative. He was notorious throughout Whitehall for throwing—literally hurling—position papers back at civil servants wrapped in a shower of uncivil expletives. The Mobster in the Mafia, as he was known. It was no secret that many in the corridors of power desperately wanted

to see his comeuppance; had that time arrived?

A year earlier he'd thought he might have cancer. He remembered how he had walked into the consultant's office trying to mask his dread, to still the shaking knee, to put a brave face on the prospect of death. Somehow it had been easier than this; the fear of mortal illness was nothing compared to the wretchedness he felt as he had walked into the Cabinet Room. Urquhart was there alone. No pleasantries.

"I've had to let Annita go," the Prime Minister began.

God, he was on the list...

"I want you to take her place. Environment Secretary. Put a bit of stick about. You know, Max, the drones in the department fancy themselves as the new thought police. An environmental watchdog here, a pollution inspectorate there. And what's the point? No sooner had they given every school child nightmares about global warming than we had to send in the army to dig hypothermic pensioners out of the snow. Next it was a paper demanding billions of pounds to combat drought fourteen days—fourteen days!—before North Wales and an entire cricket season were washed away in floods. Pipe dreams, nothing but pipe dreams they conjure up over long lunches in Brussels to keep themselves in jobs. Sort it out for me, will you, Max?"

"Be a pleasure, FU."

"One thing in particular. This Fresh Air Directive—you remember? Brussels trying to make British factories smell like a French bordello. Bloody nonsense, I'll not have it."

"But I thought the directive had already been approved."

"Yes, it'll be carved on Annita's headstone. She didn't like it, not at all gracious about going; suspect I'll have to watch my back for knitting needles. But although it's European policy, domestic governments are responsible for implementing it."

"They've turned us into odor officers. Pooper snoopers."

"Precisely. Now, there's been a lot of loose criticism about us being poor Europeans, you can imagine how distressing I find that. So I want you to ensure that the monitoring arrangements are implemented meticulously. I suggest once a year, usually in January. Preferably during a gale."

“On the windward side of town.”

“Max, you could go far.”

“I shall certainly do my best.”

Urquhart chuckled benevolently, wondering if he had just spotted a new potential rival. He would watch him, as he watched them all. He rose from his chair and walked to the window from where he could see the trees of St. James’s.

“There’s another small matter, Max. Tricky. One of the first things you’ll be asked to do is to sign an order permitting the erection of a statue to the Blessed Margaret—just out there.” He waved in the direction of the park. “The money’s been raised, a sculptor commissioned, they’re ready to go.” He turned. “And I want you to find some way of stopping it.”

“Do you have any suggestions, FU?”

“I’d rather hoped you might come up with some. It would be embarrassing if I’m seen to oppose it, they’d say I was motivated by envy, which of course is not the case. It’s the principle of the thing. This is not a Government of idolatry and graven images. I want you to know there is no thought of personal advantage in my position on this matter...”

“And I insist that you understand, my dear Mr. Martin, there is no thought of personal gain for me in all this. Many new jobs will be created for poor farmers in a desperately undeveloped part of our island.”

“But Cape Kathikas is a nature reserve. It’s meant to be undeveloped. To preserve the orchids and other rare plants.”

The Bishop gesticulated extravagantly, the loose sleeves of his cassock slipping back to reveal surprisingly well-muscled forearms. “There are a hundred thousand hillsides for the orchids. But only one Cape Kathikas. Let me tell you of my vision...”

Cape Kathikas, it seemed, was an ideal spot not only for the indigenous and exceptionally scarce orchid *Ophrys cypria* Renz, but also for a twin-hotel resort complete with helipad, golf course, conference center, and marina. The local inhabitants of this westerly cape, after generations of isolation and

impoverishment and fueled by stories of unimagined riches, were enthusiastic to the point of uprising that their small and fruitless plots of land should be transformed into approach roads, sand traps, water hazards, staff quarters, and the other accumulated clutter of a Costa del Kypros. And if the Church in the person of Theophilos who owned most of the land were also to benefit hugely, it seemed merely to bestow God's blessing upon their venture.

There was only one other obstacle, apart from the orchids. That was the fact that the Cape was a field firing range for the British military, designated as such under the Treaty of Establishment, which had given Cyprus its independence and where for twenty-one days a year the coastal rocks and its offshore environs were peppered with Milan and Swingfire antitank missiles. Bound to play merry hell with a high-rise hotel and marina.

"Do you really need a firing range?" Theophilos asked.

"As much as we need an army."

"Then we shall find you another area for your operations. There must be so many other parts of the island that might be suitable."

"Such as?"

"The British surely wouldn't stand in the way of us Cypriots developing our economy," the Bishop responded, ducking the direct question. "It would raise so many unpleasant memories."

"I thought the objections were being led by Cypriots themselves, the environmentalists. Those who value the area as a national park."

"A handful of the maudlin and the meddling who have small minds and no imagination. Lunchtime locusts who know wildlife only from what they eat. What about our poor villagers?"

"What about the orchids?"

"Our villagers demand equality with orchids!"

There was no answer to that. Martin offered a conciliatory smile and subsided.

Booza-Pitt was gabbling. He did that when he was nervous, to fill in the spaces. He didn't like spaces in a conversation. As a boy they had tormented him,

fleeting pauses in which his mother drew breath before continuing with her ceaseless tirade of complaint about her lot in life. So, as a means of defense, he had learned to launch himself into any conversation, talking across people and above people and about anything. He was an excellent talker, never at a loss for words. Trouble was, he'd never really learned to listen.

Urquhart had been alone at the great Cabinet Table when Geoffrey had entered the room. The Prime Minister said nothing but as Geoffrey walked to his chair on the opposite side of the table Urquhart's eyes followed him closely, almost as if he were still trying to make a judgment, uncertain, unsettled. And unsettling. So Geoffrey had started talking.

"I've had this idea, Francis. A new set of campaigning initiatives for the Party. Thought about it a lot. Build on the reshuffle, get us going through the rest of the year. I've talked it through with the Party Chairman—I think he's going to put it all in a paper for you. The main point is this..."

"Shut up, Geoffrey."

"I..." Geoffrey shut up, uncertain how to respond.

"The Chairman has already told me about his campaigning ideas, just before I fired him. I have to say you are an excellent peddler of other people's ideas."

"Francis, please, you must understand..."

"I understand all too well. I understand you. Perhaps it's because we are a little alike."

"Are you going to fire me after all?" Geoffrey's tone was subdued; he was trying hard not to beg.

"I've thought about it."

Booza-Pitt's face, depleted by misery, sank toward his chest.

"But I've decided to make you Home Secretary instead."

A curious gurgling noise emerged from the back of Booza-Pitt's throat. The prospect of being translated into one of the four most powerful posts in Government at the age of thirty-eight seemed to have snapped his control mechanisms.

"They'll say I'm grooming you for the leadership when I've gone. But I'm not. I'm putting you there to stop anyone else using the post to groom himself for the leadership. And to do a job. Using your talents at peddling other people's

ideas. My ideas.”

“Anything you say, Francis,” Booza-Pitt managed to croak, throat cracked like the floor of an Arabian wadi.

“We shall soon be facing an election and I’ve decided to move the goal posts a little. A new Electoral Practices Act. A measure so generous and democratic it’ll leave the Opposition breathless.”

Booza-Pitt nodded enthusiastically, with no idea what his leader was talking about.

“I want to make it easier for minority candidates to stand. To allow for”—Urquhart dropped his voice a semitone, as though making a speech—“a fuller and more balanced representation of the views of the general public. To ensure a Government more firmly rooted in the wishes of the people.” He nodded in self-approval. “Yes, I like that.”

“But what does it mean?”

“It means that any candidates who get more than two thousand votes will have all their election expenses paid by the State.”

The face of the new Home Secretary had suddenly turned incredulous. “You’re winding me up, Francis. With that on offer every nutter and whiner in the land is going to stand.”

“Precisely.”

“But...”

“But who else would these minorities and malcontents vote for, if not for themselves?”

“Not for us, not even if you lobotomized every single one of them.”

“Well done, Geoffrey. They’d vote for the Opposition. So by encouraging them to stand we’ll suck away several thousand votes from the Opposition in practically every constituency. Worth at least fifty seats overall, I reckon.”

“You, you...”

“You’re allowed to call me a deviously scheming bastard, if you want. I’d regard it as a compliment.” For the first time in their interview, Urquhart’s features had cracked and he was smiling.

“You are a devious, scheming, brilliant bastard, Francis Urquhart.”

“And a great champion of democracy. They will have to say that, all the

newspapers, even the Opposition.”

“The updated version of divide and rule.”

“Exactly. We ran an empire on that principle. Should be good enough for one little country. Don’t you think, Home Secretary?”

A spotlight had been thrown on the box and Theophilos held his arms up high to acknowledge the attentions of the halftime crowd, his robes cascading like dark wings. A great raven, Martin thought, and with similar appetites.

“So may I expect your cooperation and support, Mr. Martin?” the cleric continued, casting the question over his shoulder as he offered the sign of the cross in blessing. “This is a rare opportunity.”

“So are the orchids.”

For a moment the Bishop’s arms seemed to freeze in impatience; Dimitri had begun to develop a distinctive lopsided scowl as the conversation turned in circles. He was examining his broad and heavily callused knuckles as though the answer to every problem could somehow be found in the crevices.

“I don’t wish to appear unsympathetic,” the Englishman continued, glad that his pedigree as a Diplomatic Service Grade 4 enabled him to control most of his outward appearances, particularly those that might convey any measure of disagreement or displeasure. It was not the task of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to be seen saying no. “Your problem is not with the British, it’s with your own Government. And with the environmentalists.”

“But this is ridiculous.” The Bishop’s voice grew sibilant with exasperation. “When I approach our stubborn donkey of a President he claims the problem lies with you British. And the environmentalists. The British military climbs into bed with the goddamn greens while our poor peasants starve.” He swung around suddenly, like an unwanted visitor of the night appearing at a bedroom window. The blue enamel adorning his heavy crucifix gleamed darkly in the light; his eyes, too. “Do not underestimate how important this is to me, Mr. Martin.”

“My regrets. The British Government cannot become involved in a domestic dispute in Cyprus.”

“But you are involved!” Theophilos slumped angrily into his seat as the

second half commenced. “You have two military bases on our island, you have access rights across it, and you fire your missiles and bullets upon it. The only time you choose not to become involved is when we most need you. Like when the Turks invaded.”

Conversation ceased as the Bishop struggled to regain his humor and the young women served more wine. Martin declined; he made a mental note never to drink again while in the presence of Theophilos, a man whose attentions required all of one’s wits in response. When the Cypriot spoke again, his voice was composed, but seemed to contain no less passion.

“Many Cypriots find it unacceptable that you British should continue to have a military presence on our soil.”

“The two bases are sovereign British soil, not Cypriot. That was clearly agreed in the Treaty of Establishment.”

“The soil is Cypriot, the blood spilled upon it for centimes has been Cypriot, and the treaty is unjust and unequal, forced upon us by British colonial masters in exchange for our independence. I advise you, Mr. Martin, not to base your arguments upon that treaty, for ordinary Cypriots will neither understand nor approve. Encourage them to think about such matters and they will demand it all back. You might end up having no firing range, no bases, nothing.”

The warning had been delivered in the manner of a wearied professor lecturing a dullard, the tone implying no room for argument, brooking no response. There seemed nothing more to discuss, a silence hanging uncomfortably between them until their mutual discomfort was thrust aside by a shout of jubilation from all around. Evriviades had scored.

“You’ve just lost a Mercedes.”

“And you, Mr. Martin, might just have lost the friendship of the Cypriot people.”

“Who’s there?”

“A friend.”

“There are few friends about on days like these.”

“Count me as one.”

The door of the back room in L'Amico's restaurant, tucked away behind Smith Square, slid open to reveal the large figure of Harry Mendip. He'd heard Annita Burke and Saul Wilkinson were lunching privately, sharing sorrows and anger at having been sacked, unwilling to face the whispers and stares of a more public place. Mendip knew how they felt; he'd been one of the victims last time around.

"Will you eat with us, Harry?"

"My appetite's not for food."

"Then what?"

"Action."

"Revenge?"

"Some might call it so."

A third glass of wine was poured, another bottle ordered.

"Everything is Urquhart. Damn him."

"Little Caesar."

"He acts like a Prince, not a Prime Minister."

"And we bow and bend the knee as his subjects."

"Abjects."

"Yet what, apart from ruthlessness, has set him so high?"

"And what, apart from ruthlessness, will bring him down?"

They paused as the waiter collected a few scattered dishes.

"He's grown so lofty that his feet scarcely touch the ground."

"But when they do, the ground is soaked with blood. Slippery soil. He is vulnerable."

"Butchered too many, over the years."

Annita Burke refilled the glasses. "Are we of the same mind?"

The other two nodded.

"Then who is to lead this enterprise?"

"How about Yorke? He's fit for stratagems and treasons."

"A happy blend of mischief."

"But there's no harmony in his soul. Nothing to lift the hearts and sights of others."

"Then Penthorpe."

“With those fearsome ferret eyes that make a man think he’s volunteering for the gallows? I think not.”

“You, Annita.”

She shook her head. “No, this one is not for me. Harsh words in a woman are always dismissed as hormones at war. And in my case no one would forget they are Jewish hormones. Anyway, I lack that sharpness of foot and wit necessary to lead the dance.”

“Then there is only one.”

They all knew the name.

“Makepeace.”

“He will be hard to convince.”

“All the better once he is so.”

“To challenge for the leadership?”

“What is the point? Urquhart has filled the party machine with placemen whose spirits are dead and who’ve sold their souls.”

“Then if we cannot take Urquhart away from the party, we must take the party away from him.”

“Meaning?”

“A new leader, and a new party.”

Mendip sucked in his breath. “That is a dangerous enterprise,” he said slowly.

“An honorable one, too. At least, Makepeace would make it seem so.”

“And I’d rather be torn apart as a dog of war than stay to be slaughtered like a sheep.”

Burke raised her glass. “A toast. Let’s be masters of our own fate.”

“All the way to the door of hell.”

As Booza-Pitt stumbled out of the Cabinet Room in a haze of elation he all but bounced off the portly figure of Bollingbroke, who was admiring the white marble bust of William Pitt that nestled in a niche on the wall.

“He had it right, don’t you think?” Bollingbroke inquired, eyes raised in admiration. The homespun accent stretched vowels as though he were chewing a mouthful of black treacle toffee.

Booza-Pitt tried to adjust his profile to match that of the eighteenth-century Prime Minister, wondering what on earth the other was prattling about.

“Prime Minister at the time of Trafalgar, you know. When we blew apart Napoleon’s fleet. Heard some crap that he was a relative of yours. Stuff ’n’ nonsense. Not true, is it?”

Faced with such a direct challenge, Booza-Pitt was loath to lie. He shrugged his shoulders inconclusively. Damn the man, he was gibbering when all Geoffrey wanted to do was to flaunt his new eminence and be gone, leaving the other splashing and waterlogged in the wake.

“What were his words, Geoff, can you remember?”

He shook his head, lost in the labyrinth of the Bollingbroke mind. He suspected it was some test of his family credentials.

“‘England has saved herself by her exertions, and Europe by her example.’ That’s what he said, did Pitt. Heck, not a bad motto for today, neither. You know, Froggies never change. I’ll have to remember that. Now I’m Foreign Secretary.”

He poured the news deftly into Booza-Pitt’s lap where it landed much like a bucketful of pond life.

“You—are Foreign Secretary?” Booza-Pitt squeaked. “Arthur, I’m so delighted for you. You must come and split a bottle of Bollinger with me.”

“Can’t stand the stuff. Best bitter man, meself.”

Booza-Pitt began to gain the impression that he was being wound up. “I’ve been given the Home Office,” he responded weakly, deflated by the prospect of being forced to share the day’s headlines with Bollingbroke.

“Yes, I know,” the Foreign Secretary responded, practicing one of those looks with which he would convey to the French the full depth of his disdain without uttering a single undiplomatic word. “I’m off. Got to go and sort out all those bloody Bonapartists.” He turned away brusquely. “Hello, pet,” he greeted an approaching figure cheerfully, and was gone.

Claire appeared, or might have been there all the time, Geoffrey was not sure which.

“Congratulations, Home Secretary.”

God, had everyone heard about his promotion before him?

“But a word of advice,” she continued. “The tie.”

“You like it?” he said, running his finger down the vibrant silk motif. “Australian. An aboriginal fertility symbol, I’m told.”

“It’s a little too”—she sought the appropriate term—“courageous.”

“What’s wrong with my tie?” he demanded defensively.

“Remember, Geoffrey, the job of Home Secretary is to share miseries and explain away disappointment. Why policemen are towing away shoppers’ cars instead of cutting off football hooligans’ goolies, that sort of thing. You’re not supposed to look as if you’re enjoying it.” She smiled mischievously and headed for the Cabinet Room door.

Hell, would no one allow him to relish the moment? “That’s not all a Home Secretary might do,” he countered. “Francis and I have got plans.” His tone suggested a conspiracy of friendship and great secrets, an alliance which no one dare mock. And it had stopped her in her tracks, he was pleased to note.

She turned to face him. “If you’re going to screw the electorate, for pity’s sake don’t wear a tie advertising the fact.” Then she was gone, entering through the Prime Minister’s door without knocking.

COURT OF ARBITRATION

For the Delimitation of Maritime Areas between the Republic of Cyprus and the Provisional Republic of Northern Cyprus.

•••

DECISION

PRESIDENT: Mr. Clive Watling. MEMBERS OF THE COURT: Mr. Andreas Rospovitch, Mr. Michel Rodin, Mr. Shukri Osman, Mr. Farrokh Abdul-Ghanem...

The Court, composed as above, makes the following decision...that while Greek Cypriot fishermen have traditionally fished in these waters, and the two sides have agreed to quotas enabling those Greek Cypriot fishermen currently engaged in fishing these waters to continue so as to ensure that

their livelihoods may be protected, such traditions of access and the other “special circumstances” raised by the Greek Cypriot side cannot override the geographical features that lie at the heart of the delimitation process...

Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that independent seismic surveys have indicated little potential exploitable mineral resources on the continental shelf, there is in any event no reason to consider such mineral resources as having any bearing on the delimitation...

In the view of the Court there are no grounds for contending that the extent of the maritime rights of either side should be determined by matters of equity as they relate to the past history of the island. The legality of the Turkish invasion of 1974 is not a matter for consideration by this tribunal, which recognizes the long-standing de facto jurisdiction of the Turkish Cypriot authorities in the northern portion of the island...

Both Parties, in rebutting their opponent’s claims, tend to contradict the very principles they have invoked in support of their respective positions. The Court must assure itself that the solution reached is both reasonable and equitable, and to that end, bearing in mind the legally binding assurances provided to Greek Cypriot fishing interests by the Turkish Cypriot authorities...

For these reasons:

THE COURT OF ARBITRATION: by three votes to two, being in favor President Watling and Judges Osman and Abdul-Ghanem, and against Judges Rospovitch and Rodin, draws the following line of delimitation...

With a final check of the wording, Watling signed the definitive document. It pleased him more than he could describe. A historic agreement that would help cement both peace in a troubled corner of the world and his place among textbooks and precedents that would be passed down to future generations of international jurists. There was also the peerage. His mother could enjoy toasted tea cakes on the terrace any time she wanted now, while he would never more want for invitations to California, anywhere for that matter, including test

matches. They'd be proud of him, back in Cold Kirby-by-the-edge-of-the-Moors. The Judgment of Watling Water. A fine judgment—a fair one, too, which couldn't always be said about such matters. Now it was done and whether they discovered oil, antiques, or the bones of the Minotaur didn't matter a damn—and should never have mattered. This was a judgment of law, not a poker game with drilling licenses.

Justice. British justice. And if it entailed screwing the French into the bargain, then the bargain was all the better for it. Rodin could rot in hell.

Nineteen

The fundamental skill of diplomacy is all about give and take. And take. And take. And take...

It had developed into a silent tussle of wills. The BBC cameraman kept adjusting the angle repeatedly in order to gain an uncluttered view of the Prime Minister and his announcement in front of Number Ten—it was, after all, Urquhart’s moment—but the new Foreign Secretary was intent on basking in the sunshine of television lights and the reflected plaudits. With the persistence of an outbreak of measles the rotund outline of Bollingbroke kept insinuating itself into the picture until he was standing to attention, suit buttons straining, immediately behind the Prime Minister’s right shoulder. Urquhart’s Praetorian Guard.

One of the private secretaries had suggested that perhaps the statement should have been made to Parliament rather than to the media, but Grist—good Grist, whose instincts were so sound—had captured Urquhart’s mood. On the doorstep of Downing Street there was no Leader of the Opposition to throw up supercilious questions and comment, no former-and-recently-fired Minister to claim part of the credit, nothing to prevent Urquhart from occupying the top slot on the lunchtime news all by himself. Except for Bollingbroke. Maybe next time they would truss him to a chair.

Thus had a grateful nation been given the opportunity to witness FU expressing his delight at turning closed minds into the open hands of friendship, accepting the accolade of Statesman. Formally inviting the leaders of both Cypriot republics to fly to London in eight weeks’ time for the signing of the final and definitive peace accord—and thus providing him with another glorious

media binge and guaranteed victory in an arena where no other British politician could even enter.

Francis Urquhart. Man of Peace.

In a small floral-patterned room on the top floor of 10 Downing Street, at the eastern end of the living quarters that are so small, so unbecoming the head of a major Western government, and so very English in their understatement, Mortima Urquhart sat at the Regency desk that had once been her grandmother's. She pushed aside the letters she had been answering and with a small key unlocked the drawer, taking from it her private address book. There was a slight tremble to her fingers, the sense of anticipation she had known when riding to hounds as they were about to down a great stag. An inward struggle between excitement, fear, and—conscience? The hand reached out, no longer for crop or reins but the telephone, the one she'd installed many years before when they had first moved in. The telephone that did not go through the switchboard. Her phone, for her purposes. The quarry had been cornered, there was good news she wished to share. But not with too many people.

“I regret, Mr. President, that the air-conditioning plant has broken down again.”

A knot of anxieties had tangled around the aide who was soaked in sweat from his recent spittle-scattered brawl with the engineering supervisor. It had been to no effect, the temperature was still rising rapidly into the eighties. The two fans he had placed in the corners of the room seemed to have negligible impact on the heavy Nicosia air, which smelled and tasted as though it had been breathed many times before.

Nures, a man of passion and varied temper, seemed to bear no trace of ill will. He had removed jacket and tie, sipped sweet mint tea and was mopping his receding brow with a large red handkerchief. He was also poring over a map, and exulting.

“Soon we shall have new air conditioning—all of us. And new roads. Schools. Homes. A new airport, even. No longer to be outcasts.” His dark eyes

shimmered with hope. “A fresh start.”

“We have much to be grateful for,” the aide offered daintily, trying to push along the unexpected tide of good humor.

“And good friends,” Nures responded, “to whom we owe more than gratitude.”

Theophilos wrenched the towel from around his neck and with an impatient wave of his hand dismissed the barber.

“What’s your problem?” Dimitri badgered as the door closed. He was seated at the monitor on the Bishop’s ornate mahogany desk, his thick fingers tapping out instructions on the keyboard. The screen sprang to life. “Market’s up, it likes all this talk of peace. And Swiss interest rates rose the other day. It’s been a good week for us.”

“Political capital, that’s what we must watch, little brother,” Theophilos replied, scratching the roots of his newly trimmed beard. “If we are to rid ourselves of this fool of a President we need a taste of chaos. Peace at his hand is about as welcome as an outbreak of cholera.” He glanced at his watch. A television interview in ten minutes. He exchanged the Rolex for a plain leather band and climbed back into the dark bishop’s cassock, hanging around his neck the heavy crucifix, once more the simple man of God.

“So what are we to do?”

“Pray. To God in Heaven and any other gods you can find in the back of your closet. Get down on your knees. Humble yourself. And beg that the Turks will be caught trying to fuck us up once more.”

The telephone warbled. From the rear seat of the Citroën limousine on the congested streets of Paris, the businessman stretched to answer it, listening carefully. He said nothing, his attention focused absolutely on the message and its consequences, which were clear. The quarter of a million dollars he’d already handed to—what was the name of that Turkish quisling? He’d already forgotten—had been thrown away, the gamble had been lost. And it hurt. Even in the oil

business, a quarter of a million unreceipted dollars makes a heavy hole in the petty cash account. Yet that was the least of the pain, for it seemed certain that he was about to lose more, far more. Thousands of millions of dollars' worth of lost opportunity. Oil by the seaful. It seemed he would never get to drill his wells.

He replaced the receiver without a word, hearing it latch gently into place. The darkened glass and heavy noise insulation of the limousine cocooned him from the chaos on the street beyond. This was a sheltered world, a world of privilege and security, protected from the outside. Except for the phone. And the messages it brought.

He was a controlled man, emotionally desiccated, with his appetites reserved for only one thing. Oil. The Earth's milk. More precious to him than his own blood. With a rage as silent as the engine at idle and his fist balled like a mallet, he began pounding the leather armrest, heedless of the pain, until it broke.

She rolled to one side and, as the sheet slipped across the contours of her body, he felt himself shaking inside once more. Until he had met Maria he hadn't been sure quite where his loins were, now they seemed to be everywhere, vibrating with an extraordinary energy every time he undid a button or clasp. In Maria he had found an ideal partner, a woman of natural curiosity and wit who was not afraid to acknowledge the shortcomings of her experience and was anxious to overcome them. They were explorers, trekking together through new territories and relishing the joys of discovery.

He was surprised he felt no guilt, for he knew now that his marriage was over. It was form with no substance, his wife the absentee landlord of his loyalties, his house no longer a home, and it was not enough. He had tried many things to fill the void in his life—ambition, esteem, endeavor, achievement—but nothing would work while he was alone. The presence of Maria Passolides in his world—and in his bed—had made him realize that.

As she propped herself up on the pillow, he watched transfixed as a bead of sweat trickled its way from around her neck past the creases of olive skin between her breasts. "What are you thinking, white man?" she asked, amused.

With the point of his little finger he traced the passage of the droplet, which had made a sudden rush for her navel. "I'm thinking about what I can do for you."

Her eyes closed as his finger slid slowly past her belly button, her breath quickening. "Christ, what did you have for breakfast?" she panted. The blood was beginning to rush once more, her body desperate to make up for so much lost time.

Reluctantly his finger sidetracked, diverted to the outside of the thigh and then was gone. "Not this," he muttered. "You came to me for help. About the graves."

"Sure," she said, "but why the sudden hurry?" She sought his hand but he rolled back to give them both some breathing space.

"We have little time left," he continued. "If we don't get an answer during the next eight weeks, before the peace agreement is signed, it will never happen. After that no one will be interested, not in this country. Something else will be in the news. They'll say they've done their job, wash their hands. Cyprus will go back to being a faraway island where it might be nice one day to take a holiday in search of young wine and old ruins. Nothing more. It must be now, or we'll never find the answer."

"So what do we do?"

"We make a fuss. Put on some pressure. Try to stir up a few old memories."

Instinctively, as she thought about his words, she pulled the sheet up to her neck. Over the last few days she'd tended to forget the reason why she had originally sought his help, distracted by the discovery of how versatile his help could be. They had made love in his kitchen chair that first time and in her exuberance she had torn off the arms. After they had finished laughing she had volunteered to take it back to Habitat, but then she changed her mind, deciding she would never be able to keep a straight face when inevitably they asked how it had happened. Somehow she felt sure everyone would guess simply by the way she smiled. So they'd pushed the pieces into the corner and tried the other kitchen chair, and the Chesterfield in his study where her damp skin stuck to the leather and made a ripping sound as it peeled off. He'd only invited her to bed—his wife's bed—when it seemed there was something more than sweating flesh

behind his willingness to see her. He'd not offered help in exchange for sex any more than she had offered sex for his help, but their separate motives were becoming more intertwined and confusing, so much so that she'd had to be reminded of her original purpose in knocking on his door. She felt a pang of guilt, but orgasms could be so distracting. And such fun.

"If only I'd met you while I was still Foreign Secretary this might have been so much easier," he said wistfully. "I could've unlocked some doors from the inside rather than having to kick them down from out in the street."

"But then you would be deceiving me officially instead of personally."

"What do you mean deceiving you personally?" He sounded affronted.

"That cup of tea you offered me the first day we met and you invited me into your kitchen? I still haven't had it." She leaned over and kissed him before rolling out of bed.

"Now get up, Makepeace. There's work to be done."

Evangelos Passolides sat alone in his darkened restaurant. The last diner had long gone and he'd made a perfunctory effort at cleaning up, but had been overcome with melancholy. He felt deserted by everything he loved. He hadn't seen Maria for days. And his own Government in Nicosia was about to give away a large chunk of his beloved homeland to the Turk. Was this what he had fought for, what George and Eurypides had died for?

He sat among all the memorabilia, drunk, an empty bottle of Commanderia at his elbow. A glass was lying on its side, the tablecloth stained red with droplets of what many years before might have been blood. He sobbed. In one hand he held a crumpled photograph of his brothers, two tousle-haired boys, smiling. In the other he held a much burnished Webley, the pistol that had been taken from the body of a British lieutenant and with which he had always promised to exact his revenge. Before he had become a cripple.

Now it was all too late. He had failed in everything he had touched. Others were heroes while life had stripped him of honor and all self-respect. He sat alone, forgotten, an old man with tears coursing down his cheeks, remembering. Waving a pistol. And hating.

Twenty

Leadership is about change. Breaking things. Breaking people. Their hearts, their backs, and, when necessary, their lives.

A man's place in history is no more than that—one place, a single point in an infinite universe, a jewel that no matter how brightly it may be polished will eventually be lost among a treasury of riches. A grain of sand in the hourglass.

For Urquhart, this was a hallowed scene: the shiny leather bench scuffed by the digging of anxious nails, the Dispatch Box of bronze and old buriri polished by the passing of a thousand damp palms, the embellished rafters and stanchions that, if one listened carefully and with a tuned ear, still echoed with the cries of great leaders as they were hacked and harried to eclipse. Every political career, it seemed, ended in failure; the verdict of this great Gothic court of judgment never varied. Guilty. Condemned. A place of exhortation, passing approbation, and eventual execution. Only the names changed.

In recent days, whenever he turned away from the lights, there were voices in the shadows that whispered it would one day be his turn to fall, a matter only of time. As he sat on the bench they were at it again, the whispers, growing assertive, impertinent, almost heckling him. And through them all he could hear the voice of Thomas Makepeace.

“Is my Right Honorable Friend aware”—the constitutional fiction of friendship passed through Makepeace's lips like vinegar—“that the Greek Cypriot community in this country is deeply concerned about the existence of graves that still remain hidden from the time of the war of liberation in the nineteen fifties...?”

Old memories like embers began to revive, to flicker and burn until the crackle of flames all but obliterated the words with which Makepeace was demanding that the British Government lay open its files, reveal all unreported deaths and burial sites, so that the tragedies of many years ago could finally be laid to rest?

For a moment or two the House observed the unusual sight of the Prime Minister sitting stiffly in his seat, seeming unmoved and unmoving, lost in another world before cries of impatience caused him to stir. He rose stiffly to his feet, as though age had glued his joints.

“I am not aware,” he began with an uncharacteristic lack of assertiveness, “of there being any suggestion that graves were hidden by the British...”

Makepeace was protesting, waving a sheet of paper, shouting that it had come from the Public Record Office.

Other voices joined in. Inside his head he heard contradiction and confusion, talk of graves, of secrets that would inevitably be disinterred with the bones, of things that must remain forever buried.

Then a new voice, more familiar. “Fight!” it commanded. “Don’t let them see you vulnerable. Lie, shout, wriggle, abuse, rabbit punch on the blind side, do anything—so long as you fight!” And pray, the voice might have added. Francis Urquhart didn’t know how to pray, but like hell he knew how to fight.

“I believe there are great dangers in opening too many old cupboards, sniffing air that has grown foul and unhealthy,” he began. “Surely we should look to the future, with its high hopes, not dwell upon the distant past. Whatever happened during that ancient and tragic war, let it remain buried, and with it any evils that were done, perhaps on all sides. Leave us with the unsullied friendship that has been built since.”

Makepeace was trying to regain his feet, protesting once more, the single sheet of paper in his hand. Urquhart silenced him with the most remorseless of smiles.

“Of course, if the Right Honorable Gentleman has anything specific in mind rather than suggesting some stampede through old archives, I shall look into the matter for him. All he has to do is write with the details.”

Makepeace subsided and with considerable gratitude Urquhart heard the

Speaker call for the next business. His head rang with the chaos of voices, shouts, explosions, the ricochet of bullets; he could see nothing, blinded by the memory of the Mediterranean sun reflecting off ancient rock as his nostrils flared and filled with the sweet tang of burning flesh.

Francis Urquhart felt suddenly very old. The hourglass of history had turned.

“Go for it, Franco,” the producer encouraged. He sat up in his chair and dunked his cigarette in the stale coffee. This could be fun.

Behind a redundant church that had found a new lease of life as a carpet warehouse in a monotonous suburb of north London lies the headquarters of London Radio for Cyprus, “the voice of Cypriots in the city,” as it liked to sign itself, ignoring the fact that the four miles separating it from the City of London stretched like desert before the oasis. Describing the basement of Number 18 Bush Way as a headquarters was scarcely more enlightening—LRC shared a peeling Edwardian terrace house with a legitimate travel agency and dubious accounting practice. It also shared initials with a company manufacturing condoms and an FM wavelength with a Rasta rock station that fractured ears and heads until well after midnight. Such are the circumstances of community radio, not usually the cradle for budding radio magnates and media inquisitors. LRC’s producers and interviewers struggled hard to convey to their small but loyal audience an air of enthusiasm even while they did daily battle with second- and thirdhand equipment, drank old coffee, and tried hard to remember to turn on the answering machine when they left.

Yet this item had legs. The girl was good, somewhere behind those lips and ivories was a brain, and the old man was a fragment of radiophonic magic, his voice ascending scales of emotion like an opera singer practicing arias. Passion gave him an eloquence that more than made up for the thick accent; what was more, in its own way the story was an exclusive.

“Remember, you’re hearing this first on LRC. Proof that there are graves left over from the EOKA war, which are buried deep within the bowels of British bureaucracy...”

The producer winced. Franco was an arsehole from which a stream of

incontinence poured forth every Monday and Wednesday afternoon, but he was cheap and his uncle, a wine importer, was one of the station's most substantial sponsors.

"So what do you want?" Franco asked the pair.

"We want as many people as possible to write in support of Thomas Makepeace and his campaign to have the full facts made public. We can prove the existence of two graves, those of my uncles. We want to know if there are any more."

"And you, Mr. Passolides?"

There was a pause, not empty and mindless but a silence of grief, long enough to capture the hearts of listeners as they imagined an old man rendered speechless by great personal tragedy. Even Maria reached over to touch his hand; he'd been behaving so oddly in recent days, morose, unshaven, digging away within himself, changes that were ever more apparent since she'd been spending more time away from him. When finally his voice emerged the words cracked like a hammer on ice.

"I want my brothers."

"Great, really great," Franco responded, shuffling his papers in search of the next cue.

"And I want something else. The *bastardos* who murdered them." The voice was rising through all the octaves of emotion. "This was not war but murder, of two innocent boys. Don't you see? That is why they had to burn my brothers' bodies. Why they could never admit it. And why this miserable British Government continues to cover it up. Wickedness! Which makes them as guilty as those men who pulled the trigger and poured the gas."

"Yeah, sure," Franco stumbled, scratching his stubble, unused to anything more heated than a weather report. "So I suppose we'd all better write to our MPs and give Mr. Makepeace a hand."

"And crucify the bastards like Francis Urquhart who are betraying our island, selling us out to those Turkish *poustides*..."

The producer was second generation, not familiar with all the colloquial Greek covering the various eccentricities of human anatomy, but the intonation was enough to cause him alarm, especially with license renewal coming up.

Uttering a prayer that no one from the Radio Authority was listening, he made a lunge for the fade control. And missed. The cup of stale coffee tipped everywhere, over notes, cigarettes, his new jeans. Havoc. Evangelos Passolides, after an armistice of almost fifty years, was back at war.

Twenty-One

All opposition requires retaliation. I prefer to get my retaliation in first.

The French Ambassador had begun to feel a strong sense of kinship with General Custer. Since the elevation of Arthur Bollingbroke to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, business had degenerated into bloody war, waged by the Frenchman against insuperable odds and a foe who had dispensed with diplomatic trimming in favor of wholesale scalping. Monsieur Jean-Luc de Carmoy had no illusions about the fact that the Court of St. James's had become distinctly hostile territory. The Ambassador preferred to pursue his campaign with strawberries and champagne rather than the .44 caliber Winchesters of the U.S. cavalry but, like the blond American general, he had made the deeply personal decision that if he were going to die he would do so surrounded by friends. They milled about him as he stood directing maneuvers from the lawn of his official residence overlooking Kensington Gardens.

“Enjoying the quiet life, Tom?”

Makepeace cast his eyes at the garden crowded with guests. “As much as you.”

“Ah, but there are differences between our lives,” de Carmoy sighed, lifting his eyes in search of the sun that shone over his beloved Loire. “I feel at times as though I have been sold into slavery, where every rebuke must be met with a smile and every insult with humility.” He paused as a butler with hands resembling black widow spiders supplied them with full glasses before taking Makepeace by the arm and leading him toward the seclusion of a nearby lime arbor. There were obviously things to discuss.

“I envy you, Tom.”

“The freedom of the wilderness. You envy that?”

“What would I not give at times to share with you the liberty to speak my mind.”

“About what in particular?”

“Your Mr. Urquhart.” His face had the expression of a leaking milk carton.

“Scarcely *my* Mr. Urquhart.”

“Then whose, pray?”

Around them the branches of the pleached limes twisted and entangled like a conspiracy. They were both aware that the Ambassador had crossed beyond the frontiers of diplomatic etiquette but, caught in the crossfire between Bollingbroke and the Quai d’Orsay, de Carmoy was in no mood for standing still.

“Tom, we’ve been friends for a long time now, ever since the day you summoned me to the Foreign Office to administer a formal mutilation”—the Frenchman brushed some invisible piece of lint from the sleeve of his jacket—“after that confidential computer tape went missing from British Aerospace.”

“Along with two French exchange technicians.”

“Ah, you remember?”

“How could I forget? My first week at the Foreign Office.”

“You were frightfully severe.”

“I still suspect the clandestine hand of some official French agency behind the whole thing, Jean-Luc.”

The shoulders of the Ambassador’s well-cut suit heaved in a shrug of mock Gallic confusion. “But when you’d finished you sat me down and plied me with drink. Sherry, you called it.”

“Standard Foreign Office issue. For use only on open wounds and Africans.”

“I think I tried to get Brussels to reclassify it as brush cleaner.”

“Didn’t stop you finishing the whole damned decanter.”

“My friend, but I thought it was meant to be my punishment. I remember I was swaying like a wheat field in an east wind by the time I returned home. My wife consoled me, thinking you’d been so offensive I’d had to get drunk.”

Like old campaigners they smiled and raised glasses to toast past times and

dig over old battlefields. The Frenchman took out a cigarette case packed with Gauloises on one side and something more anodyne on the other; with a quiet curse Makepeace took the Gauloise. He'd started smoking again, along with all the other changes in his personal habits. God, he'd left her only an hour ago and knew that in spite of the aftershave he still reeked of her. Pleasure and pain. So much was crowding in on him that at times he had trouble finding space to breathe. Slowly the trickle of humor drained from his eyes and died.

"How is Miquelon?" he asked.

"Blossoming. And yours?"

"Teaching. In America." He gave his own impression of the Gallic shrug, but without the enthusiasm to make it convincing.

"You sound troubled. Let me ask..."

"As Ambassador? Or as an old friend?"

"About politics. I have no right to pry into personal matters." In any event, the Ambassador didn't have to. At the merest mention of his wife, Makepeace's face had said it all. He'd never make a diplomat, no inscrutability, all passion and principle. "I hear many expressions that the era of Francis Urquhart is drawing to its close, that it is only a matter of time. And much discussion of who, and how. Many people tell me it should be you."

"Which people?"

"Loyal Englishmen and women. Friends of yours. Many of the people here this afternoon."

Makepeace glanced around. Among the throng was a goodly smattering of political correspondents and editors, politicians and other opinion-formers, few of whom were renowned as Urquhart loyalists. From a distance and from behind a tall glass, Annita Burke was staring straight at them, not attempting to hide her interest.

"You've been getting pressure," de Carmoy stated, knowing it to be a fact.

"Nudges aplenty. I suppose I'm meant to be flattered by so much attention. Now's the moment, they say, step forward. But to be honest, I don't know whether I'm standing on the brink of history or the edge of a bloody cliff."

"They are your friends, they respect you. Virtue may be a rare commodity in politics; it may speak quietly at times, but no less persuasively for that. It sets

you apart from others.”

“Like Francis Urquhart.”

“As a diplomat I couldn’t possibly comment.”

Makepeace was in too serious a mood to catch the irony. “I’ve thought about it, Jean-Luc. Thinking about it still, to be precise. But did any of these friends of mine suggest to you how their...ambitions for me might be achieved? Or are these no more than slurpings through mouthfuls of Moët?”

“My assessment is that this is not idle talk. There’s a desperate sense of longing for a change at the top. I’ve heard that not just within your party but from across the political spectrum.”

“And from Paris, too, no doubt.”

“*Touché*. But you can’t deny there’s a great moral vacuum in British politics. You could fill it. Many people would follow.”

Makepeace began running his index finger tentatively around the rim of his crystal glass as though he were tracing the cycles of life. “For that I need a vehicle, a party. I might be able to grab at the wheel, force Urquhart off the road, but it would probably do so much damage that it’d take years to get it working again. The party’s scarcely likely to offer the keys to the man who caused the accident.”

“Then create your own vehicle. One that’s faster and better built than Urquhart’s.”

“No, that’s impossible,” Makepeace was responding, but they were interrupted by another guest, the Minister for Health who was seeking to bid farewell to his host. Felicitations and formal thanks were exchanged before the Minister turned to Makepeace.

“I’ve got only one thing to say to you, Tom.” He paused, weighing both his words and the company. “For God’s sake keep it up.” With that he was gone.

“You see, you have more friends than you realize,” the Ambassador encouraged.

“In his case not a friend, merely a rat hedging his bets.”

“Perhaps. But they are edgy, waiting to jump. The rats, too, believe the ship is sinking.”

Makepeace was back with the rim of his glass, which was vibrating

vigorously. “So often we seem to go around in empty circles, Jean-Luc. What’s necessary to make it more than noise, to get the whole universe to shatter?”

“Action.”

The Ambassador reached for the finely cut crystal, taking it from his guest’s hand and holding it aloft by the stem, turning it around until it had captured the rays of the afternoon sun and melted into a thousand pools of fire. Suddenly he appeared to fumble, his fingers parted and before Makepeace could shout or move to catch it the glass had tumbled to the lawn. It bounced gracefully and lay, undamaged, on the grass.

Makepeace bent his knee to retrieve it, stretching gratefully. “That’s a stroke of...”

In alarm he snatched his fingers back as, with the heel of his elegant handmade shoe, the Frenchman crushed the glass to pieces.

The helicopter swept low along the black sand coastline of Khrysokhou Bay in the northwest of the island, past the tiny fishing villages they had known as boys. Those days of youth had been long, summers when the octopus had been plentiful, the girls had eager eyes and much to learn, and sailing boats had bobbed in the gentle swell beside clapboard jetties. Not so long ago the road back through the mountain had been little more than a rutted track; it had since turned into a swirling tar highway that bore on its back thousands of tourists and all their clutter. The fishing villages now throbbed to the beat of late-night discos, the price of fish had soared, so had the price of a smile. Progress. Yet the sailing boats were still moored inside ramshackle harbors, which collected more flotsam than jetfoils. Opportunities unfulfilled, yet Theophilos’s marina on the nearby cape would change all that. Once he’d got the British off his back.

The helicopter banked. “Bishop’s Palace in five minutes,” the pilot’s metallic voice informed them through the headphones. Dimitri reached for the hand grip; he hated flying, regarding it as an offense to God’s law, and would only submit to such folly so long as God’s personal messenger were by his side. Trouble was that his brother traveled everywhere by helicopter, often flying the machine himself, which served only to exaggerate Dimitri’s congenitally twitchy

disposition. He'd give his life for his brother but prayed it wouldn't be necessary at this precise moment. He sat upright in his seat, relieved that the noise of the engine precluded conversation.

Theophilos, by contrast, displayed an exceptional degree of animation. He'd been studying a newspaper, repeatedly stabbing his finger at it and thrusting it in Dimitri's face. Dimitri was sure this was done deliberately in the knowledge that any activity other than rigid concentration on the horizon would induce in him an immediate and humiliating attack of sickness. In many ways they were still kids back on the rocks by the beach, playing, planning new and greater adventures, testing each other's courage, bending the rules. Dimitri recalled the first day his brother had returned to the family house as a priest, clad in his robes, clutching his crucifix and bible, a dark apparition in the doorway surrounded by all the panoply of holy office. Dimitri, overawed and uncertain, had fallen immediately to his knees, head bowed in expectation of a blessing; instead Theophilos had raised a leg, placed his boot squarely upon his brother's shoulder, and sent him spiraling backward to the ground. That night they'd got bladder-bursting drunk on homemade wine, just like old times. Nothing had changed. Theophilos was always the bright and ambitious brother, honed by a year at Harvard's Business School, who would lead the family Firm. Dimitri was a man of linear mind, reconciled to following. Even in helicopters.

They had landed on the helipad behind the palace and Dimitri, having cheated death once more, came back to the world of the moment. His brother was still absorbed in the newspaper, *The People's Voice*, a leading Cypriot newspaper in London. This in itself was not unusual since the Firm had well-watered business contacts among the expatriate community and Theophilos took considerable care to ensure that his press coverage was high in both profile and praise, but this item was not about him. It appeared to be an extensive report concerning missing graves, many column inches, which the Bishop kept caressing with the tips of his fingers, yet his words were inaudible, sent spinning away in the wash from the rotors. As they clambered from the cabin instinctively they ducked low, Dimitri wanting to kiss the ground in relief while the Bishop struggled to secure the flowing *kalimachi* headpiece. He continued to cling to the newspaper.

"What? What did you say?" Dimitri roared in his brother's ear as the noise

behind them began to subside.

Theophilos stood to his full height, his holy garb adding further inches and authority. He was smiling broadly, the gold cap of his tooth much in evidence.

“I said, little brother, that you should brace yourself. We’re about to catch a bad dose of bone fever.”

Twenty-Two

Westminster is the type of place that on occasion makes Chernobyl attractive as a holiday destination.

The nudges aplenty applied to Makepeace and about which he had complained to de Carmoy had grown to outright body blows. Telephone calls, snatches of passing conversation, journalists asking The Really Serious Question, all seemed to conspire to push him in a direction he was reluctant to take.

But why the reluctance? Not for lack of ambition, nor fear of the probable suicidal consequences of taking on the Urquhart machine. Surrounded by more self-professed friends than ever before, nevertheless he felt more isolated than at any time he could remember, almost adrift. He'd been shorn of his Ministerial support machine for the first time in a decade—its secretaries, advisers, tea makers, ten thousand pairs of hands, and most of all the daily decisions that made him feel so much part of a team. Even for a man so long in political life he had been mortified to discover that for all the new supporters he appeared to have gained, others he had counted as friends now turned the other way, found things with which to busy themselves whenever he appeared. Friendship within a divided party may be Honorable by the compulsion of parliamentary etiquette, but it is far from Reliable.

Then there was his marriage. It was empty and hollow but it had had form, a regularity that was comforting even if for so many months of the year it amounted to no more than a phone call a week. He hadn't called for more than two, and she hadn't inquired why.

Exhilarating as he found such freedoms, they were also confusing and, when

he was left alone to brood, almost frightening, like a climber reaching across a crevasse for his first mountain top. And behind him they kept pushing, pushing, pushing, Annita Burke in particular. She was sitting beside him in the rear of the car, Quentin Digby the lobbyist in front. Digby was going on about how the media adore fresh faces and a new story, and this would be the biggest and newest for years. Annita, her black eyes witchlike in the glow of the dashboard, sat stirring. "The logic is overwhelming," she was saying. "The support is there. For you. I've talked to a posse of people in recent days. They'd follow you all the way, given half a chance."

"The chance of anonymity, you mean," Makepeace responded acerbically. "Any support short of actual help for fear FU might find out what they're up to."

"No, not a clandestine coup, no attempt to take over the sweetshop by stealth. It probably wouldn't work and it's not your way."

"Then what?"

"A rival sweetshop. A new party."

God, this had all the echoes of his conversation with Jean-Luc. He remembered Annita's display of interest at the garden party and began to wonder whether she had put de Carmoy up to it. She was a cynic and natural conspirator, perhaps too much so; how many of the other nudgers, winkers, and pushers had she organized, cajoled, perhaps persuaded to imply support just to get her off their backs?

"You'd dominate the headlines for weeks. Build a momentum," Digby was encouraging. "After all these years of Urquhart people want a change. So give it 'em."

"I've twelve former Cabinet Ministers telling me they would back you, and even one present member of the Cabinet," Annita continued.

So she was organizing. "Who?"

"Cresswell."

"Ah, the soft white underbelly. A man whose only fixed opinions seem to center on puddings and port."

"But worth a week of headlines."

"Publicly?" Makepeace demanded. "He'd come out and say so publicly?"

"Timing is everything." Digby was at it again, leaving the question

unresolved. “Once the first few are out of the trap, others will follow. Momentum is everything. It’s catching, like mumps.”

“Safety in numbers,” Makepeace muttered, almost to himself. “It makes that first step so vital.”

“Timing *is* everything,” Burke echoed, delighted that Makepeace’s observations appeared to be focusing on the definitive and practical. His mind was on the move, three parts there, just one last push...“You can go all the way, Tom, if we retain the initiative. We must start organizing now, but for God’s sake don’t reveal your hand too soon, until everything is ready. The trouble with you is that once you make your mind up about something you’re too impatient, too emotional. Too honest, if you like. It’s your biggest fault.”

True enough. Exactly what Claire had told him. He could handle himself, but there were other problems. “To fight and win an election we need a machine, grass roots in the constituencies, not just a debating society in Westminster,” Makepeace reflected.

“That’s why we need time.”

“And timing.”

The car had stopped outside Vangelis, where he had invited them to eat. And, it seemed, to plot. It sparked a memory of something Maria had said at their first meeting by the milk bottles. About a ready-made headquarters in every high street and overnight an army at his side.

The ghost of a smile hung on his lips. The various strands of his life seemed to be drawing together, or at least entangling themselves. Urquhart. Ambition. Maria. Passion. All pushing him in the same direction. Suddenly there seemed to be no point any longer in reluctance or resistance, he’d better lie back and enjoy it. And as Maria had said only the previous night, his timing was usually immaculate.

They disembarked from the car. “I guess about eleven o’clock, Mickey,” he told his driver. “Not earlier, I’m afraid. I’ve a feeling this dinner is going to be a long one.”

Mickey tipped his cap. This new job was proving to be most stimulating. The pay was better than sitting around the corporate car pool; Makepeace was a kind and considerate passenger. And the gossip was a hell of a lot more entertaining

than listening to businessmen wittering on about ungrateful clients and their wives' muscle-minded tennis coaches.

Others were being pushed and jostled. Hugh Martin was in his forties, once fleet of foot and a former rugger wing-forward who was more than accustomed to the elbows and abuse of a line-out. He hadn't expected to find the same tactics used outside the Nicosia Cyprus Folk Art Museum. The museum, which lay among the labyrinths behind the city's ancient fortified walls, was promoting its most recent exhibition, and invitations had been issued to the city's erudite and elevated, the British High Commissioner among them. He had counted on a pleasant stroll around the stands with Mrs. Martin, greeting old friends and making some new, perhaps even finding something to inspire his wife, who had started a small collection of ceramics. Instead he found a group of almost twenty people gathered outside the hall distributing leaflets. He had no chance to discover what the leaflets said because as soon as they saw his official Rover draw up the group turned its full attention and considerable volume in his direction.

His bodyguard, Drage, was out of the front seat first. "I'll check it, sir."

But Martin was both curious and amused. If the capital's demonstrations were anything like its plumbing, the noise would far exceed the efficiency. Anyway, this was Nicosia, courteous, civil, archetypically Cypriot, not Tehran or bloody Damascus. So he followed. It was a move he would soon regret.

"British murderers," one old crone hissed through purple gums, propelled to the fore by younger hands behind her. A banner appeared, something about graves and war crimes, and as the protesters gathered around someone behind her shoulder spat. It missed, but the swinging fist didn't. It came from too far back to inflict any real damage but the surprise caused him to gasp. Drage was at his side now, pushing and shouting for him to retreat to the car, but in turn they were being pushed back by far greater numbers and the High Commissioner, still disorientated and clutching his stomach, stumbled. Drage caught him, lifted him up and tried to move him toward the car. Martin thought the blow must have done him more harm than he had realized for he was seeing lights; to his dismay

he discovered they were the lights not of mild concussion but of a television crew. Every part of the demonstration—every part, that is, which occurred after the landing of the blow—was being caught on video. The anger of aged mothers. Waving banners demanding an end to British colonial cover-up. Ban the Bases. The stumbling retreat of a High Commissioner, carried like a child in the arms of his bodyguard, fleeing into the night from the wrath of old women. The first spark of Cypriot defiance. Such an unhappy coincidence that the news crew should have found itself in the right spot at precisely the wrong time. Bone fever had broken out.

Twenty-Three

To offer compromise is like suggesting to a shark that he lick you first.

“The tea room’s infested.”

“Mice again? I understand Deirdre all but jumped out of the window into the Thames last week when she found two of the little brutes staring up at her. They’re rampant behind the paneling. Time to bring back the cat, d’you suppose?”

“Not mice. Rumor.” Booza-Pitt was exasperated with his leader’s apparent flippancy. “Tom’s up to something, but no one seems to know precisely what.”

In the background the squealing serenade of children at play came from around the pool area where a dozen of them, all offspring of senior Ministers, were indulging in the rare delights of a summer Sunday at Chequers. Out on the sweeping lawn the Environment Secretary was running through a few golf shots as a policeman in blue sleeves and bulky flak jacket passed by on patrol cradling a Heckler & Koch semiautomatic; on the patio, in the shade of the lovely Elizabethan manor with its weathered and moss-covered red brick, an air force steward served drinks. The atmosphere was relaxed, lunch would be served shortly, and Urquhart seemed determined not to be pushed. This was his official retreat; he’d handle matters in his own way.

“A leadership challenge in the autumn,” the wretched Booza-Pitt was persisting, trying so hard to impress that his eyebrows knitted in concern like a character out of Dostoyevsky.

“No. Not that. He’d lose and he knows it.” Claire sipped a mint julep—the bar steward had recently returned from a holiday in New Orleans—and subsided.

She was leading the Home Secretary on; Urquhart knew and was amused by it, only Geoffrey was too blind to realize. For him, the conversation had already become a competition for Urquhart's ear.

"Even so, he might. Out of spite. Inflict a little damage before he fades into the shadows."

"No. He has other ideas." She subsided again.

Urquhart was himself by now intrigued. She had an air of such confidence, and a voice that brushed like fresh paint on canvas, but he couldn't yet see the picture.

"Like what?" Geoffrey threw down a challenge.

Claire looked to Urquhart; she'd intended to keep this for a more private moment but he was of a mind that she should continue. A golf ball clattered around their feet, followed by a belated cry of warning from the lawn; evidently the Environment Secretary was in considerable need of his practice. Urquhart rose from the wooden garden seat and began to lead them around the pathways of the garden, out of earshot and driving range of others.

"A new party," she began once again. "A big media launch with some prominent names in support. Then more to follow over the weeks ahead. Several from within our own party. Perhaps one or two even from within the Government."

"Madness!" Booza-Pitt snorted.

But Urquhart's eyes had grown fixed, his frame stooped in concentration as he walked, studying the ground as though peering through a trap door into a personal hell. "He'd hope for a couple of by-elections where they'd buy anything new on the shelf. Bite after bite, taking mouthfuls out of my majority. Making it ever more difficult for me to govern."

"One step building on the next."

"He wants to bleed me. Death by a thousand cuts."

"Could he do it? Could he really?" Booza-Pitt had at last caught the changing wind. "Sounds like a party no one but women's magazines would take seriously."

"Even women take time off from painting our nails to vote, Geoffrey. We're not all hot flushes and flower arranging."

A sense of urgency crept into the Prime Minister's step; Booza-Pitt felt he was being left behind. "But where'd he get the money for it all?" he demanded breathlessly. For Geoffrey, the practicalities of life all came down to a question of money. He'd once found a shortcut on the school cross-country run and, much to his annoyance, had made the team. He'd found consolation by selling the shortcut to his friends.

"Money's not his problem, it's time," Claire responded. "Time to build momentum. Time to build an organization before the next election and to establish that he's more than merely a figment of the media's fevered imagination. Time to encourage our sweaty band of galley slaves to jump ship."

"It'd be no more than a dinner party at prayer," Booza-Pitt all but spat in contempt. Then his expression altered as though refashioned with a mallet. "Good God. What does that mean for my Bill? *I'd* be giving him all the money."

Urquhart came to a sudden halt under the limbs of a spreading cedar tree. "Not quite what I had in mind," he conceded quietly.

"I've...I've got to withdraw it. Somehow." Booza-Pitt's voice trailed away, his mantle as defender of democracy in tatters even before it had been woven.

"There is another way," Claire offered.

"One that would keep my reputation?"

"Keep the Government's reputation, Geoffrey," she corrected. "Your Bill will sponsor as many different groups as possible. Fine. We mustn't give Tom a clear run."

"Nibbled to death by a thousand minnows, that was always my thinking," Geoffrey exclaimed, wondering whether the time had come to reclaim authorship of the plan.

"And meanwhile make damn sure our own supporters have got something to get their teeth into. Let's fly the flag for them. Give them something that reminds them what we're all about, and how much they'd lose if it all went wrong."

"Like what?" Geoffrey pleaded.

"I thought you were the one with all the bright campaigning ideas." It was Urquhart, his tone sharp, back among them. "Geoffrey, why don't you go and have a wander through the Long Library before lunch? Fascinating collection of first editions—Sartre, Hemingway, Archer. Right up your street."

“Maybe a little later, FU?” he suggested, determined not to be written out of the plot.

“Geoffrey. Be a good fellow and bugger off.”

“Yes, right—Long Library. See you at lunch then.”

She marveled at his resilience to insult. Even now, she suspected, he was working on how he would divulge to others the privilege of the PM’s personal invitation to inspect his rare editions.

“He’ll not love you for that,” she commented.

“Geoffrey is incapable of love for anyone except himself. His adoration of his own inadequacies is as total as it is astounding and leaves no room for anyone else. I suspect I shall survive, as will he.”

In the distance a lunch gong was being beaten and the squeals of children echoed with renewed impatience, but he ignored the summons, instead gripping her arm and leading her through French windows that brought them from the terrace into the house. They were in his study with the windows firmly closed behind them, shutting them off. Suddenly she felt claustrophobic, the rules had changed. This was no longer a summer stroll around the garden making sport with Booza-Pitt, but one-on-one, she and Urquhart, in an atmosphere of personal intensity she’d never felt with him before.

“I’m sorry, Francis. Did I offend you, talking about the possibility of defeat?”

“No. You managed to express, and most eloquently, something that”—he was going to say “voices inside my own head”—“my own thoughts have been telling me all too sharply.”

“So you think it could happen?”

“I’m not a fool. Of course it could happen. We’re no more than passengers on a tide; even as we are rushed along by it, only one small slip could sweep us under.”

“And if we were to slip and he were to win, just once, there would be no way back for us. Tom’s always been committed to proportional representation—he’d change the election law himself, skew it in favor of the small parties, the minnows.”

“Who would grow into great pikes and tear any Government apart. This country would be turned over to chaos. By legislative order of Booza-Pitt and

Makepeace, destroyers of civilization. Hah!” To her alarm he sounded as if he found ironic pleasure in the prospect of the Apocalypse.

“You would be history,” she warned.

“And favored by it all the more!”

She realized why she had begun to feel so claustrophobic. She was standing beside not just a man, but a political Colossus whose deeds would be writ large. Yet she had known that from the very start; wasn’t that why she had agreed to join him, for her own selfish place in his shadow, the thrill and experience of standing beside a great chunk of that story? Up so close, so privately, it left her not a little in awe.

“There is one major gap in his armor,” Urquhart continued in a state of considerable animation, “his point of greatest vulnerability. He must keep his momentum going, appear irresistible before enough people will take their courage in their hands and march with him. But to raise an army he needs time. Time that is ours to give, or to deny. We must keep an eye on young Tom.”

“I already am,” she responded a little sheepishly. She’d intended to keep it secret, in case he disapproved, but the atmosphere of intimacy overcame her caution. “He has a new driver who is—how shall I put it?—extremely keen to share his experiences, especially when he picks up his weekly paycheck. From a very close friend of my husband.”

“Really? How splendid. I should have thought of that. I’m slipping.”

“Or perhaps I’m learning.”

He began to look at her quizzically, in a new light. “I do believe you are—turning out to be a truly remarkable find, Claire, if you’ll allow me to say so.” He had turned to her, taken her hands, his voice dropping to a softer register. He’d already invited her to share so much, yet there was a new and pressing intimacy in this moment. “One thing I have to ask. You’ve been pretty tough about Tom Makepeace. Politically, I mean. Yet from the way you understand him so well I get the impression—a sense, perhaps—that once you and he were...close. Personally.”

“Would it have mattered?”

“No. Not so long as I could be sure of your loyalty.”

Loyalty tied by bonds at least as secure as any she had shared with

Makepeace.

“Francis, you can. Be sure of my loyalty.”

She felt herself being pulled by the enormous force of gravity that surrounded him. She panicked, realizing she was losing control, her lips reaching up toward him. Suddenly she was afraid, of both him and her own ambitions. She was falling, yet couldn't find it within her to resist, even in the knowledge that coming so close to him was likely to leave her burned up and scattered like cinders. As had happened to others. She was on fire.

Then there was ice. Urquhart drew back, allowed her hands to fall and deliberately broke the spell that tied her to him. Why, she would never know, and Urquhart would never admit, even to himself.

For how can a man admit to such things? The guilt he felt for others he had taken in such a way, used, discarded, left utterly destroyed. With the passage of time he felt himself being drawn toward the day of his own judgment and such things bore more heavily on his mind. Some might even mistake it for conscience. Or was it merely the knowledge that in the past such entanglements had caused nothing but grief and turmoil, confusion he could do without in a world that, thanks to Thomas Makepeace, had suddenly grown far more complicated?

Yet there was something else that turned his blood cold. The gnawing dread that Francis Urquhart the Politician had been constructed on the ruins of Francis Urquhart the Man. Incapable of children, denied immortality. A desert, a barrenness of body that had infected the soul and in turn had been inflicted upon Mortima, the only woman he had ever truly loved. The others had all been pretense, an attempt to prove his virility, but in the end a pointless exercise, a scream in a soundproof chamber.

And, as she stood before him, desirable and available, he was no longer sure he could even raise his voice. The end of Francis Urquhart the Man.

Francis Urquhart the aging Politician stepped back from temptation and torment.

“Best that we keep you as my good luck charm, eh?”

In the Cypriot capital the crowds streamed through the entrance gates for an evening with Alekos, a young singer of talent from the mainland who had built a remarkable following among Greeks of all ages. The young girls swayed to the rhythm of his hips, old women fell for the voice that dripped like honey on dulled ears, the men were won over by the manner in which he crafted the images and emotions of Hellenism into music of the Greek soul more powerful than a first half hat trick by Omonia. He had flown from Athens for a special concert in support of the Cyprus Defense Fund. Few of the several thousand enthusiasts at the open-air auditorium gave a thought to how a concert could raise money for the CDF when all the tickets had been given away, as had the large number of banners being waved above the heads of the emotion-gripped crowd. *We Shall Not Forget*, the refrain in memory of the victims of Turkish invasion, was thrust high alongside other soul slogans such as *Let Us Bury Our Dead With Honor, British—Give Back Our Bases* and, yes, even *Equality With Orchids*.

The Bishop was much in evidence, cloaked dark in the seat of honor and surrounded by a hardworking team of his theological students. Theophilos was well pleased. Even the occasional outbreaks of alcoholic excess brought on by the heat and the ready supply of beer he bore with paternal fortitude. For three hours Alekos and his supporting musicians stirred, scratched, tickled and whipped their passion; as the night grew deeper, he reached for the refrain of *Digenes Akritas*, a tale of heroic defiance against the foreign foe, of cherished memories from the mists of time and, above all, of victory. They sang and swayed with him, lit matches and candles, their faces illuminated by hope in the darkness as the tears flowed freely from men and women alike. Alekos had them in his palm.

“Have you forgotten?” he breathed into the microphone, his voice stretching out to touch every one of them.

“No,” they sobbed.

“Do you want to forget those who died?”

“No...”

“Who gave their lives for a free Cyprus? Some of whom lie buried in unknown graves?” His voice was firmer now, goading.

(Later when he heard the reports, Hugh Martin was to wince at how Alekos in one emotional sweep had entangled together the subject of British graves with the Turkish invasion.)

“No, no,” they replied, with equal firmness.

“Do you want your homeland given away for British military bases?”

He stirred the muddy waters of old hatreds like a shark’s tail. In the darkness they began to lose their individual identities and become as one. Greek. Full of resentment.

“Then will you give your homeland away to bastard Turks?”

“No! Never!”

“Do you want your sisters and daughters to be screwed by bastard Turks, like your mothers were when the bastards invaded our country?” His clenched fist beat the night air, his bitterness transmitting to others.

“NO.”

“Do you want your President to sign a treaty that says it’s all right? All forgotten? All over? That they can keep what they stole?”

“NO,” they began to shout. “NO. NO. NO.”

“So what do you want to say to the President?”

“N-O-O-O-O!” The cries lifted through the Nicosia night and spilled across the city.

“Then go and tell him!”

The doors were thrown open and thousands swarmed out of the auditorium to find buses lined up to take them the two kilometers to the Presidential Palace, whose guards they taunted, whose gates they rocked, and whose wrought iron fencing they festooned with their banners. By the light of a huge pink Nicosia moon, the largest demonstration in the city since the election came to pass, and twenty-three unwise arrests ensured that the stamping of angry feet would continue to grab headlines for days afterward.

Like every other detail of the concert, even the encore had gone according to plan.

Twenty-Four

The game of politics usually proceeds by a succession of afterthoughts.

“Gaiters and gongs again tonight.” Urquhart sighed. He had lost count of the number of times he’d climbed into formal attire on a summer’s evening in order to exchange inconsequential pleasantries with some Third World autocrat who, as the wine list rambled on, would brag about his multiple wives, multiple titles, and even multiple Swiss bank accounts. Urquhart told himself he would much rather be spending his time on something else, something more fulfilling. But what? With a sense of incipient alarm, he realized he didn’t know what. For him, there was nothing else.

“I see they’re pegging out the lawn for that wretched statue.” Mortima was gazing out of the bedroom window. “I thought you’d told Max Stanbrook to stop it.”

“He’s working on it.”

“It’s preposterous,” she continued. “In a little over a month you will have overtaken her record. It’s you who should be out there.”

“She wasn’t supposed to lose, either,” he reflected softly.

She turned, her face flecked with concern. “Is all this Makepeace nonsense getting you down, Francis?”

“A little, perhaps.”

“Not like you. To admit to vulnerability.”

“He’s forcing my hand, Mortima. If I give him time to organize, to grow, I give him time to succeed. Time is not on my side, not when you reach my age.” With a silent curse he tugged at his bow tie and began again the process of

reknitting it. “Claire says I should find some way of calling his bluff. Fly the flag.”

“She’s turning out to be an interesting choice of playmate.”

He understood precisely what she was implying. “No, Mortima, no distractions. In the past they’ve caused us so much anguish. And there are voices everywhere telling me I shall need all my powers of concentration over the next few months.”

“People still regard you as a great leader, Francis.”

“And may yet live to regard me as a still greater villain.”

“What is eating at you?” she demanded with concern. “You’re not normally morbid.”

He stared at himself in the mirror. Time had taken its undeniable toll; the face was wrinkled and fallen, the hair thinned, the eyes grown dim and rimmed with fatigue. Urquhart the Man—the Young Man, at least—was but a memory. Yet some memories, he reflected, lived longer than others, refused to die. Particularly the memory of a day many years earlier when, in the name of duty and of his country, he had erred. As the evening sun glanced through the window and bathed the room in its rich ocher light, it all came back. His hands fell to his side, the tie unraveled again.

“When I was a young lieutenant in Cyprus”—the voice sounded dry, as though he’d started smoking again—“there was an incident. An unhappy collision of fates. A sacrifice, if you like, in the name of Her Majesty’s peace. Tom Makepeace today wrote to me, he knows of the incident but not my part in it. Yet if it were ever to be made public, my part in that affair, they would destroy me. Ignore everything I have achieved and strip me like wolves.”

He turned to face her. “If I give Makepeace any of what he wants, he will pursue the matter. If I don’t, he’ll pursue me. Either way, there is an excellent chance I shall be destroyed. And time is on his side.”

“Then fight him, Francis.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You’ve plenty of strings to your bow.”

He joined her by the window, took her hands, massaged her misgivings with his thumbs, gently kissed her forehead. “Strings to my bow. But I’m not sure I

have the strength anymore to bend the bloody thing.” He laughed, a hollow sound she chose not to share. “We must have one more victory, one more successful election behind us. The Urquhart name, yours and mine, written into history. The longest-serving Prime Minister this century.”

“And the greatest.”

“I owe that to you even more than I owe it to myself. I must find some way of beating him, destroying him—any way! And quickly. Everything I have ever achieved depends on it.”

“And what then, Francis?”

“Then perhaps we can think about stepping back and I can become an intolerable old man in carping retirement, if that’s what you want.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. But what else is there? Apart from this I have nothing. Which is why I’m going to fight Tom Makepeace. And all the others. So long as I breathe.”

For Mortima it sounded all too much like an epitaph; she held him close in a way they’d not embraced for a considerable time, nuzzling into loose flesh and afraid she was falling into the deep pit of his empty old age.

Suddenly he stiffened, measurably brightened. Something over her shoulder had caught his eye. The workmen had finished laying out the stakes—miniature Union flags, would you believe—and a large lawn mower was lumbering toward them. It approached hesitantly, its progress obstructed, forcing it to slow, to stop and swerve to avoid them. It did so with considerable difficulty, chewing up the neat turf and knocking over several flags as the gardener wrenched at the wheel. Clearly it was not a machine designed to mow in such confined circumstances. Urquhart observed all this with growing interest.

“Anyway, my love, a great general doesn’t need to bend his own bow, he gets others to do that for him. All he needs are ideas. And one or two have just come knocking at my door.”

“Max!” he summoned.

Ministers were trooping into the Cabinet Room where they found him at its far end, slapping his fist like a wicket keeper waiting for the next delivery, rather

than in his accustomed chair beneath the portrait of Walpole.

Stanbrook made his way over as the others milled around, uncertain about taking their seats while he was still standing.

“Max, dear boy,” Urquhart greeted as the other approached. “Our little conversation about the statue. You remember? Haven’t signed the Order yet, have you?”

“I’ve delayed it as long as I possibly could, FU.” Stanbrook tried to make it sound like a substantial victory of Hectorian proportion. Then, more sheepishly, “But I can’t find a single damned reason for turning it down.”

Urquhart chastised with a glance, then laid an arm upon his colleague’s shoulder and turned him toward the window. “There’s only one reason for turning down such a worthy project, Max, and that’s because they haven’t raised enough money.”

“But they have. Eighty thousand pounds.”

“That’s just for the statue. But what about its maintenance?”

“What’s to maintain with a statue, FU? An occasional scrub for pigeon droppings is hardly likely to run up bills of massive proportions.”

“But it’s not just the birds, is it? What about terrorists?”

Stanbrook was nonplussed.

“Home Secretary,” Urquhart called to Geoffrey, who came scampering. The others, too, began to draw closer, fascinated by what was evidently some form of morality play or possibly bloodletting of the new Environment Secretary—either way, no one wanted to miss it.

“Geoffrey, wouldn’t you say that a statue of our Beloved Former Leaderene situated just beyond the gardens of Downing Street would be an obvious target for terrorist attack? A symbolic retribution for past failures? Theirs, not hers. Let alone a target for the more obvious attentions of petty vandals and graffiti goons.”

“Certainly, Prime Minister.”

“And so worthy of steps to ensure its—and our—security. Twenty-four hours a day. Perhaps a specially dedicated video security system. How much would that cost?”

“How much would you like it to cost, Prime Minister?”

“Splendid, Geoffrey. To install and maintain—at least ten thousand pounds a year, wouldn’t you think?”

“Sounds very reasonable to me.”

“Then, of course, there’s the monitoring of that system. Twenty-four hours a day. Plus a visual inspection of the site every hour during the night by the security watch.”

“No change from another twenty thousand pounds for that,” Geoffrey offered.

“You see, Max. There’s another thirty thousand a year that will have to be found.”

Stanbrook had grown pale, as though hemorrhaging. “I think the fund will just about run to that, FU.”

“But you haven’t thought of the grass, have you? A surprising omission for a Secretary of State for the Environment.”

“The grass? What’s the bloody grass got to do with it?” Both his perspective and his language had collapsed in confusion.

“Everything, as I shall explain. Come with me.”

Urquhart flung open the doors to the patio and, like Mother Goose, led all twenty-five of them in file down the stairs, into the garden, through the door in the old brick wall, and in less than a minute had brought them to the site of the stakes. Startled Special Branch detectives began scurrying everywhere in the manner of cowboys trying to round up loose steers.

“Away! Away off my grass!” he shouted at them. “This is most important.”

Security withdrew to a nervous distance, wondering whether the old man had had a turn and they should send for Smith & Wessons or Geritol.

“Observe,” Urquhart instructed, hands spread wide. “The grass. Beautifully manicured, line after line. Until”—he made a theatrical gesture of decapitating a victim kneeling at his feet—“here.”

They gathered around to inspect the scuffed and torn turf on which he was standing.

“You see, Max, the lawn mower can’t cope. It’s too big. So you’re going to have to get another one. Transport it here twice a week throughout the summer, just to mow around the statue.”

“Take a bit of strimming, too, I’ve no doubt.” Bollingbroke had decided to join what was evidently a glorious new summer sport.

“Thank you, Arthur. A strimmer as well, Max. The whole bally production line we have created to keep the green spaces of our gracious city shorn and shaven—disrupted! Put out of gear. Ground to a halt. For your statue.”

“Hardly my statue,” Stanbrook was mumbling, but already there was another player on the field.

“Chief Secretary, what would be the cost of a small mower and strimmer, their storage and transportation from said storage about fifty times a year, plus an allowance for all the chaos to the maintenance schedule that is likely to ensue?” He made it sound as if the center of London was sure to grind to a halt.

“I’d say another ten thousand,” a youngish man with lips that operated like a goldfish pronounced. “Minimum.”

“So that’s ten, and ten, and twenty. Makes another forty thousand pounds, Max.”

“I’ll tell the Society.”

“Not just forty thousand pounds, Max. That’s forty thousand pounds a year. We’ll have to ensure that a fund is available to generate that sort of money for at least ten years; otherwise the taxpayer will end up footing the bill. We couldn’t have that.”

“Not when I’m just about to announce a freeze on nurses’ pay,” the Health Secretary insisted jovially.

“And where’s the Chancellor of the Exchequer? His Prime Minister wants him. Ah, Jim, don’t be bashful.”

The Chancellor was thrust by many willing hands from seclusion at the rear of the assembly amid a chorus of laughter.

“Chancellor. A fund sufficient to generate forty thousand pounds a year for a minimum of ten years. How much are we talking about?”

Jim Barfield, a rotund Pickwickian figure with a shock of hair that made him look as though his brains had exploded, scratched his waistcoat and sucked his lower lip. “Not used to thousands. Throw a few noughts on the end and I’d have no trouble but...” He scratched once more. “Let’s say a quarter of a million. Just between friends.”

“Mr. Stanbrook, has the Society got a quarter of a million pounds? In addition to the eighty for casting said statue?”

Stanbrook, not knowing whether to laugh along with the rest, to fall to his knees and kiss the grass, or to crawl away in humiliation, simply hung his head. “No graven images!” a voice from the west flank of Whitehall insisted. The others applauded.

“Then it is with much regret...”

He had no need to finish. The Cabinet to a man, even Stanbrook, applauded as if on the green trimmed sward of Westminster they had been watching one of the finest conjuring tricks of the decade. Which, perhaps, they had.

He felt good. He had shown he was still the greatest actor of the age; it had been as important to remind himself as to remind the others. His view had been salvaged, the past exorcized. Now to exorcize the future.

Twenty-Five

Ambition should be strong enough to take a hard polish. And a damned good kicking.

Claire ran into him as she was scurrying out of the House of Commons Library. She was clutching papers and he had to reach out to prevent her from toppling.

“Hi, stranger.”

“Hello to you.” The voice was soft, the old chemistry still at work. Reluctantly Makepeace withdrew his supporting arm and let her go. “Running errands for the boss?” he inquired, indicating the papers and regretting it immediately. Urquhart had already come too much between them.

“Would it seem silly if I suggested I’d missed you? I’ve thought about you a lot.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” he retorted, hurt male pride adding a sharper edge than he’d intended. “I suppose coming from an acolyte of Urquhart I should take such attention as a compliment.”

She searched for his eyes but they remained elusive, darting along the corridor, falling at his feet, unwilling to allow her to inspect the wounds she had inflicted on him. He was acting more like a secret and bashful lover than when they’d shared something to be secretive about.

“I’d like to think that we could still be friends,” she offered, and marveled immediately at her own hypocrisy. She meant it; she retained a strong sense of affection and respect for him, a man with whom she had shared so much. Yet she was also the woman who was trying to bring him to his knees. For the first time she began to be aware of how far she had moved, had strayed perhaps, from

her own image of herself. She'd become two people, political animal as well as woman, in two worlds, one black, the other white, and the dark world where she stood in the shadow of Francis Urquhart was tugging her away from her roots and those she had loved.

"Claire, there are only two sides in this place right now. Those who stand with him, and those who don't. There's no room in the middle anymore."

A colleague passed by and they both stood in embarrassed silence as though their past secrets had been betrayed to the evening press.

"I've not sold out," she began again, anxious to reassure herself as much as him.

Disdain sharpened his eye. "Spare me that sweet talk about means and ends, Claire. Like curdled milk, I'll only swallow it once. With him, there is but one end. Francis Urquhart. And any means will do. Face up to it. You've sold out."

"I wasn't born to all this like you, Tom. I've had to fight and scratch for every little thing I've achieved in this place. I've taken all the jibes, the patronizing, the gropers, the men who preach equality yet only practice it when they go a Dutch treat for dinner. Perhaps you can afford to, but no way am I going to pack up and walk away at the first sign of trouble."

"I haven't walked away. Not from my principles."

"Great. You preach, and in the meantime Big Mac wrappers will inherit the Earth. We both have our ideals, Tom. Difference between us is that I'm prepared to do something about them, to take the knocks in pursuing them, not simply sit on the sidelines and jeer."

"I'm not sitting on the sidelines."

"You ran off the bloody pitch!"

"There are some games I simply don't want to play." His tone implied that in politics, at least, she was nothing more than a tart.

"You know, Tom Makepeace, you were a better man in bed. At least there you knew what the hell to do." She didn't mean it, was covering up for her own pain, but she'd always had a tendency to a phrase too far and this one tore across their respect like a nail across silk.

She knew she'd cut him and watched miserably as a beststockinged messenger handed Makepeace an envelope bearing a familiar crest. As he wrenched it open

and read she began to frame an apology, but when his eyes came up once more, inflamed no longer with wounded pride but unadulterated contempt, something told her it was already too late.

“Those who stand with him, Claire. And those who don’t.”

He turned on his heel and strode away from the ruins of their friendship.

10 Downing Street

Dear Thomas,

I am replying to your recent letter. I have nothing to add to the reply I gave in the House last week, or to the policy adopted by successive Governments that security considerations prevent such matters being discussed in detail.

*Yours sincerely,
Francis*

It had been couched in terms intended to offend. His name had been typed, not handwritten; the dismissal of his request was as abrupt as was possible for an experienced parliamentarian to devise. Perhaps he should be grateful, at least, that the letter had dispensed with the hypocrisy of the traditional endearment between party colleagues that suggested that the author might be “Yours ever.”

As Makepeace entered the Chamber, the letter protruding like a week-old newspaper from his clenched hand, he trembled with a sense of his own inadequacy. There was a time, only days gone by, when a word from him would have had the System producing documents and reports by the red box load; now he couldn’t raise more than a passing insult.

Claire, too, had made a fool of him—not simply because he’d said things in a clumsy manner he’d not intended, but because he hadn’t realized how much of his affections she continued to command, in spite of Maria. He should know better, have more control, yet she’d left him feeling like a schoolboy.

If he was flushed with frustration as he sat down to listen to the debate on the European Union Directive (Harmonization of Staff Emoluments), within moments his resentment had soared like a hawk over Saudi skies. The House

was packed, the Prime Minister in his seat with Bollingbroke at the Dispatch Box, holding forth on matters *diplomatique* with the restraint and forbearance of a bricklayer approaching payday.

“Emoluments!” he pronounced with vernacular relish. “Wish I ’ad some of them there Emoluments. It says in this Sunday newspaper”—he waved a copy high above his head—“that apparently one of the Commissioners took a personal interpreter with him on a ten-day visit he made recently to Japan. By some oversight, ’owever, the young lady turned out to be qualified only in Icelandic and Russian.” He shrugged as though confronted with a problem of insurmountable complexity. “Well, I dunno, they probably all sound the same and I’m sure she had her uses. But it’s a bit much when they come back and start asking for more.”

Mixed shouts of encouragement and objection were issuing from all sides when, in a stage whisper everyone in the Chamber (with the exception of the scribe from *Hansard*) had no trouble in hearing, he added: “Wonder if I could get it on expenses?”

The debate was rapidly turning into music hall, much to the annoyance of several members of the Opposition who attempted to intervene, but Bollingbroke, as though standing defiant watch from the cliffs of Dover, refused to give way.

“And for what purpose are we being asked to pay the good burghers of Brussels more, Mr. Speaker?” he demanded, waving down several who wanted to offer an answer. “I’ll tell you. One of their latest plans is to issue a standard history of Europe that can be used in all our schools. Sort of...give our kids a common perspective. Bring them together.”

Several members of the Opposition Front Bench were nodding their heads in approval. They should have known better.

“A visionary epistle. Apparently, the Germans never invaded Poland, the Italians never retreated, the French never surrendered, and we never won the war.”

Pandemonium had erupted in every corner of the Chamber, the noise being so great that it was impossible to tell who was shouting in support and who in condemnation of the Foreign Secretary. But Makepeace had sprung to his feet,

the flush on his face indicating beyond doubt the depths of his outrage. Bollingbroke, always willing to plumb such depths, gave way.

“In all my years in this House I have never heard such an ill-tempered and bellicose performance by a Foreign Secretary,” Makepeace began. “When all the rest of Europe is looking for a common way forward, he seems intent on acting like an obstinate child. And his Prime Minister, who likes to pretend he is a statesman, sits beside him and cheers him on.”

Makepeace had become confused with his targets. In the seat beside Bollingbroke, Urquhart was chatting with Claire, who was leaning down from her guard post in the row behind to whisper something in his ear. From where Makepeace stood, it looked almost like an affectionate nuzzle. His sense of personal betrayal grew.

“When the rest of Europe is as one, for God’s sake shouldn’t we be joining with them rather than scratching over old wars?”

“In my Dad’s day they called that appeasement,” Bollingbroke shouted, but did not attempt to reclaim the floor; he was enjoying the sight of Makepeace being wound tight like a spring.

“This Government is picking foreign quarrels for the sole purpose of covering its failures at home. It has lost all moral authority to continue in office...”

Nearby, Annita Burke was nodding her head in approval, urging him on, while several others around her were also trying to listen, their heads inclined in sympathy rather than joining the general commotion. Through it all, Bollingbroke could be heard scoffing: “So he’s found morality since he was kicked out of office, has he? Convenient.”

“As the bishops themselves have recently said in General Synod, this country needs a change in direction and a new sense of moral leadership—a leadership that this Government and this Prime Minister doesn’t even attempt to provide.”

That was enough for Bollingbroke, who sprang to his feet and started thumping the Dispatch Box. “What have you achieved compared with Francis Urquhart?” he was shouting. “Compared with him you’re like a pork-scratching on a pig farm. Francis Urquhart has brought prosperity to this country, peace to Cyprus...”

The mention of Cyprus arrived like a slap across the face to Makepeace. It

seemed to have galvanized Urquhart, too, who was tugging at the sleeve of his Foreign Secretary. Bollingbroke, startled at this unusual intervention from his Prime Minister, subsided into his seat, his place at the Dispatch Box taken by Urquhart. The House fell to silence, fascinated to catch the next turn of the carousel.

Urquhart cleared his throat. “I hate to interrupt my Right Honorable Friend—I was rather enjoying his contribution—but all this talk about morality and bishops. So muddled and misleading. You know, Mr. Speaker, I find it extraordinary that those who spend so much time warning about the dire consequences of wrongdoing in the afterlife are often so silent about it in this life. Turn the other cheek, they suggest.” He sighed. “But if that’s the self-appointed role adopted by the bishops, that cannot be the role for Government—at least not my Government. Our job is not to forgive those who have done wrong. Our job is to protect those who haven’t.”

If Makepeace had thrown down the gauntlet of morality, Urquhart seemed intent on retrieving it and using it as an offensive weapon.

“Don’t misunderstand me, I have a high regard for the contribution made to the success of my Government by the Right Honorable Gentleman while he was a member of it.” He offered a slow smile soaked in derision. “Although I don’t recall sitting around the Cabinet table hearing him expound on how we were making such a mess of things. Not until I sacked him. But loss of office can have such a distorting effect on a man’s perspective and memory.”

The gauntlet struck again. Slap!

“I don’t doubt the sincerity of his personal values, but I do find them odd. Odd when he says we must do this or that, simply because the bishops say so. Even more extraordinary that we should follow this or that course of action because the rest of Europe says so. Where’s the morality in that? In secondhand opinions that follow the herd like dogs follow a dust cart?”

Slap.

“Morality is about deciding for yourself what’s right. Then doing something about it. Let me have around me men of action, not moralizers with empty words. I’ve nothing but scorn for those”—Urquhart’s eyes lashed in the direction of his former colleague—“who sit back and carp at the efforts of others. Who

descend from their high moral vantage points after the battle is over and tell the wounded and dying how they got it wrong...”

Makepeace tried not to flinch, but inside he hurt. Claire’s taunt still echoed in his ears—sitting on the sidelines, she’d accused—and now this. They were out to humble him, together. He looked around him as the blows rained down. Those he regarded as supporters were shifting uncomfortably in their places while Annita’s expression urged him on—do something! He rose to his feet, asking for the floor.

“No, no,” Urquhart slapped him down. “I’ve heard enough theology from him to last me a good long while.”

Makepeace held his ground, demanding to be heard, his clenched hand raised—it still gripped Urquhart’s letter—while Urquhart loyalists were jeering, shouting at him to resume his place. Slap, slap, slap! Makepeace stood alone, defying the blows, but was he simply to stand there—doing nothing, as Urquhart had taunted—allowing himself to be gouged and mauled? Annita’s eyes brimmed with sorrow as his own brimmed with the injustice of it all.

“Since he lost office,” Urquhart was saying, “his attitude has become so critical, so negative, so personally embittered and destructive that I sometimes wonder what he’s doing in the same great party as me.”

SLAP!

So there it was. The public challenge. He had no choice but to respond. All around him those with whom he had discussed and conspired were examining him, wondering whether he was up to the duel. Makepeace against Urquhart. He knew that if he ducked the challenge at this moment it would be all but impossible to persuade some of the conspirators to join with him at a later time. Yet it was too soon, too early, he wasn’t fully prepared. Don’t be too impatient, emotional, Annita had warned...but even eagles must fly with the wind. And if he played the politician then he had also been born a man, and that man was hurting inside, his cheeks smarting, his thoughts misted by a dark and deepening fury that demanded satisfaction.

Satisfaction. For the humiliations delivered publicly on the floor of the House. Satisfaction for the insults delivered more privately in the letter in his hand. Satisfaction for denying Maria and her father. And for stealing away

Claire.

Satisfaction for it all. Now!

From his position on the benches three rows up, Makepeace stepped sideways into the gangway. Was he running away? The prospect brought the House to instant and observant silence. He stepped down toward the floor of the great Chamber, to the red lines drawn on the carpet that separated Government side from opponents by the measure of two swords, the boundary between friend and unremitting foe. Then he stepped across. Not a heartbeat anywhere, not a sound to be heard, a Chamber so packed with emotion yet as though frozen. They watched as Makepeace mounted the steps through the benches of Opposition, one, two, three rows, and took a vacant seat.

The House exhaled with a single breath as life returned and tumult was restored. They had witnessed a slice of parliamentary life so rare it would fill their chronicles and be retold to grandchildren around the fire. Makepeace had crossed the floor, abandoned his party, torn up the rule book, and declared war on Urquhart, to the last breath.

Yet as he looked across the Chamber to the benches from which he had fought for so many years, Makepeace thought he saw the shadow of a faint, fugitive smile cross Francis Urquhart's lips.

Twenty-Six

The Greeks invented democracy. Little wonder that since then they have caused nothing but chaos.

The eye of an inhospitable Levantine sun stared down upon the Cypriot capital, baking the narrow streets of the central city like bricks in a kiln. Hugh Martin was relieved to reach the air-conditioned sanctuary of the Power House, a former electricity generating station that had been turned with considerable imagination into one of the old quarter's most exclusive restaurants. Works of fine contemporary art competed with menus and wine lists for the attention of the well-heeled clientele, one of whom, Dino Nicolaides, was editor of the *Cyprus Weekly* and intent on conducting an in-depth interview with his guest. For that purpose he had commandeered the seclusion of the table by the door, which led to the rear courtyard.

Martin apologized to the editor for the presence of Drage—the atmosphere in Nicosia in recent days had soured like uncollected rubbish, and demonstrations of one sort or another had become a daily occurrence, with the demonstrators becoming increasingly confused about whether the target of their protest was the Turks, the British, or the Cypriot Government itself.

“Summer madness,” the editor agreed, and Drage was deposited on a stool by the bar.

If the furniture and decor were fashionable, the hospitality was in best Cypriot tradition and Martin was soon relaxed. Drage, however, could afford no such luxury, having been inducted by his superiors into the Order of Toasted Testicles with crossed pokers after the fiasco outside the museum. “Never

again,” his superiors had admonished. “Better a widow’s pension for your wife than you make a complete ass of yourself on the main evening news.” Never again, Drage had vowed. He sat eagle-eyed on his stool, the innocuous flight bag in which he carried “the necessary” perched on the bar beside him, fingers tapping nervously upon his knees. He offered a perfunctory smile but no conversation to the two Cypriots who stood beside him at the bar ordering drinks.

The incident, when it arrived, did so with extraordinary speed. Halfway through the meal a guest from a nearby table rose and crossed to greet the editor and diplomat, an action that in itself aroused little suspicion in such a small community. Drage, however, was immediately on his guard, cursing that the bright sunlight streaming through the window was burning into his retina as he stared, turning all those around the table into silhouettes. He blinked, blinked again, searching the profile of the new arrival for any sign of the unusual. Drage did not notice—could not have noticed in the circumstances—the eyes of the High Commissioner growing large with alarm and searching in his direction. Martin’s arms remained motionless on the table, as he had been ordered. It was in the same moment when Drage thought he might have detected the outline of a small barrel protruding from beyond the far side of the intruder that the door immediately behind the table and leading to the courtyard began to open. Fear began to rise through his veins. Drage made a grab for his bag.

Impossible! As he reached for the zip that secured the flight bag he discovered that it had been smeared with superglue. Child’s play! Yet so extraordinarily effective. The fastener was stuck solid, the revolver and alarm transmitter inside as inaccessible as though they were still locked in the High Commission’s vault.

Two men—Drage’s companions from the bar—had now entered through the rear door. One was waving what appeared against the glare to be some form of submachine gun while the other helped hustle the High Commissioner up and out. The submachine gun had stopped waving and for several seconds the attacker was pointing it fixedly in Drage’s direction. Then he, too, was gone. Not even a scream, it had all happened so quickly and most guests in the restaurant were still enjoying their food, their first thought of alarm arriving only as Drage

kicked over the bar stool in his lunge for the door. It was, as he knew in every fiber it would be, locked. By the time he had made it out through the restaurant's main entrance and around the side into the chrysanthemum-covered courtyard, the getaway car was speeding off and already lost in the narrow streets of the carpenters' quarter. He didn't even get a make, let alone a number.

He had lost the British High Commissioner.

Twenty-Seven

Life is too short to learn the rules.

He sat behind the drawn curtains of his Commons room, eyes closed. The storm was about to break around him and there could be no retreat. Fate, destiny, the games of gods, call it what he might, had contrived to bring him to a time of great decision; if he failed the test they would say he lacked not the opportunity, only courage.

Less than twenty minutes after Makepeace had crossed the floor and changed the face of parliamentary politics, Urquhart had heard of the kidnapping of Martin. Havoc wherever he looked. And in havoc, opportunity. For war had been declared against him on two fronts, the first upon a parliamentary field where his skills and sagacity were matched by none, the other in a distant arena that was one of the handful in the world where British troops were still stationed. An arena he knew so well, where the long journey of his manhood had started, and might yet finish. Where Makepeace would have trouble following, and wouldn't even know what the spoils were.

There was a knock on the door, a secretary's head appeared. "Prime Minister, the Cabinet have all assembled."

"A moment more. Ask them to give me a moment more."

A final moment, a last listen to the voices inside that spoke of tempests and terrible trials. These were skies of blood that foretold men's doom and which others dared not walk in. But Francis Urquhart dared. He had wars to fight, and without delay. For in war, timing was everything.

And that time had come.

He had sent the wheel of fortune spinning and there was nothing to do but relish the exhilaration of the risk. He felt better than he had done in months. There was a lightness to his step as he walked the few yards from his room back into the Chamber, clutching his piece of paper, a single sheet with a simple portcullis crest and in his own hand, a note that would end up in the Urquhart Library. Or in the Tower. That reminded him, perhaps he should get Booza-Pitt to add a simple amendment to his Bill providing tax breaks for companies who contributed to educational funds. Like the Urquhart Library or the Endowment. There was still time.

The Chamber was full, aware that such an extraordinary and impromptu gathering of Cabinet Ministers betokened considerable drama. MPs rustled like leaves in a drying autumn wind as Urquhart placed the single sheet upon the Dispatch Box, smoothing its cream edges, and began.

“Mr. Speaker, with your permission I would like to make a statement. This afternoon in the House, a Member crossed the floor in an act that not only reduced this Government’s majority, but also threatens a period of damaging uncertainty...” Others would say it, would already be shouting it as they prepared the morning newspapers, so there was nothing to be lost by the admission. “Such uncertainty can only do harm to the good governance of this country. Moreover, claims were made that my Government had lost its moral authority to govern. That is a challenge no Government can ignore.”

He leaned back from the Dispatch Box so that he could survey his audience and, more importantly, keep them dangling, impatient upon his words.

“This Government prefers to take its authority not from self-appointed moralists but from the people. It is the people to whom we listen and in whom we trust; it is for them to say who should sit on these benches and who among the Opposition. It is the people who must decide.”

From the corner of its collective eye the whole House was looking at Makepeace, who sat impassive, aware that Urquhart was challenging every line of his credentials, and awkward on a crowded bench where not a single one was numbered among his friends or supporters. He looked isolated; he’d jumped too

soon.

“In order to bring an end to the uncertainty, it is my intention to ask His Majesty for a dissolution and a general election at the earliest practicable moment, after the passage of certain essential pieces of parliamentary business. That moment should be in four weeks next Thursday. Thank you.”

Picking up his piece of paper, Urquhart left the Chamber.

For several long moments the House reacted in the manner of some prehistoric beast under attack. A bemused silence, before sounds of confusion began to rattle among many throats. Then a sustained bellow as the creature finally became aware that its tail had been torn away. Cries of determination and rage rose on all sides.

“Good God, I never thought I’d see it. The day when Francis Urquhart ran up the white flag of surrender.” A young scribe in the press gallery tore at his notebook, infected by the air of anarchy that prevailed.

Beside him Dicky Withers appeared unmoved, eyeing the scene below him with no apparent display of heat, drawing in his cheeks as though sucking on his favorite pipe. “Bloody fool.”

“What, Urquhart?” his junior colleague inquired.

“Not Urquhart. You. He’s not running away, he’s called Makepeace’s bluff.”

“But he’s behind in the polls, now his party is split...”

“You watch ’em. Faced with an electoral drowning, not many will be keen to join Makepeace in jumping ship.”

He nodded toward the former Foreign Secretary, who was walking alone out of the Chamber. In an arena where everyone was shouting, rebuking, gesticulating, only he seemed to have nothing to say, and no one to say it to.

Twenty-Eight

A Greek life is built around ruins and rumor.

Nicosia swelters by day; by night, life is lived on the street, in the open-air eating places, on corners, at coffee shops, in parks beneath the stars. The hot pavements chatter, gossip flows along every gutter; at traffic lights young men lean out of their car windows or from mopeds to exchange banter and cigarettes with passersby, for everyone seems to be connected either by business or by blood. But, since the Turks invaded, mostly by blood.

And in the stifling atmosphere the soft wind of rumor sweeps through the backstreets, is passed from balcony to bus queue like a mistral of mistruth. Blow your nose by the Famagusta Gate and it has become a full-scale epidemic by the time, an hour or so later, it has reached Makarios Avenue. One day, perhaps, television may rescue the Cypriots, replacing febrile excitement with numbing uniformity and squeezing conspiracy into the commercial breaks. One day, perhaps, but until then, the Cypriot will believe anything.

Except politicians.

Beneath a roof of woven palm fronds in the shadow of the great Venetian walls of the old city, a waiter served two British tourists, patiently explaining the menu, imploring them to try the boiled brains that were a specialty of his cousin, the cook, and warning them off the squid. "Last week's. Too old." He shook his head as though at a graveside.

A young boy, no more than ten, passed between the tables distributing leaflets. He stopped before the couple, clearly identifying them as British. "Good mornings," he offered, along with a full smile and a leaflet each, before

continuing with his task.

“What does it say?” the woman inquired of the waiter.

“It says we want the British out of Cyprus,” he responded cheerfully, before spying the look on her face. “No, not you, Madams. The bases. Only the bases. We want the British to stay, we love you. But as our friends in our homes and our tavernas. Not in the bases.” His cheerful clarification suggested not a trace of rancor. “Now, how about some suckling pig, freshly butchered...?”

Suddenly a scooter, underpowered and hideously overthrottled, squealed to a halt at the curbside and the waiter exchanged greetings with the driver. The noise grew, however, as did the animation of both waiter and driver, who were gesticulating as though warding off an attack of ravenous vampire bats. Then the waiter turned to his cousin who was leaning from the window of the kitchen. More shouts—the waiter abandoned his pen, pad, and corkscrew on the tablecloth—and the battle with the bats continued as he backed away in the direction of the scooter. Pursued by cries from his cousin that clearly fell well short of endearments, he climbed on the back of the scooter and disappeared into the night.

The cousin appeared at the guests’ table carrying an expression of wearied forbearance, wiped his hands on his apron, and reclaimed the pad.

“But...what was all that?” Madams inquired.

He shrugged. “Bones. They’ve found more bones. So there’s another demonstration at the Presidential Palace. Don’t worry, ladies, he’s only gone for a quick shout. Be back in half an hour. Now, what can I get you? Has he told you about the squid...?”

There were bones, uncovered in the hills behind Paphos beneath a pile of rocks in an olive grove. They weren’t of an age that matched with graves from either the British or Turkish wars, and it turned out they weren’t even human. But it would be days before forensic analysis established the facts and in the meantime there would be protests, rumors, inventions, and outright lies.

Through dragging Cypriot days and beneath hard blue skies, truth rots like a gangrenous limb.

The Presidential Palace in Nicosia is an unlikely affair. Built to house the imperial trappings of an early British Governor after the old headquarters were wrecked by a popular uprising, it was in its own turn burned to the ground by the coup against Archbishop Makarios, which opened the door to the Turkish invasion. This would have been an opportunity to erase the British stamp upon the presidential home once and for all, and to create a palace of entirely modern Cypriot design. “But the British are our history,” the Archbishop was supposed to have said. “They are our friends.” So, along with the Archbishop, the Palace was restored in the old style, complete with the dominant British coat of royal arms carved in sandstone above the main entrance. *Dieu et Mon Droit*. An unlikely affair.

Aristotle Nicolaou was a similarly unlikely affair. Tall, stooped, of uncomfortable construction, the President had a leanness and a blue intensity in his eyes that set him apart from most Cypriots. He was a philosopher rather than a politician, a man who had encountered no greater pleasure in his life than teaching economics at the London School of Economics and marrying an English wife. His happiness had disappeared with the Turkish invasion that had torn the island apart, and he had returned for no better reason than to assuage his sense of guilt at missing the hardships being endured by his fellow Cypriots. It was not a sense of guilt shared by his wife. Nicolaou was a man of broad ideals who had never fully reconciled himself to the tactics and daily concessions required of political life, any more than he had to those required in his marriage. As he sat at the small desk in his office, surrounded by family photographs and the paraphernalia of power, he felt adrift. Through the great Moorish stone-arched windows came the sound of protest from beyond the palace gates—louder than ever tonight—and from the telephone came the sound of protest from the British Prime Minister. He didn’t know how to handle either.

“Ari, I must emphasize how seriously I take this business. I’m not going to allow people to start kidnapping my High Commissioners and get away with it.”

“Francis, I’m committing everything to this. We’ll find him.”

“But you haven’t. Have you even found out why he was taken?”

“A radio station received a telephone call about two hours ago. Untraceable, naturally. Called itself ‘The Word.’ Gave the position of Mr. Martin’s birthmark.

Said it will give the rest of him back in exchange for all files concerning hidden war graves and a commitment from your Government to withdraw from your ‘outposts of imperialism,’ as it called them. Bones and bases.”

“Bloody blackmail.”

In a bowl in front of Nicolaou were piled fresh lemon leaves from the garden; he crushed a few between his fingertips, savoring the sharp fragrance, as was his custom at times of stress. “Can we at least encourage them to talk about it?”

“Ari, I’ve got an election campaign about to start. I’ve no intention of kicking that off by dickering with terrorists.”

“It’s more than that, I’m sure. It’s aimed at me, too. They want to prevent me signing the peace treaty. Even now I have a mob beating at my door.”

Beneath the canopy of a hundred thousand stars, another wave of protest drifted across the grounds—God, had they broken in? For once he was glad his wife was away on yet another trip to Paris. More culture. Shopping again.

“How seriously should we take these people?”

“Have you British not yet learned to take Cypriots seriously?” Nicolaou sounded caustic. “We may be a nation of tavern keepers and taxi drivers, but you’ll remember we saw off the British military machine with little more than a handful of homemade bombs and stolen rifles.”

“I remember.”

“Above all, *I* cannot afford to forget. Throughout the ages we Cypriots have been betrayed by those who let in the Turks and other invaders through the back door. Now some believe I’m inviting them in through the front, putting out the welcoming mat. The arch deceiver, they call me. It’s my head they want, not that of Mr. Martin.”

“I hadn’t realized things were so difficult for you. I’m sorry,” Urquhart said, and didn’t mean it.

The President crushed more lemon leaves and gazed across his office to where, against the soft pastel walls above the fireplace, hung a large oil portrait of his daughter, an only child born five months after their return to Cyprus. Elpída, he had called her—*Hope*. “So long as we have peace for our children, Francis, little else counts.”

The maudlin fool. Matters appeared to be getting out of control in Cyprus;

Urquhart could not have been more content. “And you believe these bone grinders who oppose the peace are the ones holding my High Commissioner?”

“I do.”

“Then who in God’s name is behind it all?”

Nicolaou sighed wearily. “I wish I knew.”

She was twenty-three, extended in leg and lip with an adventurous, uncomplicated outlook. That’s why she had become an air stewardess, to see something of the world and its charms, and particularly its men. She hadn’t counted on meeting a man like this. Within ten minutes of their encounter in first class he’d offered her a job—better pay, more regular hours, no more anonymous hotel rooms and shabby, sweaty nights with men trying desperately to forget they were over forty and heavily married. At least this one wasn’t married. But she hadn’t expected to be looking down the barrel of a revolver.

Her hand went to her throat in alarm. From six feet away the barrel waved, fell, once, twice, three times, indicating the buttons on her blouse. He nodded as her fingers found them; she was nervous, trembling, had trouble unfastening the first. The others came away more easily.

The barrel flicked to the left, then the right as though brushing her shoulders, and her bra straps fell. The whole garment dropped to the floor to join the blouse. She shivered as a breeze from off the sea, soaked in the scent of jasmine, crept through the open window and across her bare skin. Her nipples tightened, and so did the lines of his mouth.

Remorselessly the barrel continued its march across her body. She stepped out of her skirt and was left standing in only her underwear, her arms crossed around her as though in penitence.

Again, the barrel. She didn’t answer its call this time, hesitating at the final barrier, but the barrel beckoned again, more impatiently, violently. And she did as it commanded, her breasts falling generously forward as she bent to obey. She stood, her feet apart, her legs and all his thoughts leading to but one carefully shaven point.

He stared for a long while; she felt as though she were melting inside. Then

he gave an epic grunt.

“You want the job?”

“Yes, Kyrie.”

“Good. My brother Dimitri says you’re imaginative. Come and prove it. Then we’re going to go and smash the Government.”

Twenty-Nine

Loyalty is for dogs.

Claire's journey had been tiring, its purpose—Jeremy Critter—tiresome. He was one of life's natural critics, the diminutive and fortyish Member of Parliament for South Warbury, who found it impossible even for a moment to hide his ambitions, still less his frustration at not having achieved them. He was a natural focus for media conjecture that he might join the Makepeace rebellion and it was speculation he encouraged since he could never resist having something new to say about himself. To pained inquiries from Downing Street he had replied in his usual blustering manner that his constituency association was applying considerable pressure and he was honor-bound to listen; in their view, he said, the Government of Westminster, of Francis Urquhart, seemed to be all too distant from the mist-filled reaches of South Warbury and lacking in concern. Perhaps if the Prime Minister had made some gesture of recognition for the loyal support that both the constituency and its Member had given over the years, they might have concluded otherwise, but in the circumstances, when loyalty was not repaid...

This was no more than Critter's usual bumptiousness. His constituency association amounted to little more than a superannuated branch of the union of rural seamstresses sprinkled with a few old bowlers who hadn't raised stumps in years; they'd do anything he cajoled them into, including, it seemed, jumping ship. With the desertion of Makepeace, Critter had seen his chance to squeak; Claire had volunteered as rat catcher.

She'd got herself invited as guest speaker to the association's annual general

meeting, a collection of fewer than thirty souls gathered in the back room of a pub. Beyond the partition wall behind her she could hear the ribald commentaries that accompanied a frame of snooker as, beside her, the association chairman rose to address the faithful. A gangling, stooped former colonel, he took a large brass fob watch from the top pocket of his jacket and laid it on the table in front of him as though waiting for the evening artillery barrage to commence.

Business began. Reports on the state of association finances—“a balance of fourteen and threepence. I beg your pardon, ladies, that should be fourteen pounds thirty *pee*...deteriorated...further deteriorated...may have to consider closure of the office and we were all very sad to see Miss Robertson go.” And a row about whether the ladies’ luncheon club should allow in gentlemen members. “At our age, don’t make a lot of difference,” one progressive soul offered. “And since there are no nominations for new holders of office,” the Chairman was continuing, raising his voice above the unsavory language that was beginning to filter through from the snooker table next door, “I’d like to suggest that the present office holders simply continue.”

“Can’t do that,” a voice objected from behind an active pile of knitting.

“And why not, pray?” the Chairman inquired.

“Miss Tweedie, our Vice President,” the knitting continued. “She passed away last week.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Does make it difficult, I suppose...”

On Claire’s other side, Critter beamed at them all like a dutiful son. No wonder he had them in his pocket. Could buy the lot for forty quid a year and a bus outing to Minehead. And this was the hotbed of rebellion that threatened to make national headlines by pulling behind Tom Makepeace? “Not inevitable,” Critter explained to her as the meeting almost came to blows about the projected car boot sale. “But they feel so isolated, unappreciated. If only the Government could find some way of showing its concern for this constituency...”

“Like making you a Minister,” she whispered.

“Are you offering?”

“No.”

His jaw—what there was of it—hardened. “I value what Francis has been

able to do in his many years most highly, of course. Pity he doesn't seem to value me. But this isn't personal, you understand. My association is genuinely disaffected."

"So tell them to stop it," she demanded. "A word from you and they'd get straight back to crocheting tea cozies."

"I shall listen, not instruct," he muttered pompously. "My association is very traditional. Likes to make up its own mind. On principle."

The Chairman was drawing to the end of his remarks. Soon Critter would be on his feet. His body had turned half away from her, its language spoke of defiance, of a man preparing to leap. And he had never been able to resist jumping into a headline.

"Such a pity for you," she whispered.

"What is?"

"Your association and its principles."

"What d'you mean?"

"I was simply wondering, Jerry, how these dear little old ladies will react to the fact that their conscientious Member takes so much work home with him."

"What are you going on about, woman?"

"That new secretary of yours. Taking her home with you, to your apartment in Dolphin Square. Every lunchtime."

"For work. Nothing else." He was staring straight ahead, talking out of the corner of his mouth, unwilling to meet her eyes.

"Of course. It's simply that you men don't understand the problem. You make so little provision for women at Westminster and force us into such overcrowded surroundings that all we have to do while we're queuing to wash our hands is gossip. You'd be amazed at the rumors that get around."

"Like...what?" His teeth were gritted, his complexion draining like a chicken on a production line.

"You know, mostly missed periods and missing Members. Like why you missed Standing Committee last Wednesday. And why a pair of your monogrammed boxer shorts fell out of her handbag while she was searching for her lipstick. We all laughed; she said you'd been in something of a hurry..."

"For God's sake!"

“Don’t worry. I can think of very few circumstances in which I would be tempted to betray the secrets of the ladies’ locker room. Very few. It’s like a confessional.”

He swallowed hard.

“Just as I’m sure, Jerry, you can think of very few circumstances in which you would be tempted to betray our party.”

The Chairman was finished now, was tapping the glass of his watch, while the flock applauded for its Member to rise and speak.

As Claire made the long and lonely drive back to London, she reflected that rarely had she heard such a comprehensive and carefully argued endorsement of the need for party loyalty than the one delivered that night by her colleague, the Honorable and Missing Member for South Warbury.

The ninety-nine square miles of British sovereign territory located within Cyprus and deemed vital to the security of Old Blighty consists of a number of fragments, like a mosaic left incomplete by a bored artisan. Within the two main bases of Dhekelia and Akrotiri lies a host of facilities central to the defense effort, from radar-based intelligence-gathering operations and an airfield capable of accommodating the largest military transport and reconnaissance planes, to a full-sized cricket pitch, a Royal Military Police jail, seven schools, and several pubs. Each is separated from the other, some facilities are surrounded by barbed wire, some are not. In between there are many other facilities, including terraces of neat cubicle houses, fruit farms, ancient ruins, and several Cypriot villages.

There are no signposts or other markers to indicate the frontier between British and Cypriot territories, except for Catseyes. The British seem to have a passion for marking the middle of their roads in this manner, the Cypriots do not. There it begins, and ends.

The aspect of the bases is beautiful, the duty is dull. And security is a nightmare. In the event of civil unrest, the British resort to cordoning off a few of their facilities as best they can, leaving by far the greatest area without guard or protection, and trusting in the traditional moderation and common sense of the Cypriots. Such trust is usually well-founded.

Thus, when confrontation ensued at the gates of the British airfield that lies adjacent to the salt flats of Akrotiri, the proceedings had an inevitable air of unreality. Security at the gates to the airfield, which is otherwise surrounded by a double fence of chain link topped with barbed wire, was provided by two poles, painted red and white, acting as traffic barriers and swung from a central control point, flanked on either side by two small concrete guard posts that were usually unoccupied, with a sign advising that a “Live Armed Guard” (sic) was on duty. Additional defenses were provided by several well-watered rosebushes. In normal circumstances the security would not have slowed, let alone stopped, a speeding rabbit, so on this day the system was augmented by a springy coil of razor wire swung in front of the gate, a tripling of the guard (to six), and the drawing up of an ancient white Land Rover with canvas roof and languid blue lights. Far smoother, less dated Mitsubishi patrol vehicles were available, but this was deemed to be an essentially British occasion.

The confrontation commenced with the arrival shortly after eight in the morning of the entire population of the village of Akrotiri, not a difficult logistical challenge since the village lay only some two hundred yards from the gates of the base. The village economy was dominated by the base, for which it supplied a variety of eating and drinking establishments including a Chinese takeout, a grocery store, and a unisex hairdresser.

“*Elenaki mou*, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I am protesting against British exploitation.”

There was a pause in the interrogation as the questioner, a corporal who was standing guard behind the razor wire, considered the implications of what he had just heard. He was confused. He and Eleni, an attractive doe-eyed girl of nineteen, had spent the previous evening at the Akrotiri Arms pub and she had mentioned nothing of such matters then. In any event, they were engaged to be married as soon as he had finished his tour of duty. He was looking forward to it; he’d already put on five pounds.

“No talking on guard duty!” the Station Warrant Officer snapped, who seemed to have eyes in his arse. “The natives may be hostile.”

Three young boys, one of them Eleni’s younger brother, who had occupied the branches of an olive tree next to the guard hut, roared their defiance, their

faces covered in huge grins and smears of aniseed.

Eleni seemed less impressed. Perhaps she took that from her mother, who stood directly behind her shoulder and who was never impressed. She spoke no English, never smiled but stared. At least, after much investigation, Billy, the corporal, assumed she stared, but it was difficult to be certain since her eyes faced in different directions and made him nervous. Yet in whichever direction, they never seemed to waver. He felt constantly under her scrutiny, wherever he stood. Billy balanced his SA80 automatic nervously in his hands as his beloved addressed the NCO.

“You’ve stabbed us in the back, Sergeant,” Eleni accused.

“It’s Station Warrant Officer, if you don’t mind, miss.”

“Then you have stabbed us in the back, *Station Warrant Officer.*” Her italics had an uncharacteristically sharp edge.

“If I ’ave, it’s been with me checkbook, miss.”

“You sell us to Turks!” The cry came from an aged man seated on top of an equally aged tractor, whose passion far exceeded his command of English. A solitary front tooth gave him a ferocious aspect. Many of the forty or so protesters raised their voices and waved arms in agreement.

The SWO marched slowly along his narrow front line, ten paces, turn and repeat, his boots beating a steady cadence on the tarmac, steadying his troops. “If they give you a hard time, remember, lads,” he growled. “Stick it in. Give it a twist. Then pull it out.”

“Billy doesn’t even get that when I’m being nice to him, Sergeant,” Eleni shouted across to him.

The soldier to Billy’s right snickered while Billy considered throwing himself upon the razor wire. The SWO turned on studded heel to face the protesters. Eleni’s mother stared directly at him, without taking her eye off Billy. She hadn’t got her teeth in, her gums were in constant motion as though still finishing her breakfast.

“Station Warrant Officer,” he insisted once more in a throaty voice. “Let’s have a little proper respect with this riot of yours, miss. Otherwise I might find myself forced to retaliate.”

“How?”

“Me and the lads might have to stop visiting your uncle’s pub, miss. Be a great pity, that.”

But he had lost the initiative once more. Shouts and gesticulations broke out among the Cypriots, their eyes raised skyward. The SWO looked up to see, a few hundred feet above him, the fierce yellow wings of a hang glider. It was a sport much practiced from the cliffs of Kourion a few miles along the coast, and this glider was pushing his luck. Not only was he well into unauthorized territory but he was also, except for his harness, completely naked, his golden-olive body clearly detailed against the outstretched wings.

“Now that is what I call a real man,” Eleni mouthed in a stage whisper. “I wonder if he has trouble steering.”

“That’ll bugger up Billy’s private life,” a guard muttered.

“And bugger up our radar ops, too,” the SWO added. “What the hell will they make of that?”

As the glider made a lower pass the young girls giggled while the older women shook their heads in memory of times past. The atmosphere had deteriorated to good-natured farce as everyone gazed into the sky, except for Eleni’s mother, who still maintained a wary eye on the freely perspiring Billy.

“But you’re still all right for tonight?” Billy ventured hopefully to her daughter.

“Not if I catch that one first,” Eleni announced loudly, her thoughts still floating aloft in the cloudless sky.

The confrontation had been defused, for the moment, but for how long the SWO was not sure.

“What d’you reckon, sir? Dickhead at—what?—two hundred meters? Vertical shot. Into the sun. Want me to give it a try?”

The SWO had suddenly lost his humor. “You might well have to try, lad. Soon you might well have to try.”

Billy’s future mother-in-law munched on.

Thirty

The crowds who greet a Prime Minister on his first day in Downing Street are doing little more than practicing for the day when they will cheer him all the way to the gallows. The public loves a good hanging.

“Damn.”

A brace of sapphire-tipped peacocks echoed the cry. He stood on the terrace of his chateau, set in the heart of the golden hills of Burgundy, and cursed again. The great house, all turrets and echoes of tumbrels, stood overlooking some of the finest vineyards in the world, row upon row of liquid gold. On a distant escarpment stood an old fortified abbey, ancient stone glowing in the melting evening sun; in between lay nothing but the thousand acres of his empire. Early tomorrow morning the first of nearly two hundred friends and business associates, drawn by the prospect of the view and the vintage, would start arriving to pay gentle homage and to savor the restored imperial splendors of his home. An empire built on oil.

But now there was too much oil, a whole drumful of it that had been poured over, across, around, everywhere on the cropped lawn leading down to the carp lake. Vandalism as grotesque as a morning raid on the Bourse.

He shouldn't have fired the gardener. He should've sliced off his balls and any other vital part of him then thrown the rest down one of the wells. And he'd still do it, if ever he laid hands on the little bastard.

“It's appalling,” his wife was complaining at his elbow, “how much damage a little oil spread in the wrong places can do...”

Suddenly his nostrils dilated, sniffing the wind like a fox approaching a

familiar cove. He smelled oil, cloying crude as it spurted like virgin butter, as it would spurt one day from rigs off the coast of Cyprus. It was a deal he had lost. But which hadn't yet been signed.

"Could be worse," he consoled his wife. "Might even get better," he reflected, wondering what vandalism might be inflicted on the peace agreement by a little oil spread across its neatly trimmed edges.

"This is scarcely going to help." Claire thrust a copy of the latest wire report across the desk at Urquhart. He read it quickly.

Industry sources revealing the existence of oil in the waters off Cyprus. The Turkish waters off Cyprus. Exploitation rights expected to go to British companies...

"Excellent," he pronounced, throwing it back across the desk. "More jobs for Britain." He picked up his pen and continued writing.

"But it will infuriate the Greeks."

"Why?" He stared inquisitorially across the tops of his half-moon glasses.

"They're losing out."

"Even if these reports are true, they'll be no worse off tomorrow than they were today."

"Even so, they won't like it. Wounded pride."

"I suppose you're right. They'll probably go right over the top. There's no accounting for the excitability of Cypriots, is there?"

"And a British judge, too. This will make everything more complicated. We've jumped from a row about a few graves to one about several billion barrels of oil. Instead of hundreds of protesters there'll be...thousands. The peace deal. The election. Everything. Suddenly much more complicated."

"As usual, Claire, you display a remarkably agile and perceptive mind behind those inspiring eyes of yours." He went back to his writing.

Sensing the end of his interest—had it ever started?—she reclaimed the sheet of paper and began to leave. "I wonder who leaked it?" she inquired, almost to herself, as she crossed the room.

"I've no idea," he whispered as the door closed behind her. "But it has saved

me the trouble of doing it myself.”

“CYPOS HIT OIL,” the *Sun* screamed.

“Billions of barrels of oil have been found off the tiny Mediterranean island of Cyprus. The discovery is expected to bring a smile to the face of the sun-kissed tourist haunt—and to the British oil companies who are queuing up for exploitation rights...”

By its second edition the reporter had made further inquiries and rewritten the piece under the headline: TURKISH DELIGHT.

The *Independent* took a more cautious line.

“Large deposits of oil are reported by industry sources to have been discovered off the island of Cyprus that could amount to the largest such find anywhere in the Mediterranean...”

“The reported discovery comes at a delicate time in the peace process between the two Cypriot communities who are due to sign a final accord in London soon. The oil deposits are believed to be exclusively within the continental shelf areas reserved by the Watling arbitration tribunal to the Turkish Cypriot sector.

“Last night Greek Cypriot sources in London were demanding to know if Britain, whose deciding vote awarded the disputed area to the Turkish side, knew beforehand of the likely existence of oil.”

The response of the leading daily in Nicosia was far less conditional. In a banner headline across its front page, it announced simply: “BETRAYED!”

They had organized a demonstration outside the Turkish Embassy in Belgrave Square. The call had gone out that morning on London Radio for Cyprus and even at short notice a band of nearly two hundred had gathered, even tried to get inside to deliver a letter of protest, but the entrance to the embassy was guarded by bombproofed security that saw them coming before they'd begun to cross the road. They were orderly; a single armed policeman from the Diplomatic Protection Group turned them back and they spent the morning staring sullenly and shouting sporadic protests from behind security barriers. By the weekend their numbers would have grown tenfold.

Passolides was not among them that morning. As so often in his life he'd plowed a lonely furrow, taking himself not to the house of the hated Turk—what was the point?—but to the gates of Downing Street, where the source of this latest betrayal could be found.

Had not the British betrayed his people more consistently than any other conqueror? Stealing the whole island for almost a century, stealing the bases for even longer. Stealing his brothers. And their graves. Now taking the oil. You knew what to expect from a thieving Turk, they made no pretense at their nature. An absolute, uncomplicated enemy who would spit in your eye as they sliced through your throat. You could trust them to be what they were. But the British! They showered you in hypocrisy, fought with weasel words. Smiled and talked of the rules of cricket as they shafted you and sold your homeland into slavery.

He'd been gripping the barrier by the great iron gates of Downing Street for nearly half an hour when a policeman, wondering at the intensity of the old man's concentration and whitened knuckles, approached him.

"What are you doing, granddad?"

"Minding my own business."

"If you're standing there, it's my business too. What are you doing?"

"Waiting to see your Prime Minister."

"You're in luck. He's just on his way out."

As the Daimler rushed through the gates it slowed before entering the traffic of Whitehall, and Urquhart looked up from his papers to see an old man staring at him from across the barrier. Their eyes met, held each other for no more than a moment, but in that short time the force of those eyes burning ruby in hate had scorched across Urquhart's mind. And dimly, through the blastproof windows, he heard the one word the man's cracked voice hurled at him, and remembered its meaning.

"Prodóte-e-e-es!"

He recollected the first time he had encountered it—how could he forget? Carved into the chest of an eighteen-year-old boy they had dragged from the side of his family in the middle of his sister's marriage service and shot as he cringed against the church wall like a rat in a barn.

Traitor.

Thirty-One

Asking a Greek to talk about democracy is like asking an American to teach table manners.

There were few obvious targets for an anti-British protest in Nicosia. British Leyland no longer existed; British Rail didn't run that far, even intermittently. The British High Commission provided an exceptionally unpalatable opportunity, being stuck by the accident of invasion on a finger of land barely a hundred meters wide that squeezed past the armed watch towers of Nicosia Jail on one side and the still more heavily armed watch towers of the Turkish Cypriot border patrols on the other. The chances of surprise were nil, the chances of success even poorer, the chances of a bullet from one side or the other excellent, so most Nicosian dissidents searched for other options.

The British Council down from the Paphos Gate was scarcely more welcoming. Since the last riot on its doorstep it had been heavily fortified behind steel shutters from which bricks and bottles bounced pointlessly, even when the sentries in the barracks at the end of the street cooperated by turning a blind eye.

So Dimitri, who had responsibility for the organization but who had little concept of the Britishness of institutions such as Marks & Spencer and Barclays Bank, opted for British Airways and its glass-fronted operational headquarters that lay on Archbishop Makarios III Avenue.

The vanguard arrived soon after dusk, transported from the now-permanent camp of protest outside the Presidential Palace aboard a convoy of mopeds, vans, even taxis. Soon they were joined by many others on foot or using their own resources. The Word had spread.

An exceptional degree of discipline was evident in the early proceedings. Banners were handed out, instructions and advice issued. It helped, of course, that the stewards were theological students, many of whom were from the same village as Dimitri and his brother. An extended family. The Firm had been carefully constructed on foundations of rural solidarity and tribal loyalties; it wasn't going to fail its most famous son.

It also helped that the demonstrators far outnumbered the police, who seemed content to stand back and monitor proceedings. Several were smiling.

More demonstrators were arriving, the avenue was blocked. The police contingent began to concentrate its effort on diverting the traffic. One of the stewards chattered into a mobile phone, listened attentively, then nodded. Slowly his hand began to circle around his head, stirring the cauldron. The crowd, peaceful up to that point, began chanting, waving their banners, surging forward like a human oil slick on a flowing tide, lapping around the building and clinging to its plateglass windows. The sound of oil was everywhere.

"British Out! Bones and Bases!" they shouted; not very creative, perhaps, but there is little originality in anti-imperial protest. *"Make War, Not Peace"* was also much in evidence.

The windows, great sheets of glass set between concrete pillars, were pounded—they bent, buckled, bowed, but did not break, not until a sledgehammer had materialized and one by one they were all systematically shattered. Even then, the control was exceptional. They didn't ransack the offices; instead, the steward exchanged his mobile phone for a can of spray paint and covered the walls and display units with slogans.

By the time he had stepped outside again, two barrels of oil had been positioned either side of the shattered doorway; from the lintel above was hanging a spittle-drenched effigy of Nicolaou. A placard around his neck stated simply: *"Turk Lover."*

The shouting reached a crescendo, the pressure of numbers was growing, it would be difficult to control for much longer. It was time. Into each of the barrels was dropped a flare, and out of each began to pour vast quantities of choking black smoke. Oil smoke, which gushed into the night air, smearing the faces of those standing nearby, infesting every corner of the shattered building

and burning itself into the morning's headlines.

As soon as he saw the smoke, the senior police inspector on the scene began issuing his first substantive orders. Lights flashed, sirens moaned, a fire tender began to edge through the crowd. But already the protesters were beginning to melt away into the Nicosian night, mission accomplished, message delivered.

Not a single arrest was made.

Dark spots of hate were breaking out across the Cypriot night.

Three streets away, in the back of his official Mercedes, Theophilos replaced the phone. A good evening's work. Exceptional work. God's work.

Francis Urquhart, when he heard about it, was of the same opinion.

Amid the stormy seas of stratagem devised by man, outcrops of nonsense stick defiantly above the waves. None stuck more defiantly than the case of Woofy.

Woofy—in fact, his full name was Woofer—was a three-year-old King Charles spaniel, the pet *in loco infantis* of Mr. and Mrs. Peregrine Duckin who lived in comfortable retirement in a white stucco villa overlooking Coral Bay, a sand-strewn corner in the south west of the island. Their Greek was fragmentary, as were their relations with the indigenous population, which amounted to little more than a nodding acquaintance with several local traders, but a substantial number of the five thousand or so civilian Britons who lived in Cyprus did so in this area and they did not want for friends.

The Duckins were to need them. For when they returned from a bridge party organized by one of their more distant neighbors they discovered that their cherished villa had, inexplicably and without warning, burned to the ground.

What was worse, there was no trace of the still more cherished Woofer. All night long they searched, crying his name, calling out across the bay, cursing for the fact that the Cypriot fire brigade seemed to have taken an unconscionable time to arrive, then crying some more. But Woofer was nowhere to be found.

Dawn rose as the Duckins stood amid the smoking ruins of their home, imploring all passersby for news of their beloved dog. One of those passersby happened to be a freelance journalist enjoying a few days' break but, wherever intrepid journalists tread, disaster is sure to be found. He sympathized, listened

carefully, took photographs, shared with them their inexplicable loss—although, in light of other anti-British outrages, the loss was perhaps—no, surely—less inexplicable than at first seemed. A story for its time, lacking nothing but raped nuns.

It duly appeared the following morning, splashed across the front page of Britain’s leading tabloid. A forlorn British couple standing amid the ruins of their shattered Cypriot dream. Caught between the growing crossfire.

And beneath a blazing headline.

“CYPOS ATE MY WOOFY.”

The effect of halogen lights spraying across old black brick at night gave the scene a distinctly monochrome cast. A little funereal, perhaps, Urquhart mused, but appropriately melodramatic. He adjusted his tie. Behind him, the Secretary of State for Defense stood starchy to attention. News cameras flashed as the Prime Minister stepped, stern of mouth, to the Downing Street microphones.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have an important announcement to make. Events in Cyprus have taken a further turn for the worse. Not only has our High Commissioner still not been returned, but it is obvious that the Government in Nicosia is unable to guarantee the safety of British assets or personnel. Clearly the situation is being exploited by people of ill intent, and I have a duty to protect British citizens and military personnel. Therefore, with great reluctance and purely as a precautionary measure, I have been forced to place the British bases on a state of alert and restrict Cypriot access to them. British lives and property must be protected, and our troops will have full authority to do precisely that. This is a sensitive matter, and I ask you to treat it with the seriousness it deserves.”

The scrum of reporters in front of him swayed as they pushed in unison, hands thrust forward waving microphones, tape recorders, and assorted electronic tendrils like a harvest of triffids. One scribe who looked as if he had only moments before clambered out of bed was all but bent double over the security barrier in his attempt to get as close as possible. “Prime Minister, what does this all mean?”

“It’s a message to troublemakers. Keep off our patch.”

“Doesn’t this rattle sabers, raise the stakes, though?”

“The stakes have already been raised by others. Those who have kidnapped our High Commissioner. Who attacked British property and placed British lives in peril. I have a duty to respond.”

“To attack?”

“This is an entirely defensive measure.”

“Will the Cypriots see it that way?”

The expression around Urquhart’s mouth grew yet more stiffly grim; he couldn’t betray the ironic smile that played around the paths of his emotions. He knew the Cypriots, their passions—and their polemicists, in whose hands a state of alert would be turned into something akin to a force of invasion. This was going to get much, much worse before it got better. He couldn’t smile, so he simply shrugged.

“Do you have the permission of the Cypriot President for this move?”

“I don’t need it. Our bases in Cyprus are British sovereign territory. I no more need permission to put our troops there on alert than I would to move tanks across Salisbury Plain. I have, of course, informed him.”

“How did he react?”

In agony. With pleading. Said it would inflame the hotheads. Would play into the hands of those who opposed the peace deal, increase the pressure on British bases. Begged to be given a few more days to obtain the release of the High Commissioner. But he’d already had several days...

“He regretted the necessity for this action. As do I. But men of goodwill everywhere will understand and must support this action. My first duty is to protect British interests.”

“Play hell with the island’s tourist trade, Prime Minister.”

“Sadly, yes.” Threatens to knock it on the head.

“Where does this leave the peace deal?”

“That’s for the Cypriots to decide. I cannot help bring peace to Cyprus if they will not bring peace to themselves.”

“And where does this leave the election?”

“On course. This is a move in the national interest, not for party purposes. I

expect the support of all responsible politicians, all sides of the political debate. I don't expect this to become an issue in the election."

No, not an issue, mused Dicky Withers, *the* issue. I'm watching a piece of banditry, the hijacking of the election campaign as Urquhart casts himself in the role of statesman, defender of the national interest, the British way of life, the rules of cricket, warm beer, sunny afternoons, Blackpool beaches, morality, virginity, and any other -inity to which votes might be attached. And Makepeace, he's got Makepeace trussed up as tight as a gutted chicken. As tight, presumably, as is our High Commissioner. Francis, you old bastard.

"And Tom Makepeace?" Withers prompted. "Where does this leave him?"

The smile was demanding to emerge, as much in recognition of Dicky's perceptiveness as in self-congratulation. Makepeace was shafted. Adrift. Nowhere to go except to hell and back. A journey for which he would find few companions.

"Where does it leave Mr. Makepeace? I have no way of knowing. Perhaps you'd better ask him."

Thirty-Two

There is so much history stuffed into Cyprus that it has given them stomachache.

As the first rays of dawn spilled slowly across the salt flats of Akrotiri, a battered Bedford bus coughed its way uncertainly toward the entrance of the base. It sounded very sick. In better days it had carried children from the village to their schools and produce to the local market, but for almost a year had been languishing behind the pizza bar, its rust levels having been pronounced terminal. The arrival of the bus before the entrance to the base was heralded by a noxious belch of oil smoke and a groan in the manner of some disemboweled dragon. Then it slewed, fell and died, blocking the entire entrance. By the time the smoke had cleared and the guard had crept forward to inspect the prehistoric monster, it was empty.

They took more than an hour to move it. Attempts at restarting the engine failed, and it was difficult to get a tow truck hooked to either end. They tried to raise it on jacks but the suspension collapsed and the beast retaliated by rolling onto its side. Eventually they were forced to bring along an earthmover and push it out of the way.

But not before, in an envelope attached to the steering wheel and addressed to Billy, they had found Eleni's ring.

They were outside again, in greater number than ever. What, less than two weeks before, had begun as sporadic demonstrations by handfuls were now constant

and too large to estimate accurately.

They were also intensely personal. Nicolaou was the name—the target—on everyone’s lips. They displayed as much logic, perhaps, as when the mob had come to condemn Christ in the marketplace, but condemn him they did.

The head of presidential security had demanded an audience, interrupting Nicolaou in the first floor living room where he was listening to his daughter, Elpída, play the piano. Beethoven. Something loud and long, to block out the insistent noise coming from beyond the gates.

“We must disperse the protesters, sir. They’re a danger to traffic, to themselves. To you.”

“And how would you propose to accomplish that, Commander?” He was seated, his eyes closed, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose in both concentration and anxiety.

“I’d have to call in troops; there are too many of them for my guard.”

Nicolaou was wide awake now. “I can scarcely believe my ears. You want me to set the army against the people?”

“These *people*—sir—are nothing short of a dangerous mob. They’ve already burned buildings, their numbers are growing, their demonstrations have been playing havoc all over Nicosia. My duty is to preserve peace around the presidential palace.”

“And it is my duty, Commander, to secure the peace throughout our country. That’s what is at stake here, nothing less. I will not permit you to use troops and tear gas against them.”

“But I don’t have enough men to guarantee the security of the grounds or this building. That means you, sir.”

“I have no concern for my own safety.”

“And your family?”

Nicolaou turned toward his daughter, who was still at the piano. She meant everything to him. When he was lonely because his wife was once more absent, Elpída was there as companion. When he grew outraged at his wife’s indulgences, she was there to remind him of what he owed to his marriage. When he was uncertain, she acted as inspiration, raising him above the short-term and trivial to the Cyprus of tomorrow. Elpída’s Cyprus. Balm for his every

wound.

“It is precisely for her that I must say no. I can’t sign a peace treaty with the Turks if there is blood on the streets of Nicosia.”

“Sir!” The commander was pleading now. His voice dropped to prevent Elpída from hearing. “As an old friend. The choice you’re facing is not so much *if* there will be blood, but *whose* blood it will be.”

The President walked over to the window, from where he could see out over the floodlit statue of Makarios and the cypress trees to the impressive panorama beyond. “Panayoti, come here.”

The Commander walked to the President’s side. Nicolaou opened the window.

“What’s out there?”

“A rabble. Baying at your doorstep.”

“But what do you see out there?”

“The lights of the old city.”

“And beyond that, in the darkness, is the other half of our country. Isn’t it time, Panayoti, to bring those two halves back together again? After all these years and so much blood?”

“That’s politics, sir. Your job. My job is security. And I tell you we’ve got to do something about those people out there.”

With the window open the howl of protest had become unrelenting.

“Then I shall talk to them.”

“This is no time for humor.”

“Let a few of them in. I’ll talk to them from the steps.”

“Madness!”

“Perhaps so. But I shall do it nevertheless.”

“At least talk to them from the balcony.”

“The balcony where hangs the British Royal Standard? Peeking out from behind the imperial lion? I think not. No, let it be from the steps.”

“But I can’t guarantee your safety!”

“Then leave that task to God.”

And Panayotis, as he had been trained throughout his career, no matter how unacceptable or unreasonable the command, had obeyed. They had planned on

perhaps two dozen but numbers are impossible to control when thousands are pressing against the gates, and nearer two hundred had crowded their way in by the time the gates were forced shut once more. They gathered on the driveway before the main entrance, guarded by two ornamental cannons, assorted gargoyles, a couple of flower tubs, and a cohort of the palace guard.

Shouts of fury erupted as Nicolaou appeared, waving his hands above his head for calm.

“Cypriots, countrymen. Allow me to be heard. Allow yourselves to hear.”

“Turk lover!” came the cry.

“I love only one thing. Cyprus!”

“Then why give it to the filthy Turks?”

“And the British!”

“No one has suffered more than I from the thought that our country is divided. I weep for those who have lost families. Homes. Everything.”

“And won’t lift a finger to help them.”

Panayotis was growing increasingly nervous. It was already clear that Nicolaou had failed to gain control of the crowd, was entering into a dialogue of the deaf. His logic and sincerity stood no chance against the raw emotions of a mob.

“My friends, remember what split our island. What brought the Turkish Army to our shores. It was when we Greeks fell out among each other. When Makarios stood here on these very steps and they refused to listen to him.” His hands stretched up one of the sandstone columns that stood to either side. “See these holes. Where the bullets struck. When they tried to kill our Archbishop.”

A scattering of neat cylindrical holes and craters had been gouged from the columns, bullet holes, relics of the coup Makarios had ordered to remain, like the royal standard, as part of the heritage. Stigmata in stone. Now Nicolaou’s fingers crept toward them, stretching out, reaching for the mantle of Makarios. The tips of his fingers were almost there when another hole appeared, accompanied by a cloud of dust. Only then did he hear the gunshot.

The effect on the crowd was immediate, as though a starting pistol had been fired. They began to surge forward, pushing against the cordon of guards in front of the steps like dogs at a deer. Nicolaou, bewildered and still only at the early

stages of fear, found himself borne aloft in the arms of Panayotis and hustled through the main door, which was slammed shut behind them. Within seconds from the other side there came a primitive baying and a barrage of blows against the wood. At the same time the gates to the palace grounds that had been holding back the main body of protesters were swept aside as anger turned to rage at the sound of gunfire and thousands came streaming up the long driveway.

“For God’s sake, now will you go?” Panayotis barked.

“Elpída,” pleaded Nicolaou.

But his daughter was already running down the circular staircase from the private quarters, past the antiquities, the stone heads and torsos, a small harvest of the island’s ancient heritage that would soon lie smashed and strewn upon the ground.

Father and daughter tried to embrace, but Panayotis was already pulling them apart and dragging them down the long corridor with its Moorish arches and youthful tapestries that led through the heart of the U-shaped building. Running beside them was the sound of shattering windows, raised voices, wrecking. Then more gunshots.

Panayotis led them to a part of the palace Nicolaou had never visited, at the back of the kitchens. A door. Stone steps. Another door for which Panayotis had a large key. Then they were in a tunnel hacked from the bare rock.

“Makarios Avenue,” Panayotis whispered grimly. “His escape route at the time of the last coup.”

It was cool, dimly lit, at least two hundred meters long, perhaps longer—Nicolaou had lost all sense of proportion in the confined space. His thoughts were befuddled, still worrying about his commander’s words. “The last coup.” Was this, too, a coup?

They emerged through another door at the far side of the swimming pool, beyond the amphitheater where Nicolaou had entertained groups of schoolchildren and where, in a previous time of trouble, the British had played tennis. Then they were in the woods, vast stands of eucalyptus that glowered in the moonlight. Behind them the noise of wreckage was growing ever more relentless.

They crossed the shale and loose rocks of a dried riverbed—Nicolaou lost his

footing and was once more hauled aloft by the ready arms of his commander—and they came upon the chain-link fence that separated the palace grounds from whatever lay beyond. There were no protesters here; they were too busy in the Palace. They heard the sound of a muffled explosion. Panayotis dragged them on.

Another lock on the gate through the fence. Another key. Panayotis seemed well prepared. Then they scrambled up a bank and were standing on an empty road.

“Where to, sir? A British base?” That was where Makarios had fled, to Akrotiri, into the arms of the old enemy and away from the waving fists of his own people, but Nicolaou decided he had already that evening donned too much of the Archbishop’s mantle.

“No. Not to the British. To the mountains.”

Then there were headlights advancing upon them. Panayotis drew a gun.

“Stay in the bushes, sir,” he instructed, and stood in the middle of the road, waving his arms.

The car stopped. No rioters, only an elderly couple driving home after an evening meal. A German couple who spoke neither Greek nor English, but who understood all too well the unmistakable language of Panayotis’s gun.

With a cry of alarm the man put his foot to the floor and sped off into the night. Panayotis shrugged his shoulders in despair. What was he supposed to do, shoot a couple of elderly and unarmed tourists?

“Leave it to me,” Elpída instructed and pushed him aside.

The next car contained an accountant, who stopped and listened with growing incredulity to the pretty girl. He apologized, he was almost out of gas and his mother was expecting him home, but he would be happy to take them as far as he was going. The President of the Republic of Cyprus, his daughter, and the Commander of the Palace Guard thanked him as one and climbed into his battered Renault. They’d argue about distance and destination later.

Nicolaou looked behind him in the direction of his home. An angry orange moon shone down like a celestial torch, brushing the treetops and sprinkling them with fire. The view brought tears to the President’s eyes as they drove away. It was only when he had dried them and was gripping the hand of his

daughter that he realized it wasn't moonlight at all. He was watching the glow as, once again, the palace was being burned to the ground.

Thirty-Three

Honesty is not a policy. It is merely an excuse for moral idleness.

The battered Renault and its increasingly disorientated driver got them as far as a Hertz parking lot. There Panayotis acquired an alternative vehicle. It had no ignition key but the full tank of gas seemed more compelling since the few coins Panayotis kept in his trouser pocket for the cigarette machine proved to be the only money they had between them. Nicolaou found comfort in the knowledge that Panayotis hadn't thought of everything; somehow it made him feel less of a fool.

As soon as they were beyond the city limits of Nicosia on the road to the Troodos, Nicolaou fell into a deep sleep. The tension and—yes, he admitted it—fear had drained the energy from his veins and he was overcome by a most oppressive exhaustion. They had no idea whom they could trust—was this simply a riot or a full-blooded coup attempt? And if a coup, had it succeeded? Such matters could be determined from the Presidential Lodge in the mountains from where, for a few weeks in the height of the summer and if necessary for the next few days, the country could be run.

He did not wake until they were less than ten miles from their destination and the road had begun to wind and curl its way around the mountainsides. They were among thick pine forests, the heavy trunks picked out in the headlights, standing patiently like queues of hovering tax collectors. Not until they had turned off the main road and were approaching the compound along a narrow, steeply descending lane did their spirits begin to rise as the car lights played comfortingly across the familiar picket fence of the driveway.

“Home from home,” Elpída whispered, for whom the mountains had always been a place of adventure and refuge.

“And from here it’s a straight drive down to Akrotiri. If necessary,” Panayotis added, practical as ever.

Nicolaou remained silent, winding down the window and allowing the sweet resin air to flood in and revive his bruised soul. From beneath the wheels came the sound of pinecones being crushed. No flag was flying and there was no one in the guard hut, no welcoming flash of light or howl of dogs, but no one had known they were coming. The familiar green roofs—all corrugated iron, as was the fashion in the Troodos, to deal with the snow—flashed past as though in an old film, and behind the low wall of the vegetable garden the tomato plants were flourishing, waving gentle welcome in the breeze. The car circled slowly around the drive and approached the front of the Lodge. The moon, so angry above the skies of Nicosia, here in the mountains was the color of ripe melon and surrounded by a million shy stars. It gave greeting, dusting the front of the house and lighting their path to the green double door. Everything was as it should be.

“It’s open,” Elpída muttered in relief as she tried the handle.

“Let me, miss,” Panayotis insisted, and led the way into the dark hallway. He was fumbling for the light switch when he noticed a chink of light coming from under one of the doorways leading off the hall. Some fool of a maintenance engineer, leaving doors open and lights...

They entered the sitting room and looked around in numb amazement. It was busy with armed men, all standing, and pointing guns in their direction. Only two people were seated.

In one corner, bound to his chair and with a mouth taped beneath glassy, exhausted eyes, sat the British High Commissioner.

And by the fireplace directly in front of them, casually sucking at a small cigar, his lips twisted in a smile of greeting, sat Theophilos.

“*Kopiáste.*”

“Sit down and join us.”

“Little wonder we couldn’t find your lair.”

Theophilos raised a tumbler of Remy in salutation of the compliment. “You didn’t think to look in your own backyard, let alone your bedroom. Nor will anyone else. I have it all here—communications, security, food. Now, by the hand of God, even you.”

Nicolaou tested the bonds that tied him, like the High Commissioner and the other hostages, to a chair. It was, as he knew it would be, a futile gesture. “How did you know I would come here?”

“He moves in a mysterious way.” His deep voice had a lilt, as though he were singing the Eucharist. Then he laughed, raucously. “And He gave you only three choices.” He counted them off on his fingers. “Death in the ruins of the Palace. A political burial with our British enemies in one of their bases, which is what I would have preferred—your memory would have been kicked like a manged dog from every coffeehouse in the country. Or, thirdly, deliverance unto me here. For that, too, I prepared; obviously you did not see my lookout at the edge of the compound.”

“There are many things I appear not to have seen,” Nicolaou remarked with evident distress. He looked across the room to where his daughter was bound. “Do you intend to harm us?”

“If need be.”

“In God’s name what do you hope to achieve?”

“Why, in God’s name, everything. First, we shall blockade the bases until the British are forced to pack their bags and go home. In the meantime, I fear, you will be too preoccupied to fly to London for the signing ceremony with the Turks. Too many pressing engagements here. Such as signing a decree nationalizing all British assets in Cyprus. Then, I suggest, you are likely to find yourself too exhausted to continue with the strains of office. You will hand over the presidency.”

“To you? Never.”

“No, my dear Nicolaou. I am but a humble cleric. It is possible in time that I might become Archbishop of Cyprus, but I have no wish to hold your office. So much strain and uncertainty, don’t you find?” He settled back in the simple rustic furniture scattered around the small room; Nicolaou noticed that beneath his cassock he was wearing yellow socks. “Anyway, I have too much other...

business, yes, business, to concern myself with.”

“Then who?”

“Why, my brother Dimitri.”

Dimitri smiled, an awful jagged expression.

“Then he’d better get his teeth fixed unless he wants to give the babies nightmares,” Elpída spat.

The smile went out.

“You can’t possibly hope to get away with it,” Nicolaou challenged.

“But of course I shall. I have every advantage. The company of the British High Commissioner. The ear of the Cypriot President...”

“I’ll not lift a finger to help you.”

“And not only his ear,” Theophilos continued unruffled, “but also his arse. And, perhaps more importantly, his daughter’s arse.”

Dimitri had moved across to Elpída with the apparent threat of thumping the insolence out of her, but had changed tactics and instead was stroking her hair, moving his finger slowly down her neck to her shoulder. He was smiling again.

A strangled cry of protest racked through Nicolaou’s throat.

“I think I hold all the aces,” Theophilos said, without a trace of compassion.

Thirty-Four

A manifesto is like a well-cut suit. Its function is to hide a politician's nakedness.

Every step of his arrival had been greeted with a loud cry of “Huzzah!” from his troops. He had paraded before them, stiffening sinews, summoning up the blood. He could all but hear the impatient stamp of horse and the whisper of swords settling into well-oiled scabbards. An army ready to do battle.

The business was done, the Electoral Reform Bill passed, the sun setting on another Parliament. On the morrow they marched. All lungs were filled with courage, all nostrils with the scent of death—of others hopefully, perhaps of their own.

Urquhart's troops took their farewells, hearts gladdened by the propitious omens. Every hour seemed to bring news of further polls and press barons marching to their support, and already several of the enemy's generals had made it known they would be heading not to the sound of battle but only to the Chiltern Hills and, if favor shone upon them, to the House of Lords. As for the hapless Clarence, Leader of the Forces of Opposition, the soothsayers were already gathering outside his tent, their speculations vivid as to whether he would fall on his sword or have to be hacked. If, indeed, he managed to survive the battle. Three weeks on Thursday.

And of Makepeace there had been no sound, and scarcely sight. A general without troops.

Time to let slip the dogs of war.

She began to shiver and yelp, a noise like a beaten dog, her cries filling the room and tumbling through the open window, but still he did not stop.

Makepeace had called her, said he needed her, and she had jumped. And so had he, as soon as she came through the door and dropped her bag, but it was not an exercise of adventure, more in the manner of a savage reprisal and experimentation in pain. When it was over, he buried his head in the pillow, ashamed of her silent tears.

“You’ve never been like that before,” she mourned. She thought she could taste blood in her mouth.

When eventually his face rose from the pillow, his eyes were also rimmed red. “I don’t expect you to forgive me. I’ve never done anything like that before. I feel such a bloody fool. Sorry.”

“You ought to be.”

For a while she plotted retribution, thought she might hit him, take a bread knife and split him in two, but their relationship was more than sex, more even than love. Somehow she sensed that he was the victim. Instead of rushing for the kitchen she stared at the confusion in his eyes. “Rough day?”

“The bloodiest. Ever. Like I want to destroy the last thing that’s important to me. Before, like everything else I cherish, it turns and destroys me.”

She raised herself on an elbow, ready to listen. It was the moment to reach for a cigarette.

“It was the final Question Time. I arrived early but the bench was already crowded. They’d deliberately squeezed up to leave no room for me. So I shoved myself in, right at the end, all elbows and shoulders and nudging. Like a prep school bus trip. Then Marjory appeared—you know, the one who looks like a moulting orange squirrel and throws up barricades before breakfast? She just stood there, waiting to get past. So I...moved. Got up to let her past. Then they simply pushed again. Pushed me right out. They were all laughing, mocking me.” He cringed with the humiliation—“No room for me on either side of the House. I had to sit on the bloody floor.”

Slowly she began to gurgle with mirth.

“You too?” His eyes flared in accusation but already the truth was beginning

to dawn. "It was so bloody childish." An expression of self-ridicule trickled from between reluctant lips. "And so very effective." He had the grace to look embarrassed.

Her lips brushed at the creases.

"But there was more. The frustration of knowing there was nothing I could do or say. Urquhart stood there accepting the plaudits of his acolytes and the rest of us were left like a crowd at a coronation."

"Didn't you try to say anything about Cyprus?"

"And give him the chance to play his Churchill impersonations? Didn't you hear what he said in his speech last night? 'Wherever an Englishman stands, there we shall stand also. Wherever an Englishman falls, there we shall be to raise him up...'" His fingers began to twist at the loose ends of her hair. "I'm facing the most important battle of my life and I don't have a single ally. Except for you. Even Annita can't look me in the eye."

The rage was gone; the brutal man had become no more than a little boy lost.

"There were so many who promised to walk with me. Now not one of them seems able to find their feet. All I have is the hope that I might be able to hold on to my own seat. Otherwise..." He deflated into his pillow.

"There are plenty of people who will walk with you, ordinary people outside of Westminster. You're not alone."

"Truly?"

"You know it's true."

"But I've no time. No party. No friends. No issue anymore. Urquhart's like some malevolent magician, he's made them all vanish."

"Go over Urquhart's head. Stand up for fair play. Give people an excuse to march with you."

"Without a political machine it'd be a damn long march."

"That's a great idea."

"What is?"

"A Long March. Instead of burying yourself in your constituency, take your cause to the people in the country. Walk with them. Talk with them. Show the world your strength."

He sat up. "What would be the point?"

“It’s a means of showing how much support you have. A way to become a figure of real power and authority after the election, even if you don’t yet have a party and a hundred parliamentary seats. Be a voice for all those who feel disillusioned and left out of the present system. A one-man revolution.”

He curled up his legs, placing his chin on his knees while he considered. “Great media possibilities. A march from—where, Manchester to London via Birmingham?—the country’s three greatest cities with speaking stops and interviews on the way.”

“Surrounded by supporters, real people, not ancient party hacks. Something fresh, a total contrast to all the other campaigns.”

“Best way of beating the Government machine in my own constituency, by showing national support.” He was beginning to bounce on the mattress, inflated by enthusiasm, when suddenly the air began to escape.

“Do we have time? It would need a big start. And would need to grow, momentum to keep it going.”

“I’ll provide the start. Give me three days and I’ll deliver two thousand Greek Cypriots anywhere in the country, with posters in every high street and organizational support in every town. After that it’s up to you and a lot of luck.”

“If it fails, peters out, my political career will be ruined.”

“If you don’t try it, you’re ruined anyway. What have you got to lose?”

“Nothing, I suppose. Apart from you.”

She pulled him toward her. “Come and show me how it’s done properly. Before we go out and do it to Francis Urquhart.”

“If I’m to do all this walking, hadn’t I better preserve my strength...?”

But already his protests were too late.

“Come, Corder, it’s a warm day. Into the garden.”

Superintendent Corder of the Special Branch followed his Prime Minister through the Cabinet Room and down into the walled garden. Urquhart indicated a bench beneath the shade of a rowan tree and they sat down together. Tea was ordered.

The privilege of such intimacy was not lightly bestowed, but Corder had

earned the trust over many years of loyalty and unquestioning service. He was unmarried, had never displayed anything other than a mechanical sense of humor, a policeman with a university education but few apparent interests apart from his work of heading Urquhart's personal security team, passing up promotion in order to remain in that task. He was an extraordinarily self-contained individual whose first name was known to very few. Mortima, who had tried to interest him in opera, occasionally speculated that the Urquharts were his only friends. But they were of different worlds. Once, while on a pheasant shoot in Northamptonshire, Urquhart had winged a bird that had crashed from the sky to lie fluttering pathetically in front of them. Before anyone could move, Corder had drawn his revolver and finished the job, the 9 mm bullet at such close range spreading pieces of giblet for several feet in every direction. As Urquhart related later to his wife, not very sporting but damned effective.

Corder had a small red file in his hand, which he opened in his lap.

"Probably not significant, but I'm not paid to take risks, sir." He spoke in a series of assaults, short, rapid bursts, rather like machine gun fire. "Over the last few days the local Greek Cypriot radio station in London has been spouting like a volcano, throwing all sorts of criticism in your direction. Getting really carried away. But the worst has come from this man." He handed across the file. "Evangelhos Passolides. About your age. Appears to own some sort of eating house in north London. We don't know much about him, apart from the fact that he appears to have connections with Mr. Makepeace. And that he's said on live radio—the transcript's at the back of the file"—in a monotone Corder began quoting from memory—"that you deserve to have the skin ripped from your lying bones, various material parts of your anatomy thrown to dogs, and the rest of you buried in a deep grave and forgotten about in the same manner he suggests you've forgotten about his brothers. He's the gentleman who..."

"Yes, Corder, I know who this gentleman is," Urquhart whispered, staring at the photograph in the file. "And I haven't forgotten his brothers."

His mouth had run dry and he longed for the tea at his side, but he knew his hand would shake and betray him, so long as those eyes of long-festered malevolence were staring up at him. Abruptly he closed the file. So now he knew the name of the brother. Had seen him, practically on his doorstep, had felt

his hate, which refused to die. It was as though ghosts from all those years ago had chased him around the world.

“Probably a harmless old crank,” Corder was saying, forgetting the age similarity with Urquhart, “but he has threatened you, and what with you being out and about on the campaign trail we can’t afford to take chances. What would you like me to do with him? Warn him off? Lock him away for a bit? Or forget about him? As it’s election time and this is all very personal, I thought this one should be your call. Even parking tickets can get political at a time like this.”

“Thank you, Corder,” Urquhart responded softly. A gentle breeze riffled through the honeysuckle and ran across the lawn, glancing off Urquhart’s brow. He could feel prickles of sweat.

“Trouble is, if we do nothing it could simply get worse. His threats. The bilge on the radio. Do you want me to have him shut up?”

There were other voices, too, inside Urquhart’s head, whispering, blowing at the mists of doubt, helping him to see more clearly and to decide.

“No, Corder, not the man, don’t touch him. No martyrs. But the station...”

“London Radio for Cyprus.”

“It must surely have broken all sorts of codes. Race Relations Act, election law, any number of broadcasting regulations.”

“I’ll bet it’s probably got illegal substances hidden on the premises, too. Could almost guarantee it.”

“Yes, I suspect you could. Let’s pull the plug on them, revoke their broadcasting license. Silence their foul mouths. Then there would be no need to run the risk of turning Passolides into an object of public sympathy. What do you think?”

“Just tell me when you want their lights to go out, and it’s done.”

“Excellent. Now, Corder, tell me about the old man’s links with Mr. Makepeace...”

“And it turns out he’s been rogering the daughter.”

Tom hadn’t wasted much time, Claire mused. Rebounding like a badly sliced golf ball.

“The thing that surprises me,” Urquhart was saying, “is that you’d heard nothing about it. From the driver. Apparently they’ve been going at it like Caribbean cats in an alley.”

Surprised her, too. The driver must have known, told Joh. Ah, but there it was. Joh hadn’t told her. Wouldn’t have told her. All too close to home, perhaps...

“We need to know more. Does he dress up as Robin Hood? Leap from piles of *Hansard*? Nuggets like that are more precious than pieces of the cross,” Urquhart continued, “in encouraging those lame mules in the press to rise up as one beast.”

All this prying, probing for weaknesses. Not the best way, she was beginning to realize. Not Joh’s way. He’d not been the first of the Carlsens she had known. Claire and his son, Benny, had been contemporaries at university, and had been considerably more. Their affair had begun at the start of the Trinity term in a punt moored beneath a conspiring willow on one of the headwaters of the Cherwell and had continued throughout a glorious summer of hedonism spent among the sand dimes and melon patches of Zakynthos, living in a state of self-centered lust. One evening they’d gone to watch the turtles clamber up the beach to their nesting sites; they’d taken a bottle and already had more than enough to drink. They’d met another, older man, on his own. Benny had suggested they share the drink and, later, had suggested they share her, too. And why not? Benny would’ve jumped at a similar chance. She’d obliged, on the warm sands of turtle beach, and after that it had never been the same between her and Benny. Up to that point they’d tried to share all their sexual experiences and appetites, but this one she hadn’t afterward wanted to share. It had been a mistake, an own goal, something that made her realize she might have the body of a woman but yet lacked judgment in its use. And judgment about Benny. She didn’t want to talk about it. So he’d grown jealous, obsessive, tormented by the memory of her writhing pleasurably in the moonlight, and they had bickered all the way back to their separate and final years of study.

Then, a lifetime later, she had met Joh. She hadn’t wanted to fall in love with him and had tried hard to prevent it but it had happened. And, when she had met Benny again after all those years and Joh had read the tormented expressions on

their faces, he had known. He blamed no one and had understood when Benny decided to go and run the Stockholm office and rarely visited. He had never asked.

How different Joh was from Francis Urquhart. Urquhart always searched for weaknesses to exploit, private pieces that would wither a man's reputation to the roots when exposed to the sun. For him, every man of stature was a threat to be cut down to the stump. She began to realize that for Urquhart there were no mountains, no glorious escarpments and swooping valleys, only a flat and desolate landscape upon which he alone cast a shadow.

She'd learned a valuable lesson today. She found Francis Urquhart hugely attractive. But she didn't very much like him.

Thirty-Five

There is no democracy in Heaven. I think God has a point.

They'd discovered you couldn't organize a huge march in three days, but in five they had worked wonders. The novelty of the idea in a campaign that threatened to be squeezed of initiative by the party machines attracted several showy pieces in the press and on television, and fifty thousand leaflets were printed, their hurried and unambitious style carrying an appealing touch of sincerity. A small alternative advertising agency developed a logo for T-shirts emblazoned with the message "*FU Too.*" He sighed when he saw it, but discouraged no one—if the event were small enough for him to control, he would already have failed. Only the route was firmly within his grasp—authorities permitting. The line of march was to begin in Albert Square beside the Town Hall in Manchester and finish in Trafalgar Square, something over two hundred miles in fourteen days with the bits in between being worked on almost as they marched. But march they did.

There were considerably fewer than two thousand on that first Sunday morning and their politics were distinctly dappled—the great majority were Cypriots with their families but there were also environmentalists, militant vegetarians, a smattering from the antihunting lobby who came to present a petition and left, a woman who had been at university with Makepeace and now ran a free-love-and-alfalfa commune somewhere in Cumbria, and three candidates from the Bobby Charlton for President Party. There were also enough journalists and television cameras to make it worthwhile. They came to look, to crowd, to write feature pieces dipped in condescension and cant. "*Making War with Makepeace,*" the *Telegraph* wrote opposite a photograph of three members

of the Manchester Akropolis weight-lifting team persuading the candidate of the Sunshine Brotherhood to put his clothes back on. Others wrote of chaotic coalitions, of Makepeace and his coat of many colors. But they wrote. And others read. It gave Makepeace a chance.

The Battle Bus, as it was known, was a specially designed coach armored with Kevlar and mortarproof compartments that had been constructed as Urquhart's primary means of road transport for the campaign. Chauffeur-driven Daimlers were deemed too remote and untouchable for the ordinary voter—although had any ordinary voter managed to penetrate the cordon of security thrown around the Battle Bus at every stop and touched anything apart from the windscreen wiper, they would have activated an alarm system delivering almost as many Special Branch officers as decibels. In motion now, sliding through the night air on its way back to London, there was nothing to disturb the Prime Minister's peace but the whisper of air conditioning and the quiet murmurings from the front compartment of aides conducting a postmortem on the day's campaigning.

The campaign rally had been a success—no hint of hecklers getting into the hall, a good speech and, Urquhart had to admit, an even better video, although Mortima had been going on about resetting the music track. The evening had rather made up for the afternoon, an industrial visit to a factory that made agricultural equipment that included cattle prods. Some reptile from the press pond had discovered that the biggest single order for the electronic prods came not from an agricultural concern but from the National Police Headquarters in Zaire. Testicle ticklers. Urquhart had decided he'd test one on the cretin who arranged the visit.

But that had been the Six O'Clock News and now the main evening news pictures and the morning headlines would carry more sensible coverage. Not a bad day's work, he reflected as he rested, eyes closed, in the Tank Turret—the bus's fortified central compartment.

There was a tugging at his sleeve. "Sorry to disturb you, Prime Minister, there's a call from Downing Street. You'll need the scrambler."

A sense of anticipation rose through tired limbs as he picked up the phone. It

was his private secretary.

“Prime Minister, shall we scramble?”

Urquhart pushed the red button. During the last campaign they’d discovered a car shadowing the route of the bus with sophisticated monitoring equipment, hoping to pick up the chatter of the mobile phones and fax machines. He’d been disappointed to discover that the eavesdroppers were from neither the Opposition nor the IRA, either of which would have doubled his majority, but simply freelancers from a regional press bureau. They’d pleaded guilty to some minor telegraphy offense and been fined £100, making several thousand by selling details of their enterprise to the *Mirror*. He held a sneaking admiration for their initiative, but it had left his civil servants as reluctant to break news as pass wind. To bother him on the campaign trail betokened a matter of some importance.

He listened attentively for several minutes, saying little until the call had finished and he had switched off the phone.

“Trouble?” Mortima inquired from her seat on the other side of the bus where she had been signing letters.

“For someone.”

“Who?”

“That remains to be seen.” His eyes flashed and he drew back from his thoughts. “There has been an announcement from Cyprus. It appears that our High Commissioner and their President Nicolaou are both alive, well, and being held hostage in the mountains.”

“By whom?”

He laughed, genuinely amused. “By a bloody bishop.”

“You’ve got to get them out.”

Urquhart turned to examine Mortima, who shared none of his humor.

“It will be all right, Mortima.”

“No it won’t,” she replied. Her tone had edges of razor. “Not necessarily.”

In the subdued night lighting of the bus he could sense rather than see her distress; he moved to sit beside her.

“Francis, you may never forgive me...” She was chewing on the soft flesh in her cheek.

“I’ve never had anything to forgive you for,” he replied, taking her hand. “Tell me what’s worrying you.”

“It’s the Urquhart Library and the Endowment. I’ve been making plans...”

He nodded.

“Making arrangements for the funding.”

“I’m delighted.”

“Francis, I did a deal with President Nures. If I could help him achieve a satisfactory arbitration decision for the Turkish side, he would ensure a consultancy payment made over to the Library fund.”

“Do we have a fund?”

“In Zurich.”

“And did you—help achieve a satisfactory decision?”

“I don’t know. I had a talk with Watling but I’ve no idea if it helped. The point is, neither does Nures. I told him I’d fixed it and he’s delighted.”

“How delighted?”

“Ten million dollars.”

“A drop in an ocean of oil.”

“These arrangements are normal business practice in that part of the world...”

“A finder’s fee.”

“...and I have a letter signed by him to confirm the arrangement. He also has one from me. One letter each, guaranteeing our good faith. No copies. Just him and me. No one else knows.”

Urquhart considered all he had been told, his fingers steepled as though in communion with a higher authority. He seemed to find some answer and turned slowly to his wife.

“So what is the problem?”

“I also did a deal with the wife of President Nicolaou.”

He shook his head in confusion.

“She approached me at a meeting of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Wives—we’ve always got on well over the years at those meetings. She’d just come from Paris—she has good contacts there, perhaps a lover, I’m not sure. Anyway, she’d heard reports of the oil, very specific reports, said how important it was to her poor country. And to some immensely rich oil concerns in Paris.

How grateful both would be for any help...So, we did a deal. I would try to help, no guarantees. Payment only on result. Nothing if the Greeks lost the waters, nothing if they found no oil. On two conditions. That all dealings would be conducted through her, so I would never have to meet anyone else and my name wouldn't be revealed to the people in Paris."

"Very sensible. And the second condition?"

"Four million dollars."

"She must have been deeply disappointed at losing out on the decision."

"We cried on each other's shoulder."

"Does her husband know?"

"No. He's an unworldly academic..."

"He's a Greek politician."

"He didn't know, I'm sure. It would have raised too many questions about her—how can I put it?—friends in Paris."

"Then what is worrying you so?"

"Another letter. From me to her. Which apparently she left in a safe in the Presidential Palace. Now she doesn't know who's got it, even if it still exists."

His words were slow and solemn. "That is a considerable pity." The implications were all too apparent.

She fell silent for a moment, eyes downcast. "I've been trying to find the right moment to tell you. Do you hate me?"

He looked at her for a long time until, in the shadows of the night, her eyes came up to meet his once more.

"Mortima, all you have ever done you have done for me. As far as I have ever climbed, you have been at my side. All we have ever achieved has been achieved together. I could not feel anything for you that I do not feel for myself. I love you."

Her eyes washed with gratitude but there was still within them a cold glint of fear. "But, Francis, the letter may fall into the wrong hands. It would destroy me. And with it, you."

"If it fell into the wrong hands."

"Do you realize what must be done? We have to make sure the letter is safe. Grab back the President. Send in the troops. Take on the Cypriot mob. Use any

means and any force necessary.”

“But haven’t you realized, Mortima? That is precisely what I have planned to do all along.”

They were prepared for the assault. Somehow they’d figured it out—perhaps it was the unexpected request for all recent program tapes, or an unwise word on the telephone from one of the officials at the Radio Authority in Holborn. For when three police vans and an RA van drew up outside 18 Bush Way, the doors were blockaded and the airwaves drenched in emotional outpourings that would have done justice to the Hungarian Uprising. Not from Franco, of course. At the first hint of trouble he’d legged it, suggesting that to get caught up in a hassle with officialdom might interfere with his Open University course. They could have used Franco, shoved him in the metal cabinet jammed up against the front door to give it more dead weight.

Resistance was never likely to be more than token; there were too many windows, too many hands on too many sledgehammers for them to hold out long. London Radio for Cyprus went off the air as a policeman kicked out the lock of the studio door and with a polite “Excuse me, sir,” reached across and flicked off the power supply. Simultaneously he also managed to kneel on the producer’s fingers, although whether by accident or design was never established.

But not before the excited Cypriot had succeeded in squeezing out one final phrase of defiance. The EOKA cry of resistance.

“Elefthería i Thánatos!”

When Passolides returned that afternoon from purchasing fresh crab and vegetables at the market, he found the plateglass frontage to his restaurant smashed to pieces and the curtain of seclusion ripped into shreds. A neighbor told him that a car had drawn up, a man climbed out with a sledgehammer and without any evident sense of haste had calmly shattered the window with three blows.

Passolides hadn't called the police, he didn't trust them, but they arrived anyway, a man in plain clothes with an indecipherable name flashing a warrant card.

"Not a lot we can do, sir," he'd explained. "Trouble is, outspoken gentlemen like you make yourselves targets at a time like this. Lot of anti-Cypriot feeling around in some quarters, what with the High Commissioner gone missing. Wouldn't be surprised if this happened again."

He'd closed his notebook, dragging back the remnants of curtain to peer inside.

"By the way, sir, I'll tell the sales tax people you're ready for inspection, shall I?"

The French Foreign Minister sat studying papers before the start of the meeting in Brussels. It was more than the routine gathering of the Council of Foreign Ministers; indeed it had an element of drama. The British would be practicing a little crawling today, and it would force that appalling man Bollingbroke to adopt a position of vulnerability that the Frenchman was looking forward to exploiting. He'd taken enough from the Englishman in recent weeks; he relished the opportunity to show that handing out punishment was not an exclusive Anglo-Saxon prerogative.

His reverie was broken by the clamping of a large hand on his shoulder.

"Allo, Allen."

Damn him. Bollingbroke always Anglicized the name, refusing to pronounce it properly.

"Looking forward to a fine meeting today, Allen. You know, getting your support on this Cyprus matter."

"It's a complicated problem. I feel it would be inadvisable to rush..." But already the Englishman was talking through him. It was like watching a bulldozer trying to cut grass.

"It could get rough, you know. Might have to send in the troops. But I've just thought, Allen. What you ought to do. Offer us some of your own troops, a sort of international gesture. After all, we're trying to sort out an international

problem. Restoring order and democracy in Cyprus. We'd take care of 'em, make sure none of 'em got hurt."

"They can certainly take care of themselves," the Frenchman responded, ruffling with pride. "But are you suggesting that we give you French troops to help sort out this mess you English have got yourselves into?"

"That's right."

"Impossible!"

"You surprise me," Bollingbroke responded, astonishment wrinkled across his face. "I'd have thought you'd jump at it. Why, give you Frenchies a chance to be on the winning side for a change."

Another hand came down on the Frenchman's shoulder, a playful tap he suspected was intended to break his collarbone. His neck turned the color of the finest Burgundy as he threw aside the folder containing his briefing notes. He knew how to handle this meeting.

The French representative was adamant and intractable. He would not be moved and, since most of the other partners had little desire to be moved, even the traditional compromise of fudge was lost. Every request by the British Government for support was turned down. Flat. *Non!* No token troops, no selective sanctions, not even words of encouragement or understanding. Europe turned its back on Bollingbroke. Throughout the long meeting he argued, cajoled, insisted, threatened, suggested all sorts of dire repercussions, but to no avail. And when the vote was taken and he stuck out like a stick of Lancashire rhubarb, he simply smiled.

They've no idea, he mused to himself. Middle of an election campaign and Europe says No. Deserts us. With British lives at stake. It'll be the Dunkirk spirit all over again. They'll be running up Union Jacks on every council estate in the country and saying prayers in chapel in praise of Arthur Bollingbroke. And Francis Urquhart, of course. Just as FU had said they would.

Bloody marvelous.

Thirty-Six

If you want a camel to move you shove a stick up its arse, and the bigger the stick, the quicker he'll obey. I put a lot of stick about.

It was Thursday. Exactly two weeks to go before the election.

“I am concerned, Prime Minister, that we should not rush into things. There are lives at stake and, to be frank, we’ve never prepared for a contingency of this sort. Invading Cyprus, if you will.”

“Don’t worry, General, I’ve thought of that for you.”

The Deputy Chief of Defense Staff (Commitments), Lieutenant General Sir Quentin Youngblood, cleared his throat. He wasn’t used to having his military judgment either questioned or improved. “But with the greatest respect, Prime Minister, we’ve found no one who can brief us on the layout. We simply don’t know what this Presidential Lodge looks like and what sort of target it will be.”

“Look no further, General. I visited the Lodge several times when I was serving in Cyprus. It used to be the summer home of the British Governor. It won’t have changed much; the Cypriots are sticklers for tradition. Too idle for change.”

“Even so, there are so many political complications. I must ask for a little more time for preparation.” He looked around the other members of the War Cabinet seeking support. The Defense Secretary was shuffling his briefing papers, about to join in.

“No!” Urquhart’s hand banged down on the Cabinet table. “You’re asking to give the bloody Bishop more time. Time in which he will strengthen his position and raise the costs for us all...”

Let alone increase the chances of Mortima's letter falling into the wrong hands.

"But there are logistical problems, too. We can't afford to rush in blind," Youngblood protested.

Urquhart looked around the table at COBRA, the Cabinet subcommittee gathered together to handle "Operation Defrock," as Urquhart had called it. Apart from Youngblood there sat Bollingbroke as Foreign Secretary, the Defense Secretary, the Attorney General (to pronounce on legal requirements), and the Party Chairman to help with presentation and the selling of a great victory. The defense chiefs had muttered objections to the inclusion of the Party Chairman, afraid that it would make the matter seem all too party political a fortnight before polling day. How right they were.

Booza-Pitt had asked to be included, practically begged. For however long it lasted this exercise was going to be at the top of the news and he wanted to be there with it. He'd left a pleading message with Urquhart's private office, insisting that as head of one of the three great departments of state his input and inclusion were vital. But it was a busy day; Urquhart hadn't even bothered to reply. "Life is destined to be so full of disappointments for the boy," he'd ventured to his private secretary. But at least Booza-Pitt wasn't a man of faint heart, unlike some. Urquhart stared directly at the General.

"These logistical problems. What form do they take?"

Youngblood drew breath. "Since the rather lurid reports were published of the Foreign Secretary's discussions in Europe"—Youngblood cast a reproachful look across the table, determined that blame should be shifted onto political shoulders—"elements of the Cypriot community have treated our preparations as tantamount to a declaration of war. My local commander in Cyprus tells me of a considerable increase in public hostility. It has made any initiative we might take considerably more complicated."

"And will grow more complicated the longer we leave it."

"But at this stage there are too many imponderables. I cannot guarantee success."

"You cannot guarantee that the British Army can whip a bloody bishop?" Urquhart could scarcely contain his derision.

“Success in my opinion is achieving our objectives without unnecessary loss of life.”

“And it is delay that threatens disaster. Timing, timing, timing, General. For God’s sake, the Presidential Lodge is barely twenty miles along good roads from our base at Akrotiri. We could be there before your tea’s had time to grow cold.”

“But...”

“Are there armed men waiting at the gates of Akrotiri to intercept our convoy? Is that what you are afraid of?”

“There is a blockade...”

“No, General. No more excuses. The time has come.” Without taking his eyes off the military man, Urquhart had reached for the red phone that sat in front of him on the Cabinet table and raised it to his ear.

“Give me Air Marshal Rae.”

“Prime Minister!” Youngblood protested in puce. “The chain of military command and communication goes through me. We cannot have politicians interfering in a military operation and...”

“General, you’ve already insisted that this is a political operation as well as a military one. Are you trying to deny the Prime Minister the right to discuss matters with the local commander?”

Youngblood stared back defiantly but held silence, uncertain of his ground. Air Vice-Marshal Rae was not only the Commander, British Forces Cyprus, but had a further role as the Administrator of the Sovereign Base Areas, effectively the political governor of the British territories. Two hats. But which was he wearing at this moment...? While Youngblood pondered several centuries of constitutional etiquette and precedent, the communications chain of command that ran through operational headquarters at Northwood and onward via satellite above the Sahara had worked without flaw; within seconds Urquhart was linked with the Commander/Administrator in Episkopi at the heart of the Akrotiri base.

“Air Marshal Rae, this is the Prime Minister. I’m talking from the Cabinet Room. I understand your base is under some form of blockade.”

He paused while he listened.

“I see. There are two hundred women at the gates blockading it with prams and babies’ strollers.” The glance he shot at Youngblood was like a viper’s

tongue. “In your opinion, would breaking through that blockade of prams constitute a threat to the lives of British servicemen?”

A pause.

“I thought not. That being the case, Air Marshal, my orders to you are to cordon off the Presidential Lodge. Make sure that the Bishop and the hostages cannot get out, and no one else can get in. I want it sealed tight. That is to be done immediately. You are then to wait for further instructions. Is that clear?”

Urquhart turned his attention to those in the Cabinet Room. “Gentlemen, are we in agreement?”

All eyes were turned to Youngblood. Now that the orders had been issued, to dispute them would be professional suicide. He would have no choice but to resign. And, as Urquhart knew, he was not a rash man, likely to jump to precipitate action. The General found something of consuming interest to study among the papers in front of him.

The news cameraman knew the moment was at hand from the increased level of noise, of shouted commands, of stamping feet and revving engines that had been coming from behind the wire and outbuildings at Episkopi all through the night. He could sense rather than see a change in the activity around the gates, a quickening of pace behind the rolls of razor wire, a sharpness in the reflex, like a lumbering sumo wrestler about to hurl himself at his opponent. The women sensed the change, too, calling to their children, hugging them more closely than ever, reassuring each other even while their eyes spoke of anxiety and danger. Keep together, they whispered. Success through solidarity. And they had chained and tied the collection of prams and strollers together such that it would take an hour to untangle them all.

But “Stinger” Rae did not have an hour.

The first sign of movement came soon after dawn from two olive-painted vehicles that drove up rapidly until a squeal of brakes brought them to a halt only inches from the gates. Several of the women at the front of the demonstration stood in order to gain a clearer view; they were the first to be hit and sent sprawling by the powerful water jets of the fire tenders. The vehicles

were not specifically built for riot control, the nozzles of their hoses not set for maximum force, but nevertheless the impact of these “gentle persuaders,” as Rae’s press officer would later term them, was devastating. Within less than a minute the demonstration in front of the gates had been washed away in a flood of children’s screams. Even as they sobbed in the rushing gutters and on the grass verges around the gateway, teams of servicemen ran into action. The first removed the razor wire, dragging it roughly to one side, another team of medics fanned out among the women and their infants to minister to the minor injuries, abrasions, and bruises that had been inflicted and the vapors thereby caused. Hot coffee and milk were already at hand. A third team of military policewomen scoured through the overturned and waterlogged baby vehicles to ensure that they were all empty. One sleeping infant was lifted from a stroller and handed to his dazed mother sitting on the grass verge. Then the all clear was pronounced.

With a grumble of diesel engines, a long snake of vehicles came into view, headed by a phalanx of four-ton trucks. They hit the jumble of baby carriages at a good thirty, and left them crushed flat beneath the tires. They were followed by ambulances, Land Rovers, a signals truck, and more four-tonners, carving through the barricade like a sleigh through fresh snow. They left behind them the tears of children and the sight of sobbing women picking over the wreckage, just in case. They also left behind them a delighted news cameraman.

They took the main road into the hills, past the dam, until their progress was slowed by the serpentlike curving of the black tar as it wound its way through the pine forests. The air was noticeably cooler; the drivers could smell the pine resin even inside their cabs as they crashed their way down through the gears. They encountered no opposition. Fifty-three men in all, led by a Lieutenant Colonel Rufus St. Aubyn, which included the assault force, four specialist signals operators, a squad of diversionary troops, and medics. Just in case.

In two hours they were there. Turning off the main road beneath the gaze of the huge golf ball radar domes that dominated the highest points, dropping down a gorge strewn with the tall, mastlike trunks of pines. At the top of the gorge they left two men and a roll of razor wire, more than enough to secure the narrow entryway. At the lowest point, where the road rejoins the main highway, they did the same. And in between on a carpet of pine kernels but out of sight of

the green metal roof of the Lodge, the remainder of the troops scurried around to spy out the land and secure their communications.

Within four hours it was done.

That evening Makepeace, with Maria at his side, held a rally to the south of the pottery town of Stoke-on-Trent. Five days had passed since the start of the Long March and it had come to a crucial phase. The novelty was gone, and so had many of the hangers-on, particularly those who were there to gawp or to disrupt, perhaps, the type that gathers to stare as a man stands on a ledge and threatens to jump. In Makepeace's case he had jumped and they'd been interested solely in the gruesome result. Yet he had disappointed them. He'd bounced.

Most who still walked with Makepeace were now intent on the same purpose of protest. None but a handful had followed him all the way, but many came to walk for a day, more for an hour or a mile, pushing children, carrying banners, cheerfully accepting the hospitality provided along the way by mobile kebab shops and local Greek businesses. Yet day by day the numbers had visibly diminished. The efforts of those distributing the leaflets ahead of their progress were tireless, their determination unbowed, yet there was a limit to the amount of coverage the media would give to an endless, uneventful march, and the promotional push of television news had begun to wane. Until today.

In modern warfare the greatest obstacle to military success is often not the muzzle of an adversary's gun but the lens of a camera. The scenes of women cradling babies in arms being set upon by jets of British Army water that spouted like flamethrowers dominated the lunchtime news. They were excellent action pictures that puzzled and upset many viewers; great adventures in distant lands were made of victories over panzer divisions or darkened fuzzy-wuzzies, not defenseless children. The military vehicles scythed through baby carriages like wolves through a Siberian village, leaving devastation, tears, and much anger in their wake.

And so by that Friday evening Makepeace had found new recruits to his cause. Greek Cypriots, who gathered in larger number and with still greater determination than before. Those whose politics were inspired by a European

ideal came too, offended by Bollingbroke. There were pacifists aplenty, waving “Make Peace” slogans, along with those who did not regard themselves as being political but whose sense of the balance of decency had been upset by the news pictures. There were banners, speeches, babies in arms, an impromptu concert of folk songs, and a display of Cypriot dancing that carried with it a sense of renewed commitment for the cause of the Long March.

At dusk in a park they sang, joined hands, shared; they held up a thousand flickering candles whose light turned the park into a field of diamonds, jewels of hope that adorned their faces and their spirits. Before them, on a makeshift stage beneath the limbs of a great English oak, Makepeace addressed his followers and, beyond them, a nation.

“We have set out, as has a convoy in a place faraway yet a place close to all our hearts today, called Cyprus. But our intent could not be more different. Where they threaten war, we talk of peace. Where they brush aside babes in arms, we open our arms to all. Where they believe the answer lies in the strength of military force, we believe the answer lies in our conjoined and peaceful sense of purpose. And where they do the bidding of Francis Urquhart, we say, ‘No! Not now, not tomorrow, not ever again!’”

And many who were watching on television or listening to his words on radio resolved to join him.

Passolides watched the events unfolding on his television screen, feeling more deserted than ever. His soul boiled at the sight of women and children under fire from British Tommies, being cut down, cast aside, just in the manner he thought he remembered through the mists of time, mists that had been thickened with romantic tales of suffering until they obscured the truth. Memory and emotion play tricks on old men.

He sat alone in his deserted and ruined restaurant, the Webley in front of him in case the wreckers returned, watching Makepeace. For many Cypriots the Englishman was growing as a hero, a latter-day Byron, but this was not a view shared by Passolides. The man had taken his only daughter, had taken her in flesh and away from him. Not asked, not in the Greek way, simply taken. As the

English had always taken. And who the hell was this Englishman to claim the mantle of honor borne so bravely by George and Eurypides and hundreds of others—a mantle that, but for cruel fate, should also have been Evanghelos's own?

So he drank, and spat at the name of Makepeace, even as he grew to hate Francis Urquhart the more.

Then he heard them outside, scratching at the temporary plywood sheeting that covered the damage, kicking at the remaining traces of glass, snickering. They were back! With a roar the old man made for the door, flung it open and threw himself into the street. He found not men with sledgehammers but three youths, obviously the worse for drink, spraying graffiti.

“I will kill you for this,” he vowed, taking a step toward them.

“Yeah? You 'n' whose army, you bleedin' old fool?” The three turned to confront him, full of beerish bravado.

“One against three. I like these odds,” one scoffed.

“Soddin' Cypos shouldn't be 'ere anyway. Not their country,” another added.

They were almost upon him before, in the shadows cast by the dim street lighting, they saw the revolver he was waving at them and the gleam of madness in his eye. They didn't bother hanging around to find out whether the gun or its crazed owner were for real.

Thirty-Seven

Politics are far more honest than love. In politics you expect betrayal.

At the rear of Downing Street, where the garden wall backs onto Horse Guards Parade, there is a narrow L-shaped road, at the side of which is a large wall box. Within the wall box run many yards of British Telecom wiring, and nearby is a hole in the wall through which signaling cable can be fed directly into Downing Street. Once connected—and it takes less than a couple of hours to complete the task—television signals can be received from any point on the globe.

Military engagements make for good pictures. What Cable News Network had done for the Gulf War, defense establishments around the world had decided to do for all their wars thereafter—although on a rather less public scale than CNN. On arrival in the mountains, St. Aubyn's signals operators had unloaded their large metal boxes from their four-tonner, exposed the racks of control equipment, set up two remote-control cameras at some distance on either side of the Lodge, slotted together the segmented parts of a two-meter dish, and with a compass located and locked on to the Eutelsat satellite in geostationary orbit above the equator. From there the test signals were bounced to Teleport in London's Docklands, thence to the BT Tower opposite the taverna in Maple Street, and onward to two monitors in the Cabinet Room.

Francis Urquhart was almost ready to wage war.

The screens flickered into life to reveal the solid, unpretentious, and tightly shuttered three-story Lodge set amid a tangle of tall trees, slightly comic in its

bright green paintwork.

“Looks like a Victorian rectory in some down-at-heel diocese,” Bollingbroke muttered.

“That’s almost precisely what it is,” Urquhart responded. He dismissed the technicians from the room before turning to the red phone. “Your report, please, Colonel St. Aubyn. You are on a loudspeaker to the other members of COBRA, and we have vision on the monitors.”

“The area is now secure, Prime Minister. There’s only one access route and we have that blocked. The ground surrounding the Lodge is pretty inhospitable, the side of a mountain covered in pines and thorn bushes. One or two men might just make it but they’d never get a whole party out. Not including a woman and a bishop, sir. We have them corked up.”

“Excellent. What resistance do you expect?”

“Difficult to say at the moment. As you can see on your screens, there are various other buildings surrounding the Lodge that might give us cover; on the other hand, we’re not yet sure whether there are guards in any of those buildings who might see us long before we can get to them. I’ll have to wait for the cover of darkness for a full evaluation, I’m sure our night scopes will tell us all we need to know.”

“Very good.”

“Trouble is, Mr. Urquhart, the Lodge itself is an old solid stone structure, the type they don’t build anymore.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“An excellent defensive position,” St. Aubyn continued. “Roof made of corrugated metal that will clatter like a drum. Outhouses on one side that might contain guards, an open stretch of lawn leading to a helipad on the other. Countryside completely covered with dried pine debris that makes a sound as though you’re walking on cornflakes. If they’re not fast asleep they’re going to know we’re coming, and from quite a distance.”

Youngblood gave a loud *harrumph* that bordered on, but did not quite cross, the line of insolence.

“Does your communications wizardry allow you to put me directly in touch with His Grace the Bishop?” Urquhart asked.

“It will if I get Private Hawkins here to shin up a telegraph pole and tap into his phone line. Take about five minutes.”

“Do it, please.”

They waited while Hawkins made his effort at earning the Distinguished Flying Cross, during which Youngblood yet again put his case. There could be no surprise, he insisted, they had no specialist assault troops on site. They must wait, delay, lower the Bishop’s guard through fatigue. To push ahead trying to release the hostages by force would be folly, more likely to result in their deaths than their release.

To it all, Urquhart offered no reply.

And then he was through.

“Bishop Theophilos? This is Prime Minister Francis Urquhart.”

“At last. What kept you? I have been waiting for your call.”

“What kept me, my dear Bishop, was the need to put a military cordon around the Lodge where you are holding the hostages. That cordon is in place. You are now my prisoner.”

A belly laugh crackled down the phone. “Forgive me, Prime Minister, I had forgotten what an excellent sense of humor you British retained in adversity.”

“But time is on my side, Bishop. Those troops could stay there weeks, months if necessary.”

“If you believe that, Mr. Urquhart, then you are a fool. Do you not realize what you have done by bringing your troops to this place? You have invaded Cyprus, my country. Even as we speak the tide of resistance will be flooding through this island. You will find no friends here and the longer you squat on my doorstep like some imperialist bully of old, the more you increase my power and the easier it will be to sweep you off this island for good. It is time, time to complete the unfinished business of earlier years. Why in God’s name do you think I’ve been sitting here waiting for you? Did you not recognize the trap that I set for you?”

Evening was drawing across Cyprus, casting long shadows and suddenly giving the pictures of the Lodge a more gloomy cast. Urquhart’s voice dropped to a more thoughtful register. “I hadn’t looked at it in that light.”

The Defense Secretary winced and quickly covered his eyes, pretending to be

deep in thought. Youngblood raised himself in his chair in the manner of his ancestor, Ezekiel, saddling up before the charge at Balaclava, his eyes growing bulbous with righteousness. The Bishop's metallic but distinct voice continued to fill the room.

"I have wine enough for weeks and food for months, Prime Minister. I am in no hurry. Oh, yes, I was almost forgetting. And I have four hostages. I am a great believer in the afterlife. I shall have no compunction whatsoever in propelling them toward it at an accelerated rate if I so much as sniff the socks of a British soldier approaching this Lodge."

"Is that a Christian view?" Urquhart protested.

"We have a saying in Cyprus: The Bishop's son is the Devil's grandson. We are a nation of priests and pirates, and few can tell the difference." He chuckled.

Urquhart's voice had lost its assurance, sounded deflated. "There need be no violence, Bishop. I want no casualties."

"Sadly, I suspect there must be at least one casualty, Mr. Urquhart."

"Who?"

"You, my dear Prime Minister. You have, what—thirteen days to go before your election? I cannot believe the British people will consider reelecting a Prime Minister who, sadly, will be humiliated by a Cypriot Bishop. Because I demand that you announce before election day your intention of withdrawing from your bases."

"How can I possibly agree to that?"

"Because if you don't, I shall send to your newspapers slices of Mr. Martin's ears."

"I see."

"I hope you do."

Urquhart paused. "Bishop, is any of this negotiable?"

A pause. "The timing, perhaps. Withdrawal in five years rather than immediately. In exchange for a substantial aid package, of course. You see, Mr. Urquhart, I am not an unreasonable man."

"I need to think about this. Give me time to think."

"All the time in the world." He gave another laugh and cut the phone link.

Sitting starchy upright across the table, Youngblood was contempt made

flesh. "I told you to wait," he hissed.

"And I told you time was on the Bishop's side, not mine."

"But you said you needed time to think..."

"I don't need to think, I already know what I'm going to do."

"Which is?"

Urquhart took one final look at the scene on the television monitor. "I'm going to burn that bastard out."

Thirty-Eight

Death. For some it is an exquisite adventure, for others an obliteration. One's point of view depends very much on whose death it is, and whether you are inflicting it or suffering it.

Four hostages in total. Three men and a woman. All in the same room downstairs. We picked them up on the night scopes, Prime Minister. As you can see, during the day the windows of the Lodge are shuttered but at night they open some of them for air. We've counted seven hostiles inside, including the Bishop, another three posted in outbuildings on watch."

"Metal roof like a drum, solid stone walls, windows shuttered, door presumably secured," Urquhart mused. "If I asked you to gain access, Colonel St. Aubyn, how would you do it?"

On the far side of the Cabinet table, Youngblood propelled himself to his feet.

"Colonel, stand by," Urquhart instructed, closing the link. "General Youngblood. People only rise from this table in order to leave."

"But this is senseless! We *must* wait. Wear them down psychologically. Give us time to put in a specialist SAS squad. St. Aubyn's men are ordinary infantrymen, they're not equipped for special forces work. They can't go in blind. Shouldn't go in at all."

"The blindness is yours. He wants us to wait, to delay. Even now he'll be organizing and by tomorrow an army of infant soldiers in their buggies will have arrived to give you yet another excuse for delay."

"Wait, consider. I implore you."

"Seize the time, General."

Urquhart made it clear he would not be moved, both jaw and mind set like rock. The soldier knew it was useless, the anger in his voice was replaced by a measure of considered disgust.

“What demon is driving you?”

“Political leadership demands many sacrifices.”

“But of whom? One fool throws a rock into a pond and a thousand young men may drown trying to retrieve it.”

“If this goes wrong, I’m the sacrifice and you can dance a jig on my grave.”

“My feet are already tapping.”

The insult was poured slowly, like treacle, and brought a gasp of astonishment from the military advisers who sat in a row behind Youngblood.

Urquhart’s eyes offered not a flicker. “Weren’t you supposed to have put that in code, General?”

“I wanted there to be no misunderstanding. I think I have your measure, Mr. Urquhart.”

With that the Deputy Chief of Defense Staff (Commitments) strode from the room.

“Bishop, good morning.”

“Ah, my dear Mr. Urquhart. *Kalimera*. You have had a good night’s rest, I trust? No unpleasant dreams.”

“Little sleep but time for much thought.”

“And shall I have the privilege of knowing to where those thoughts lead you?”

“To a deal. An exchange.”

“But. There’s a But. I can hear the rumble of conditions already sticking in your throat. Take care not to choke.”

“The terms you outlined yesterday are impossible.”

A drizzle of ridicule washed across Theophilos’s words. “You wish to fiddle at your own funeral?”

“I wish to survive, very much. But consider. If I let it be known that I am—how would I term it?—acknowledging the Cypriots’ just claims for the return of

the base areas and I were to announce my conclusions before the election, then, as you say, I shall be a casualty. Driven from office. But whose purpose will that serve? Not yours. A week on Thursday there would be a new Prime Minister who would feel no obligation to honor any undertaking given by me. Quite the contrary, he would probably have been swept into Downing Street on the promise to keep every inch of the bases.”

“And I shall have kept your High Commissioner. In pieces.”

“Exactly. No one would win.”

The Bishop hesitated; his trump card seemed to have turned distinctly soggy and more difficult to play.

“You are suggesting that the British would act the jackal and break their word. As they have done so many times before.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

The sound of a hot liquid being vigorously slurped came over the line; an extended pause for thought. “You spoke of a deal. A counterproposal?”

“You release the High Commissioner, and in return I give you a written pledge about the bases.”

“British paper!” the Bishop scoffed.

“And also a substantial aid package. I’m willing to be highly imaginative about that package, Bishop. And very personal.”

“I understand.”

“You will also understand that the agreements about aid and the bases cannot be made public until after the election. You see, you need me in Downing Street to meet these promises. You’ve got to help me win.”

“But how will I know you will deliver afterward?”

“You will have my signature...”

“Not enough!”

“...and a substantial down payment of the aid package as a token of good faith. In cash. Delivered into your hands for safekeeping. It can be arranged within hours.”

“Mr. Urquhart, I am beginning to like you. A man after my own heart.”

“We have a common interest, Bishop, perhaps even a common destiny.”

“The start of a splendid affair,” Theophilos chuckled.

“I believe you have a saying in Cyprus that everyone pulls the quilt over to their own side.”

“But at least it seems we shall be sharing the same bed...”

The voice trailed off. From the other end of the phone came sounds of interruption. The Bishop could be heard asking in a gruff voice what amid the flames of hell was happening. Confusion. Then he was back on the phone.

“Urquhart, you English bastard. What are you up to?”

The Troodos Mountains are the pine green heart of Cyprus. The towering ranges that stretch up to Mount Chionistra act as a cloud trap, sucking in the winds of the eastern Mediterranean, bringing relief from the oppressive heat of the plains and water in an abundance that is the envy of most other Mediterranean islands. But it is not always so in the Troodos. The rain falls mainly in winter while the summer months are parched. The shadow-dappled glades between the pines scorch to arid bowls of dust, the forest ferns die and desiccate while the carpet of flowers that is spread in springtime is rolled back to reveal the dried bones of once-abundant vegetation. The bracken and fallen timbers of the forests are turned to a compost of kiln-dried tinder, and cooling winds may become the harbinger of death. Disaster in a spark.

The back of the Troodos itches with the scars and scabs of old forest fires, silent charcoaled testimony to the power of flame whose noise and smoke resemble a belching express train and may travel almost as fast. Men who know the mountains fear the flame.

The first wisp of smoke began to curl into the sky from beside the roadway that runs below the Presidential Lodge at the start of the tourist trail leading to the Caledonian Falls. A cigarette end, the rays of the sun focused through the glass of a carelessly discarded bottle, the embers of a lightning strike, there might have been many explanations, but only one consequence. The gossamer thread curled into the sky like a kitten edging for the first time away from its mother's side. It was already growing rapidly when the Bishop's guard posted in the third-floor window of the Lodge spotted it. By the time Theophilos had climbed up the stairs to see for himself, it was approaching with the roar of a

lion.

He wrenched the phone from its cradle. “What double dealing is this, Urquhart? How stupidly you condemn four hostages to death.”

“Bishop, listen to me very carefully. You touch the hostages and both you and I are finished. I will be blamed and you will be butchered. I would have no choice but to order my troops in.”

“You pretend you did not set this fire? Liar!”

“For God’s sake are you telling me this is the first forest fire you’ve seen? It could’ve started in a thousand ways, the important thing is to finish it. My troops are already fighting the fire. If you wish to leave the Lodge I shall arrange safe transport...”

“We stay!”

“Then do that, but don’t touch the hostages. Remember that you and I will stand or fall together in this matter. We are bound as one.”

“Urquhart, I do not trust you. But you can trust me. I swear on my Holy life that at the first sight of any British soldier approaching this Lodge I shall take one of the hostages and throw him from the top-floor window. Just to show you my good faith. And if you don’t keep the fire away from the Lodge, I shall accept your offer of transportation. But I shall leave another hostage behind in the ashes. Do you hear?”

“All too well. But there is no need for that. I’m told that there are already two helicopters on their way to you equipped with firefighting facilities. The Lodge will be safe.”

“You’d better pray for your own soul if it is not.”

The Wessex HC2 trooplift helicopters were the old workhorses of the military skies, long since phased out in most other parts of the world for larger, more sophisticated machinery better able to deal with frontline conditions. But Cyprus wasn’t the front line—or hadn’t been, until now. The Wessex was all they had, but it was adequate for the task. The flight from Akrotiri lasted less than fifteen

minutes, even equipped with the cumbersome rainmaker buckets slung beneath Mission Three-Zero Alpha and its sister craft Bravo. They'd flown in formation up beyond the Kouris Dam, which diverted the precious emerald waters from their rush to the sea and toward the concrete oven of Limassol, the drone of the twin gas turbines bouncing back from the valley sides, extending still further the footprint of noise and declaring their imminent arrival even before the villagers of Monagri, Doros, and Trimiklini could rise from the tending of vines and spot them in the sky. They climbed, the four-bladed rotors grabbing more urgently at the thinning mountain air, the torque increasing as the craft fought to maintain formation and speed, crewmen tightening in anticipation as, ahead of them, the malevolent swirl stood out dark against the clear skies.

They found their water supply less than two minutes from the source of the fire, the tanks of a trout farm full of fingerling and grower fish. In one mouthful each Wessex scooped up a hundred and fifty gallons of water and yards of protective netting—half a year's work for the farmer, whose cries of despair and incomprehension were lost beneath the flattening roar of whirling rotor blades. With an ironic bow of acknowledgment the two Wessex left the farmer to his tears of frustration and headed for the Lodge.

On instructions from his brother, Dimitri had checked the bonds of the four hostages, ensuring that they were immobile and had no chance of escape by tying their legs as well as their upper bodies. As always, he took particular care with Elpída, his eyes groping and hands brushing across the cotton of her blouse as he tested the bonds, running his callused palms around her thighs, squeezing, wine-sour breath falling across her cheeks. His eyes were glassy bright, pumping with adrenaline and anxiety.

“Before this is over, my beauty, I'm going to show you what a real man is made of,” he smirked.

“Please, not so tight, you're cutting the circulation in my leg.”

He settled on his haunches in front of her, removed the ligature, raised the dress high above her knees, and began massaging the muscles.

Elpída smiled, a look of pure plastic, then kicked him straight in the crotch.

It was only as he regained his breath and was no longer squirming in agony that the threats began to tumble forth. How he would have her, no matter what his brother said, and what he would do to her warm moist flesh. He stumbled to his feet, still bent, clutching himself with one hand while the other drew back and unleashed itself in fury across her cheek. His ring scoured a plum-colored graze; he sneered and stooped close in expectation of submission. Her father shouted in alarm.

There were tears in her eyes but again Elpída smiled, and spat in his face.

Dimitri was about to strike her once more when his collar was grabbed and he was cuffed about the head. He went sprawling in surprise and, rolling over, discovered the figure of his brother looming over him, arm raised to threaten him again.

“Fool!” Theophilos snarled. “Is there no time when your brain rises above your belt?”

Dimitri prepared to growl and snap, Theophilos to strike, when they both froze, their dispute forgotten in an instant. For in the distance they could hear the rumbling thunder of helicopters.

Thirty-Nine

A conscience is like a rock, always waiting to trip you up.

The two helicopters came in at three hundred feet, skirting the jumble of tourist shops and cheap restaurants huddled below the mountain top and dropping down through the gorge of ancient black pines. Even at that height they could feel the cauldron of heat bubbling beneath them, the pilots struggling to maintain control as bursts of superheated air hit the underside of the fuselage. The fire had fanned out, catching the mountain air and swirling it into innumerable eddies and currents that were then thrown out in all directions, the flames following. Climbing the mountainside. Creeping nearer the Lodge.

Mission Three-Zero Alpha was the first to start its bombing run, the pilot guided by the instructions of the crewman in the rear. Even leaning out from the fuselage in the embrace of the dispatcher's harness it was difficult for him to determine a precise point of impact; from above all that could be seen was an angry swirl of thick dark smoke being blown forward above the flames. The first run would be no more than target spotting, suppressing the smoke screen to provide a clear line of sight.

Alpha hovered to get its bearings before moving decisively forward, slicing across the leading edge of the fire. It was traveling at forty knots, the pilot throwing anxious glances at his torque meter as he was forced to use near-maximum power to cope with the unhappy combination of height, sudden heat, and heavy payload that turned the craft from a porpoise into a mother duck. He could screw up the transmission if he wasn't careful. It didn't help that he was practically blind, the limited forward vision provided by the droop-nosed

Wessex all but obliterated by plumes of smoke. He was in the hands of God and his crewman, one of whom, he knew for a fact, had slipped in an extra pint of Guinness last night.

The crewman was latched firmly to the handrail and had one foot perched on the wheel of the undercart to give himself extra inches of reach and sight. “Steady. Steady. Left ten. God, it’s bloody hot. Steady.” The craft was in his hands, the pilots following his commands as he tried to find the right release point. A gust of wind snatched at the smoke below, carving out a gap through which he thought he could see it. It was as good a bearing as he was going to get. He yanked the cable that fired the rainmaker release. The newly liberated Wessex leaped forward as half a ton of water spread out and drenched two hundred square yards of forest. Yet already thousands were in flame.

The first Wessex was already heading back toward the trout farm when Mission Three-Zero Bravo maneuvered into position. Perhaps the rear crewman directing the approach was a shade hesitant, for from above it appeared as though he’d covered the almost identical section of forest as Alpha, a wasted run, but from below the action looked spectacular, for a passing second the rainmakers creating great rainbow arcs in the sky before the pall of smoke and new steam once again covered the sun. Hope, heat, darkness, and still more flame marked the time as the rearmed Wessex craft returned to resume the onslaught.

But still the fire was not out. The flames licked forward like the tongue of a fire serpent, enraged, defiant, setting about everything in its path, which led directly to the Lodge.

And the trout pond was empty. A new water supply had to be found, more vital minutes away.

The attack was beginning to falter.

“For pity’s sake, Mr. Urquhart, the fire is less than a hundred meters from the Lodge.”

The Bishop’s tone had altered. The bluster had disappeared, ground away by anxiety as he had watched the assault of the helicopters being repulsed by the

forces of nature.

“They are doing their best. Another helicopter has been scrambled from Akrotiri.” Yet even Urquhart was sounding less confident. “Their problem is finding a suitable water supply.”

“Enough of your excuses, Englishman!”

“Bishop, let me evacuate you and your men. I give you my word...”

“As I have given you mine. If I am forced to leave this place, one of the hostages will remain behind. And her death will be on your hands.”

“What more can I do, Bishop?”

“Pray, damn you. Down on your knees.”

“I already am.”

The flames were only seventy meters from the Lodge, advancing remorselessly. They had already encountered the fence of barbed wire thrown around the perimeter of the compound and reduced it to a cat’s cradle of blackened shards. Glowing embers were soaring on the convection currents, thrown high into the heavens before cascading down upon the lawn in front of the Lodge and bouncing off its metal roof.

Bravo had made his final pass. The water bombing had proved ineffective, the nearby water supplies exhausted. In a gesture that stank of defeat, the pilot pressed the jettison button and ditched the rainmaker bucket, shedding the last hope of quenching the fire.

Theophilos watched it all with growing anxiety. He had thought his plan foolproof, beyond the means of man to unravel. He hadn’t counted on God getting in the way.

As he watched through the partially opened shutters of the Lodge he was gripped by a grim fatalism. Someone was going to die—had to die, he had given his Holy word on it. As the moment of decision approached, he found his hand was trembling. He hid it deep within the folds of his cassock.

Yet the play was not finished. Even as the Bishop peered from the Lodge, Bravo circled around ahead of the fire until it was almost above the Lodge. Slowly it edged forward until it hovered only fifty feet from the ground, its

wheels practically brushing the pine tops, interposing itself directly between the building and the approaching fire. The rotor blades sliced through the air, hurling a downdraft of immense force against the trees. A new front in the battle had been opened. A wall of air was pushed forward from the helicopter until it met the advancing flames and the two air masses engaged in a war of great winds. Choking billows of smoke and dust were hurled in all directions, encasing the helicopter in a blinding envelope of debris. Bitter tongues of flame leaped upward, only to dash against the concentrated fury of fifteen hundred horsepower of mechanical muscle and be forced back in retreat. Mission Three-Zero Bravo did not kill the flame, which sidetracked, sought new avenues of advance, but with both courage and skill and flying almost blind amid the smoke it held the fire from the Lodge while Alpha and the newly arrived support helicopter continued with the work of the rainmakers.

Inside the Lodge the noise was deafening. The force of the swirling blades beat down upon the corrugated metal roof like a hammer upon a drum, obliterating all other sounds and making conversation impossible. Shutters rattled, a chimney pot crashed down, corrugated roofing sheets began to flap loose, thoughts were shaken by the irresistible frenzy of sound until they fell apart.

Theophilos watched the scene from an upstairs window with a huge grin of relief. The forward march of the flames had been stopped, he felt much better now. He wasn't going to have to kill anyone after all.

They chose a small square window that led into the darker recesses of the Lodge, on the side farthest away from the fire.

The Lodge, their target, had been designed more than a hundred years before by a French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, while still in his twenties. He was a man of rich experience for his few years, a life dedicated to indulgence, drinking, and bawdy conversations, which he supported through his activities as a gun runner, explorer, trader, man of letters—and architect. His building design, however, was utterly commonplace, the Lodge owing its survival more to the stoutness of its stone than to its beauty or practicality. The kitchen, in particular, was a

miserable affair, narrow and dark, so at a later stage it had been modified by adding a small extension for storage, and light for that extension was provided by a small window. It was out of character with the other windows in the Lodge, which were mostly tall with a pretense at elegance. This window was scarcely two feet square. It was also the only window into the Lodge without shutters.

They knew precisely where the hostages were held, in the sitting room at the far end of the house from the kitchen. They suspected that there were at least an equal number of the Bishop's men guarding them and another three, including the Bishop, were stationed at windows keeping watch on the progress of the fire. With luck, they could account for them all.

Captain Rupert Darwin had been placed in charge of the assault squad. Aged thirty-two, infantry, he was a man of endeavor and experience rather than notable achievement who had served in Ulster and Oman as well as United Nations duty in strife-torn Nigeria. He had also been to the same school as the Air Vice-Marshal—they were distantly related—but it was his two tours of duty on rotation with the Special Air Service in Northern Ireland rather than blood ties that in all probability had accounted for his selection to lead the assault on the Lodge. Six ordinary but experienced riflemen plus the captain, one for each hostile body, armed with the short SA80 rifle, smoke grenades, and thunder flashes. With faces blackened they had approached the Lodge from the side farthest away from and up-mountain of the fire, their camouflage smocks providing more than adequate cover among the smoke-strewn trees.

They had come to within twenty yards, each footstep sending telltale rivulets of pine needles creeping down the steep slope. They lingered behind the fissured boles of the pines until it had been confirmed that the three lookouts posted in the outbuildings had been taken out—without even a curse, as it later transpired, so distracted had they been studying the progress of the fire. Their task could only get more difficult. With a final glance at the shuttered windows and fearing a spying eye and angry muzzle behind every one, Darwin and his men had swarmed from behind their pines and tumbled down the final stretch of slope to the wall of the kitchen extension. No cry, no shout of alarm, nor sound of shot—nothing but the pounding of rotor blades that even from the far side of the building made it sound as if they were standing in the middle of an avalanche.

Darwin edged to the window, his back pressed flat against the wall. He could feel the trickle of sweat along his backbone. Now was the worst moment, when it all started, the point of no return in the operation when your life was about to depend upon the lessons squeezed from a thousand years of military history. That and a whole pile of luck. The time when you swallowed the fear, prayed it was your day to survive. He took a deep breath, knowing it might be his last, and spun to face the window.

The kitchen was empty—of course, who would want coffee at a time like this? His luck was holding, already he felt better. But they could not risk the sound of shattering glass. They taped and cut out a section of windowpane, carving a hole with a glass cutter through which the latch could be released. In less than thirty seconds the window had swung open. In another thirty Darwin and two others were inside, the rest of the men following in quick order.

The galley kitchen was narrow, no cover, no place to run or hide, a killing field if but one of the Bishop's men confronted them in such confined quarters. They needed to get out of it as rapidly as possible. But they were through, into the dining room with its dark, formal furniture. There were dirty plates on the table, cheese and bread crumbs, fruit, several empty bottles of wine, screwed-up cigarette packets, and on the sideboard two submachine guns and boxes of ammunition. The eyes of Makarios, dark and somber in oils, stared down upon them, but no one else.

Within the house the bombardment of noise seemed still more remorseless, echoing between stone walls until the inside of their heads throbbed. There was no possibility of communicating through speech, all commands were given with a flick of the fingers to an order of battle orchestrated and meticulously scored in the hours before. Beyond the dining room they knew they would find a central hallway leading from the main door, and beside the door a half-open shutter where there should be a lookout. He'd been there all morning, damn him if he'd moved in the last ten minutes. Up the stairs from the hallway on the top floor they expected to find another lookout; the Bishop was reported to be on the middle floor, in the main bedroom with a view overlooking the fire. Beyond the hallway was the sitting room with four bound hostages and—they hoped—the four remaining hostiles. All accounted for. Perhaps. A man each.

The lookout positioned beside the main door was the key that, once turned, would open up the stairway and the approach to the sitting room. But they could afford no shots, no noise that might cause the lock to jam.

The paneled oak door from the dining room opened silently. Darwin smiled grimly. The theology student-turned-liberation fighter had been spending too much time on theory, his practical skills proving woefully inadequate. While he dragged at a cigarette his machine pistol lay on the chair a good pace away from the window, a pace he would never get the chance to take. Before he'd even turned a sergeant had the point of a bayonet pressed against the jugular and a hand forced over his mouth. The lookout froze, his eyes filled with fear, the bayonet point breaking the skin on his throat as he swallowed. Then he fell to his knees as though in prayer. One down.

In his heart, Darwin knew that the assault on the sitting room couldn't be as simple. The position of the hostages was critical; if they were all set apart from their captors, an exchange of fire might be risked. He glanced through the crack in the door, cursed. One of the guards was seated directly beside the hostages, facing the window where, silhouetted against the bright light, standing shoulder to shoulder and struggling for a better view, two others stood. There should have been three.

The male hostages were tied in a row, also facing the windows, but the young woman was behind them and turned toward the door. One cheek was raw red and two buttons on her untidy blouse were missing, torn away. Yet there was a light in her dark eyes that ignited as she saw Darwin's sooted face. He raised a finger to his lips; she closed her eyes, managed a small smile.

The rubber-soled boots made no distinguishable noise upon the carpet. The seated guard was felled with a blow from a rifle butt, offering nothing more than a low moan as he crumpled to the floor. Still there was no response from the men standing at the window, so overpowering and obliterating was the noise. Two soldiers stationed themselves as a wall of flesh between the guards and the hostages, another pair approached those at the window. Barrels to their backs. The captors stiffened in alarm. One accepted his fate in a flurry of raised hands and dropped weapons, but the other swung around, determined, hate in his eyes, his arm sweeping at the short barrel of the automatic rifle. All he got was the

butt in his face, a blow that broke his nose and left him covered in blood. He fell to the floor, groaning.

The briefest of checks on the hostages assured Darwin that all were alive, although Martin in particular, captive for almost two weeks, appeared wan and exhausted. Any attempt to elicit from them the precise whereabouts of the Bishop and the other targets was frustrated; they didn't appear to know, the noise prevented any useful exchange.

It was while he was questioning the High Commissioner that Darwin's attention was aroused by the look of alarm that suddenly was drawn across the face of one of his men. He turned to discover that the freed woman had picked up one of the many small arms left lying around and was standing over the fallen guard with the busted nose. She kicked him to attract his attention. He stopped moaning, looked up, saw a special look in her eyes, held out a bloodied, pleading hand.

Elpída let him grovel until she could see fear stretched tight across his face like a piano wire. Then she fired and blew Dimitri's right kneecap into a mush of skin and bone fragments. "Next time, you bastard, you'll come crawling to me."

Dimitri's body began to jerk, trying desperately to get hands around his shattered leg while every movement sent a thousand volts of agony shooting through his body. He was screaming at the top of his voice.

As though she were handing out refreshments during a hot afternoon on the lawn of the Presidential Palace, Elpída gave the gun to Darwin and went to tend to her father.

The Captain felt sick. He'd lost control, the game plan was unraveling. It seemed certain that the gunshot and Dimitri's cries of agony would have been heard by those still unaccounted for. He had the hostages secure, but the job was not yet finished. And he'd have to do the rest on his own.

As he contemplated the stairs, his mouth went dry and his finger stiffened around the trigger. He had little idea what to expect—Urquhart's briefing had only extended as far as the ground floor—and there were too many doors leading off the landing, any of which could leap open in a blaze of gunfire. Like O'Mara Street near the river in Derry, a disheveled terraced house with peeling wallpaper and no carpet, on a miserable November day when he'd been sent to pick up an

IRA suspect. At the top of a short flight of stairs there had been only two doors, but one of them had opened, just a fraction. He had hesitated—was it an innocent civilian, a child perhaps, coming from the bathroom? Or the suspect about to surrender?

The answer had come in the form of a 5.56-mm bullet fired from an Armalite that had sliced clean across his collarbone and through the throat of the corporal giving him cover from behind. They had both ended up at the bottom of the stairs, Darwin curled in a ball of pain, staring directly into the lifeless eyes of his fellow soldier. The corporal's widow had got a pension, Darwin had got sick leave and a commendation, and the IRA murderer a sentence of life imprisonment when eventually he had given himself up. That was eight years ago; he could be paroled and out on the streets in less than another two. In Darwin's dreams the eyes of the dead soldier had stared back at him for months afterward. That wasn't going to happen again.

All the Bishop's men with the exception of the still writhing Dimitri had had their hands wired behind their backs; he grabbed the nearest and thrust him forward. Up the stairs. A shield. Insurance.

They climbed, and Darwin's senses were ringing; the nearer he came to the tin roof and the beating of the blades, the more insistent became the pounding inside his head. Even the wooden floor trembled. A sheet of metal roofing was working loose, beginning to bang methodically in the downdraft. Deafening. Like volleys of artillery fire.

Left at the top, the hallway dark and decorated like some Victorian boarding house. Prints, oil paintings, lamp shades with gently vibrating tassels, antique-stall bric-a-brac. And doors, too many bloody doors.

"You speak English?" Darwin had to shout directly into his prisoner's ear.

"I have a master's from Bristol University."

"You want to die?"

The prisoner shook his head.

"Then you open the doors. Very slowly. And start praying your friends recognize you."

He rebound the prisoner's hands in front of him, and they crept along the corridor, Darwin pushing his human shield, until they reached the first door.

Gingerly the brass knob was turned, the door swung open—to reveal nothing more threatening than a linen cupboard. For a moment Darwin felt a fool, until he reminded himself that at least he was a fool who was still breathing.

Onward. Behind the second door was a bathroom, behind the third an unoccupied bedroom. A sense of urgency grew; he had to get on with it. Darwin wiped away the sweat that was dribbling freely into his eyes.

The next door unlatched in faltering fashion, the prisoner's damp and bound hand slipping around the polished brass. It opened a fraction, then a few more inches. And before them, back turned, looking out of the window in the pose of a statue dedicated to a Latin American warrior, stood the Bishop. Three respectful steps to his rear, attention also focused out of the window, was the missing guard.

They hadn't heard a thing.

With rising confidence Darwin pushed forward behind his shield, ducking down for protection, but as they crossed the threshold his prisoner stretched out with a boot and caught the leg of a chair, enough to send it toppling. The guard near the window swiveled, his mouth opened to shout, his gun leveled. He saw the human shield, recognized his companion, and fired. As Darwin fired back, the man in his hands flinched, grew heavy, and slowly toppled to the floor. Darwin could see two bubbling craters in his chest and could feel the spatter of warm blood on his own cheek.

The Bishop had turned now, attracted less by the noise than the fact that his guard who had been positioned some way behind him was now slumped against the wall at the foot of the window, his heart blown wide open by a single round.

Theophilos faced Darwin, examined the two bodies on the floor with great deliberation. He sought for options; there were none. Inescapably, it was over. An adventure too far. He shrugged, expelled a great lungful of disenchantment and slowly raised his hands, the sleeves of his cassock slipping high up his arms to reveal his favorite Rolex and a white silk shirt. His arms outstretched in silhouette against the glowing light of sun and fire from the window gave the impression of a crucifixion.

Darwin wiped the blood from his cheek, as he had done that day in Derry. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness he could see that Theophilos was smiling

wryly. “I surrender,” the Bishop mouthed—or might have been shouting; it was impossible to hear.

Darwin put a bullet straight through the top of the wooden cross that hung over his heart. The Bishop, lifted from his feet, fell heavily against and then backward through the window, which shattered into fragments like an exploding star leaving nothing but a gaping, lifeless hole. The last sight Darwin had of Theophilos was the tail of a flapping cassock, a pair of sandals, and two bright yellow socks.

Urquhart had been right. He’d apologized to Darwin, as soon as he’d finished briefing him over the satellite link about the layout of the Lodge.

“Apologize, Prime Minister?”

“Yes, Captain. The Bishop, if captured alive, will inevitably go before a Cypriot court. He has a lot of friends in Cyprus. I suspect he’s more likely to get elected President than convicted. We don’t deal with terrorists very effectively, do we?”

“No, sir.”

“I remember in my own time, when I was a soldier doing your job in Cyprus, fighting EOKA terrorists. The Archbishop, Makarios, led the terrorists at that time, paid them from church funds, gave them their instructions. They killed not only our troops but many British civilians, women too. We knew it, even locked him up in exile. Then we let him become President of Cyprus. We’re too soft, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Even if they lock him up for a while, it would achieve nothing. Like a serpent’s egg. Put it away, and the menace only grows stronger until it breaks out in some more dangerous and reformed fashion. I’ve always believed there’s only one thing to do with a serpent’s egg.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“Crush it, Captain.”

They had watched it all on the monitors. The shadows flitting between forest and kitchen window. The flash of confusion by the shutter at the front door. The fire

drawing ever closer. The dark shape bursting forth from the first-floor window and falling like a sack of coal. Four grateful hostages rejoicing in sunlight for the first time in days.

And miraculously the fire had been doused, the aim and effectiveness of the rainmakers improving as rapidly as circumstances within the Lodge.

Much to Urquhart's private delight Youngblood had returned, commanded to do so by his superior who was insistent that, no matter how intolerably interfering and unreasonable the Prime Minister might be, a military representative had to be there to advise and, if necessary, to object. And even as Urquhart gloried in his victory, the argument was not yet done.

The military advice, from the commanding heights of the Cabinet Room all the way down to St. Aubyn on the spot, was to transfer the released hostages immediately to the safety of Akrotiri. But again Urquhart said no and insisted. This was no longer a military matter, it had become entirely political, and the politics demanded that the victory be paraded and lauded for the benefit of the legitimate government of President Nicolaou and for the disgrace of his foes. To skulk behind British barbed wire would wipe away all the President's newfound advantage.

So Urquhart decreed that the exhausted Nicolaou and the others were to rest overnight in a nearby hotel, and on the following morning, Sunday, St. Aubyn should prepare to drive them in convoy not to a British base but to the capital of Nicosia, to the seat of Government and authority. To the media networks that would spread the word of victory throughout the island. To the symbolic ruins of the Presidential Palace. To the humiliation of all foes. And to wherever Mortima's letter might be.

And, in order to maximize the magnitude of victory, Urquhart made a mental note to ensure that every television network and news cameraman his staff could get their hands on would be there to witness his triumph.

It was as dusk was falling and the last of the debris of captivity and assault was being cleared from around the Lodge that Urquhart knew, with a certainty that clung to his heart as ice, that something had gone wrong. The light was

dimming, the sun setting, shadows stretching across the ground—as they had done all those years before on the side of that mountain. Urquhart was contemplating the scene of his triumph on the monitor when an ember, revived in the caress of a cool evening breeze, caught on the dried bark of a pine, settled, found renewed life. As he watched, and remembered, the tree burst into all-consuming flame.

Full circle. A cycle of life complete, finished. And from out of the screen, Urquhart saw the charred, accusing fingers of George and Eurypides pointing directly at him.

Forty

Fear brings out the best in a man, strips away the complacency, and exposes the core. Those who are afraid to die have never properly lived.

Victory. It had been the lead item on the Saturday evening news, even though there were as yet no new pictures to illustrate the story.

“I asked not to be included in the formal War Cabinet. People would start speculating that I was being lined up for the succession—you know, the youngest Home Secretary since Churchill. We’re in an election, not a leadership race. So I declined. But, of course, Francis consults me, all the way.”

Across the table Booza-Pitt offered a smile that spoke of modesty, determination, achievement, I-know-you-want-to-touch-me-all-over-with-those-beautiful-lips-but-I’m-truly-very-important-and-business-comes-first. His dining companion purred in encouragement. After years of anguish she’d separated less than two months earlier from a parliamentary husband whose dedication to late-night lobbies, weekend surgeries, answering the telephone, and endless piles of constituents’ letters was as utterly selfless as it was, to her, irredeemably boring. She knew getting laid by Booza-Pitt would be folly, but it had been such a long time and it might be fun, particularly if he was as practiced in the delivery as he was at finding the route. She hadn’t climbed higher than a Minister of State before, let alone as far as a Home Secretary. She owed it to herself.

“Really?” she incited, wondering if his performance would be as inflated as his ego.

“It’s pretty tricky right now—can’t go into detail, you understand, but I advised that we should get in there as quickly as possible. Spring the hostages

and teach those bloody Cypriots a lesson.”

“A good spanking.”

“Yes, something like that.”

“You’re magnificent, Geoffrey.” She fluttered her eyelids outrageously, he smiled in self-congratulation—he was so lacking in subtlety that he belonged in a zoo. She hoped.

“It’s a strain,” he admitted, heavy eyebrows twitching. “Lonely at times.”

Here it comes. He was about as difficult to read as a tax demand.

“You know what I would like?” he continued, staring at her across a glass of wine, which cast strange patterns across his forehead in the candlelight.

“To become Prime Minister?”

“I’ve no ambitions at present beyond...” he began the litany.

She reached out and touched a fingertip to his lips to put him out of his misery. Grief, he’d better be good in bed, he had no other redeeming features. At least it would avoid the complications of an extended affair.

“Tell me all your secrets, Geoffrey. I’m very good with confidences.”

“Are you? Are you really?”

“Yes. Tell me—don’t if it’s truly a state secret, but—are you a Virgo?”

“I wish you were here having breakfast with us, Mummy.”

It was the one meal Claire insisted on trying to have with the children before politics dragged them apart for the remainder of the day. It didn’t always work, even on a Sunday. “I know, darling, but you remember what election campaigns are like from the last time.”

“Where are you?”

“Somewhere in the Midlands, to be quite honest I’m not sure where. I got picked up in a car yesterday afternoon from the train and the rest is all a blur. But I’ll be back tonight. After you’ve gone to bed.”

“I’ve run out of refills for my asthma inhaler.”

“The blue one or the brown?”

“Blue.”

“I’ll find a pharmacy open somewhere.” Claire scribbled a hurried reminder

to herself in the margin of her *Sunday Express*, beside an exploding headline that shouted: FU'S FALKLANDS. "Bring you one back tonight. And I hope you and Abby are wearing the clothes I laid out for you."

Diana ignored the question. Something else was on her mind. "Mummy?"

"Yes, darling?"

"What is war?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're fighting Cyprus, aren't we? Why?"

"Not the whole of Cyprus, darling. Just a few bad men."

"And all those ladies with the baby chairs."

"Not really."

"But Mr. Urquhart killed the Bishop, didn't he?"

"No, not Mr. Urquhart personally." Although something in her daughter's naivety rattled chains within Claire.

"But why?" Diana persisted, munching her way through a mouthful of wholemeal toast.

Claire hesitated. The morning's press had been crammed to capacity with plaudits for the previous day's success in the Troodos. Even those who were not supporters of the Government couldn't avoid copious reference to "Francis's Fusiliers." Some of the more serious newspapers carried reports of disagreement with military advisers and of the Prime Minister unusually and perhaps inappropriately having taken single-handed control of the operation, but in light of its success the military appeared to be playing down any sense of injured pride. Victory argues its own case.

So why did Claire feel so unenthused?

"I'll explain it all to you later, darling. And remember to brush your teeth."

"Gotcha!"

With a snap of exultation and a flick of his remote control, Urquhart wiped the Leader of the Opposition from his Sunday morning screen.

For almost twenty minutes on breakfast television Dick Clarence had been struggling hard to avoid his fate, but persistent questioning had worn down his

linguistic ingenuity and overrun every defensive position his advisers had prepared until he was forced to capitulate. Finally he had no choice but to admit it. Yes, Francis Urquhart had done the right thing.

“Not long for this world, I suspect, young Dick,” Urquhart reflected to Mortima. Fate was a harsh judge on an Opposition Leader who had lost the ability to oppose with only ten days of campaigning left.

From the other side of the breakfast table Mortima looked up from her newspapers. “The press seems already to have reached that conclusion.” She passed across to him three editorials, carefully folded and highlighted, which effectively pronounced the election over.

He digested them alongside his Lapsang, then laid them to one side, shaking his head. “They rush to judgment. Clarence is dead, because he is congenitally useless. But there is still opposition.”

“Makepeace?”

“Who else?”

“A man with no party.”

“But an army.”

“An army under attack, sir.” It was Corder, who stood filling the doorway in the quiet way to which over the years they had grown accustomed. Mortima didn’t even adjust her dressing gown.

“You have news from the front, Corder?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Makepeace may have a battle on his hands. Since last night’s news broadcasts, various of the extreme British nationalist groups have been organizing. Arranging a little reception for when he reaches Birmingham this evening. They want to do to him what you did to the Bishop.”

“How unfortunate,” Mortima mused with as much concern as if she were selecting tights.

“So what’s to be done, Corder?”

“Depends on whether you want a riot on the streets of Birmingham.”

“Violence is certain?”

“Could be. If you wanted it, Prime Minister.”

“I think not, Corder. Too much uncertainty. Such things can get out of hand, make him a martyr. No, how much better if the threat of riots were sufficient to

get Mr. Makepeace to abandon his march.”

“You think he’d do that?” Mortima interjected skeptically.

“I doubt it. It would be the end for him. We could appeal, request, beseech, but I don’t suppose he’d listen.”

“So?”

“So we would have to get the Chief Constable to order Makepeace to abandon the march as a threat to good public order, wouldn’t we, Corder?”

“In my experience, sir, Chief Constables don’t always listen...”

“He’s coming up for a knighthood, he’ll be all ears.”

“...and aren’t always listened to in such matters.”

“But wouldn’t that be wonderful?” Urquhart spread his hands in front of him as though confronting a heavenly host. “Makepeace. Already branded a friend of terrorists. Now challenging the forces of law and order in this country. The threat of riot would seem to be his fault as much as any other’s. From martyr to public menace. We’d have to arrest him.” He clapped, then subsided. “With great reluctance, and after copious warnings, of course.”

“Public Order Act 1986, sir. Section Thirteen, I think. Three months and a fine.”

“Precisely, Corder. Can do?”

Corder nodded.

“And then we would have all the loose ends tied up.”

“Except for one, Mr. Urquhart.”

Corder was clutching the red file. It appeared thicker than on the last occasion.

“Passolides.”

“Yes, sir. We’ve been keeping an eye on him. Not simply a harmless old crank, after all. Appears he carries a gun, been waving it about. And a record as an EOKA activist.”

He was standing right beside the burning tree, scorching his flesh as though an oven door had been opened in front of him.

“We should pick him up. But I wanted to check with you first.”

The voices were at him again, warning, instructing, clashing and confusing. It was many moments before Urquhart was able to push aside the debris in his

mind and speak.

“Where is he now?”

“Skulking in his tent. The one with no windows.”

“Good. Then let us leave him there. Someone so close to Makepeace, armed, blood on his hands. British blood. Could prove very convenient.”

“Even old men have their uses, sir.”

“You might say that, Corder...”

Claire scurried through the swing doors of the local radio station, already a few minutes late for her interview and muttering darkly about faceless party officials who drew up election schedules. A woman needed a little more preparation time in the morning than some crusty Cabinet colleague who had no hair and wore the same soup-spilled pinstripe his wife had bought for him twenty years ago. Anyway, she'd had to try three pharmacies before finding one that was open and could fill Diana's prescription.

“I'm Claire Carlsen,” she explained to the young and unkempt receptionist.

He didn't look up, loath to leave his examination of the sports pages. “Message for you,” he muttered through a mouthful of gum, waving a scrap of paper at her. “You're to ring this number. He said it was urgent.”

There was no name, she didn't recognize the number but it was a Whitehall exchange. “May I use the phone?”

He looked at her, less reluctantly now, his attention beginning to focus on the shape behind the name. He gave her a crooked smile before nodding slowly.

She dialed. It was Corder.

“Is this a secure line?” he inquired.

The receptionist had begun to examine her with ill-disguised lust, unwashed eyes massaging their way across her chest.

“If you mean can we be overheard,” Claire replied, returning the stare, “not by any intelligent form of life.”

Defiantly the receptionist blew a huge balloon of gum; both it and his confidence collapsed in a pink dribble across his chin. With a final sullen glance, he subsided back into his newspaper.

There was a brief silence on the telephone as Corder struggled to decode her cryptic remark. Irony was not his strong suit. "Your friendly driver," he continued cautiously, "is he on duty today?"

"No," she replied. During the last week the driver's time had been spent ferrying secretaries, correspondence, and dry cleaning between London and the route of the march, and he'd little to offer by way of fresh indiscretion. Claire had felt relieved.

Now she felt dirty. Corder knew. Her secret was spreading, as was her feeling of remorse. At the beginning she had regarded it as no more than a little idle mischief but she could no longer hide from the fact that it had been a mistake. The betrayal of a friend she still cared for. She had demeaned herself, got carried away. Acted like Urquhart.

The receptionist was staring once more, furtively; she turned her back on him, no longer able to meet his gaze.

"No, the driver's not on duty," she mumbled, feeling much like a prisoner in the dock being asked to plead. Not guilty, she wanted to insist. But who was she kidding?

"Good," Corder snapped.

"Why do you ask?" she was about to inquire, but already it was too late. Corder had rung off.

Forty-One

Downing Street has a simple dress code. When you come in you should leave your principles at the door.

Makepeace stood on the age-worn steps of the parish church of St. Joseph's in Cannock, some fifteen miles north of the center of Birmingham, having attended early morning Communion and received the vicar's blessing. He was a committed if undogmatic Christian, not unaware of the benefits for a politician of displaying occasional touches of piousness, and many Christian groups had begun to join him on the march, gathering beneath a large "March for Peace" banner that had been draped across the bell tower of the church. Yet there were many others assembling that morning whose motivations were less spiritual, and two new elements in particular. For the first time, supporters and committed members of Dick Clarence's party paraded openly among the kaleidoscope of banners and protest groups in the crowd. They, like Urquhart, most editors, and many others, had perceived Clarence as a lost cause and already written him off. Stranded between the rock of despair that was Clarence and the hard, unforgiving place over which towered Urquhart, they had turned to the only banner of defiance they could find. Thomas Makepeace.

The second new element was still more noticeable, noisy in spite of relative lack of numbers.

Draped in Union flags and tattoos, their close-cropped heads appearing like battering rams above mean eyes and studded noses, surrounded by news photographers and penned in behind the hastily erected barriers of the local constabulary, the skinheads had begun to arrive, armed with their traditional

weaponry of obscenity, spittle, and abuse. It was early morning, their enthusiasm for the task not yet fully warmed, but they formed the skirmishing patrols of elements that would gather later in the day in the guise of nationalist warriors.

“Scum’s risen,” Maria muttered to Makepeace.

“Not all of it. Too early for most of them.”

“Urquhart’s supporters come in strange and unwashed shapes. I suppose we should take it as a sign of success.”

“I’d rather not. It worries me, these types, with all the families and children around.”

“Don’t worry,” she reassured. “The police will take care of it all.”

They were much slower to stir in the Troodos, even taking into account the two-hour time difference. In the early hours of the previous evening Lieutenant Colonel St. Aubyn had commandeered the top floor of the Pine Crest Hotel a few miles from the Lodge; it had caused the manager mild apoplexy and for a few minutes he was of a mind to refuse. But he was a German with an irregular work permit who had no care to tangle with the President of Cyprus, and was not paid enough to do so with several dozen well-armed troops. There had been an hour of shuffle and squeeze—and also indignation, guests responding with an eclectic mixture of insults when they discovered that they were not to be allowed to set foot outside the hotel until after the presidential party had left the following morning. But Elpída had wandered around each of the dinner tables, thanking, explaining, asking for understanding. The harrowing details of her story plus the scar on her cheek had done much to repair frayed tempers, bolstered by the announcement that the Ministry of Finance would be picking up the bills for the entire week.

Of the President, however, there was no sign. Exhaustion had overcome him. As soon as he had talked by phone with a couple of his Ministers and ensured that his arrival the following day was to be expected, he had slept, until ten o’clock the following morning. Panayotis insisted on standing guard the whole night outside his door. No one had tried to wake him, there was little point. It would take only a couple of hours to drive to Nicosia.

By the time he rose the following morning the dew had disappeared and the crickets and martins on the wing had taken over from the morning chorus. It was a tender honey-colored spot, surrounded with cherry trees and with unspoiled views across the valley, so different from the tree-choked gorge in which the Lodge had been built. Nicolaou, like his daughter, made an attempt to circulate and thank everyone but the strain of his adventure was all too apparent in the awkward shuffle of his frame and the bruise-gray shadows about his eyes. He had aged, clinging to Elpída's arm as though afraid someone else would try to snatch her away.

St. Aubyn was growing impatient. It would be noon before they left, they would be traveling into the heat of the day and the President, already wan, was in no need of further ordeal.

"Do not worry on my behalf, Colonel," Nicolaou had tried to reassure. "I am a Cypriot. Used to a little heat."

The Lieutenant Colonel deferred to the politician, which seemed to be the order of the day. He'd been even less impressed with the instruction to head for Nicosia than his military superiors had been; the capital was a warren of intrigue where both streets and tongues forked in a confusion that offended the neat military mind. But as the Air Vice-Marshal had reminded him, soldiers don't get to choose.

The sun had passed its zenith but the thermometer was still rising when at last they set off, four-tonners in front and rear, Land Rovers in the middle, carrying forty-eight British servicemen and the four liberated hostages. They had debated long and hard whether to send more troops up from Episkopi, but had decided against. This was supposed to look like a victory parade, not another invasion.

Darwin and his team as well as the signals squad had been sent back to base, doused in gratitude from the President.

"You must come and visit us in Nicosia, Captain. Accept a little of our hospitality."

"And perhaps a medal or two?" Elpída added mischievously.

"It's been an honor, sir—miss."

The Captain saluted starchy, but the President was too overcome with emotion for military etiquette. He threw his arms around his savior in the manner

of any Balkan bidding farewell to a much-loved brother, kissing both cheeks.

“Take care of yourself, sir,” Darwin mumbled, coloring.

“Don’t worry, my dear Captain Darwin. The worst is over. After what you have already achieved, the rest will be easy.”

There was little Sunday spirit in evidence. With some three thousand people marching with him and more than ten thousand promised when he reached Birmingham city center, Makepeace should have been content, but all day long the skinheads had been driving up and down their route, blaring their horns and sounding trumpets, waving flags, leaning far out of car windows to raise clenched fists, spitting, goading, warning of trouble to come. Several supporters had tried to intervene and appeal for moderation, but by midmorning and Walsall, empty beer cans and other forms of garbage had joined the obscenities being thrown in their direction. A Morris dancer had already been knocked to the floor, and several marchers with young families had decided to quit.

Makepeace had appealed several times to the police to take some form of action to quell the disruption but the number of officers on duty was small and entirely inadequate to deal with the incitement. He was relieved therefore when, up ahead in the far distance, he saw a congregation of police cars, orange flashes on white, surrounded by a flurry of officers whose animation suggested they were intent on business. One was striding purposefully toward him.

“Chief Inspector Harding, sir.” The officer introduced himself with a courteous salute. Makepeace gave no indication of stopping or even slowing, forcing the policeman to fall in alongside.

“Welcome, Chief Inspector, delighted to see you.” He shook hands. “These jobs are proving a damned nuisance; they’re deliberately trying to provoke trouble.”

“I’m very much afraid you’re correct, sir. Our information is that a countermarch is gathering with the objective of coming into direct confrontation with you in the city center. Many hundreds of skinheads, British National Union types, neo-Nazis, assorted maggots. Those you’ve seen so far are just the outriders. Has all the signs of a nasty bit of violence.”

A car passed, horn blaring, heading away from the gathering of police cars. A pair of tattooed buttocks protruded from the window.

“Blast them,” Makepeace snapped. “This is a protest for peace, a family event, not an excuse for mayhem. What are you going to do about it?”

“That’s difficult, Mr. Makepeace.”

“Don’t just wring your hands; you’ve got to do something.”

“My instructions are to stop it, sir.”

“Excellent.”

“I don’t think you understand. My instructions are to stop all of it. The skinheads’ march. And your march too, sir.”

“You’re bloody joking.” Makepeace came to an abrupt halt. Flustered, angered, he motioned those behind him to continue. The marchers parted to either side of them.

The policeman persisted. “The two marches coming together will cause violence and disruption of the peace.”

“Then stop their march. Mine is peaceful.”

“For better or for worse—I sometimes wonder which, sir—we live in a democracy. They may be pavement scrapings but they also have a vote and equal rights to demonstrate.”

“Sticking their unwashed arses out of car windows is demonstrating? Demonstrating what?”

“They are entitled to their political opinions, sir.”

“This is a sick joke, Mr. Harding. Just sweep them off the streets, for heaven’s sake.”

“If I stop one march I have to stop both.”

Makepeace was growing irritated by the other man’s dogged sophistry. He began walking briskly once again, swept along by his supporters, but now he found himself accompanied by four uniformed constables who had fallen in behind their officer.

“This is crude blackmail, Chief Inspector.”

“It’s protecting the peace.”

“I’m the one trying to protect the peace. That’s why I’m standing for Parliament.”

“And organizing a march of this size that in itself constitutes a strain on public order, that includes anarchists, militant animal liberationists, a group of extreme environmentalists calling itself ‘One World Warriors,’ the Anti-Nazi League, some...”

“The vast majority here are ordinary peace-loving families. I can’t control everyone who wants to tag along behind.”

“Precisely.”

“Justice can’t be this blind. It’s a put-up job, isn’t it, Chief Inspector?”

But Harding had no wish to debate further, not while swimming in a sea of Makepeace supporters. His brain locked into the appropriate criminal code and engaged gear.

“Sir, under Section 12 of the Public Order Act of 1986 I have reason to believe that this public procession may result in serious public disorder, serious damage to property, or serious disruption to the life of the community, and therefore, under the authority accorded to me by that Act, I am directing you to bring this procession to a halt and disperse your supporters.”

“Not a chance.”

The officer was bobbing up and down on the toes of his highly polished shoes in a state of some agitation. “Mr. Makepeace, I must warn you that failure to comply with the lawful directions of a police officer in this matter is an offense and renders you liable to prosecution.”

“Bugger off, you bloody fool!”

The roadway down from the Troodos knotted and twisted like a child’s ribbon, making the convoy’s passage through the pines uneven and uncomfortable. Their four-tonners had not been designed for high-speed cornering. The air above the macadam boiled, throwing up little whirlpools of dust that irritated the eye and cloyed the tongue. From their right-hand side the ancient Amiandos asbestos mine glared gray at them as though it had been dropped from the far side of the moon, a dust-raped landscape destroyed by pickax and bulldozer. St. Aubyn licked his drying lips in distaste.

On the other side of the road they passed a small stone monument that

remembered the Troodos of more gentle times, a drinking trough that trickled with the cool waters of a nearby spring. St. Aubyn read the inscription: ERECTED TO COMMEMORATE THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NICOSIA-TROODOS ROAD—VRI 1900. Victoria Regina Imperatrix. A hundred years gone by and still the British were bailing out these people. Or still interfering, perhaps. He ignored the faded Greek graffiti.

Around the bend they encountered their first serious opposition, a BBC television crew, the advance troops for what St. Aubyn knew must be a formidable media invasion, waving their arms and pleading for assistance. They were standing beside the yawning hood of their car from which sibilant clouds of steam were emerging, the perils of an overhasty hire and an intolerably impatient editor. St. Aubyn looked the other way, passing by at the gallop.

The road continued to hug the side of the mountain, curling, dipping, disappearing around the bend into the pine trees ahead. That's when St. Aubyn saw the cutting, a man-made valley slashed through the rock, an angry scar whose steep sides and unhealed slopes seemed to cry with pain at the memory of the explosives and mechanical shovels that had blasted this great wound through the mountain's side, then inexpertly cauterized it with hot tar. Scree trickled like tears to either side.

It was inhospitable, claustrophobic, no trees or any form of vegetation seemed to want to grow here, this was no place to tarry. Then some fool up front stamped on his brakes.

There was a touch of Irish in Makepeace on his mother's side, buried a couple of generations deep, which seemed to rush to the surface at moments of indignation and perceived unfairness, blocking his judgment and making him desperate to find some physical outlet for his anger. As when he had crossed the Floor of the House. He was never entirely sure where principle stepped aside and old-fashioned Celtic passion took over, but that was his makeup, the way he was—anyway, there seemed little point in principle divorced from passion. Now there was some ridiculous policeman with pips on his collar standing in his way and telling him he was no better than some Nazi who stuck his bum out of a window.

Nuts! As the Chief Inspector moved closer, Makepeace raised his hands to push him away. Or was he going to strike the man? Quickly Maria restrained him, reaching out before any of the constables had the chance.

“Don’t give them any excuse other than a political one,” she urged.

Makepeace had stopped walking and those following were beginning to falter, uncertain what was going on. They began to mill around Makepeace and the policemen, a march turning into a melee.

Harding attempted a placatory smile. “Please, Mr. Makepeace, no one regrets this more than I do. We want to make this as simple as possible for you, we’ve even arranged a venue about a mile down the road, a sports ground where we would be happy for you to wind up your march with your supporters. But with the threat of violence hanging over the whole community, there is no way we can allow you into the center of Birmingham.”

Makepeace was blinking rapidly, trying to brush away the mists of rage and clear his thoughts. Maria was there first. “What of tomorrow, Chief Inspector? And the next day? And next weekend in London?”

Harding shrugged. “Not in my hands, miss. That would depend on the local police force. But if the threat of violence is still there...”

“So you would allow a bunch of thugs to run my election campaign completely off the road,” Makepeace snapped.

“I’m sorry.”

“And what will you do if I refuse?”

“Mr. Makepeace, I have given you a lawful direction to stop this march. If you don’t, you would leave me with no choice but to arrest you. Neither of us wants that. Wouldn’t do your election campaign much good either.”

“You’ll allow me to be the judge of that.”

But others were also judging, pressing around more closely as they began to understand that the police presence surrounding Makepeace was not for his protection. The mood was turning edgy.

“I don’t pretend to understand politics, sir, but I have a job to do. So let’s wind this march up peacefully.”

“No, I think we’ll take the other route. Arrest me or get out of my way.” Makepeace began marching once more, trying to clear a path through the bodies

in front of him.

“Please, sir...”

Harding was reaching out after him; Makepeace brushed aside the restraining hand. Harding hurried to bring himself alongside.

“Sir, you do not have to say anything. But if you do not mention now something that you later use in your defense, the court may decide...”

The rest was drowned in a growl of opposition from various members of the Akropolis weight-lifting team who had begun pushing forward through the crowd. Parents with children in arms were getting jostled, someone tumbled, cries of confusion sounded on all sides, the march had suddenly tugged on the edge of chaos. Is that what Harding intended? Makepeace arrested in the midst of violence without a neo-Nazi in sight? Forcefully Maria thrust herself between Makepeace and the advancing muscle, shouting reprimands in seaman’s Greek and waving them to subside.

Makepeace had a constable latched on to either arm but he did not struggle or resist. Instead he, too, was calling out for order. “Relax. Get on with the march,” he shouted to those around. “I’ll be back with you as soon as I’ve got this nonsense sorted out.”

But Harding’s placatory smile had disappeared. “No, Mr. Makepeace, I don’t think we can allow that. Not at all.”

The cutting had been blocked by a barricade of eight buses, ancient Bedford and modern Mercedes, parked sideways and four deep, fronted by a low rampart of boulders and pine trunks. There was no way through and, since the sides of the cutting rose steeply from the roadway, no way around. The buses were empty, doors ajar, curtains flapping at dust-streaked windows, yet the silence had an unmistakable menace that filled St. Aubyn’s throat with bile.

“Back!” he yelled, waving his hand in a circular motion above his head as the driver made an agile three-point turn and started off for the far end of the cutting. The four-tonners snorted and complained like beached whales as they struggled in the narrow confines to follow suit.

It had been less than three minutes since they had passed into the rocky

valley, but when they returned to it the entrance was not as it had been. Seated in the road as though engaged in a summer's picnic were two hundred chattering schoolgirls, in uniform, none more than fifteen. A barrier as unbreachable as rock. The Land Rover slid ungracefully to a halt in a cloud of dust.

Trapped. And he could see something else out of the corner of his eye. Shadows were falling across his path, cast down from on high. St. Aubyn looked to the top of the cutting, towering above him some forty feet, where the silhouettes of men were shooting up like a field of thistles. Every one of them was armed.

Then he saw two further dark shapes appear against the hard blue sky. Men holding to their shoulders not weapons, but television cameras.

With a certainty that sickened him, St. Aubyn suddenly knew he was going to be famous.

Makepeace was, of course, already famous, and about to move up to the category that would label him notorious. As soon as he had been arrested he had moved to the side of the road, out of the path of the march and against the wall of a church. There, framed against the statue of Mother and Child that dominated the churchyard, he refused any further cooperation. At least for the next couple of minutes. He had spotted a television van parking a short distance away, its crew tumbling forth. He needed to make a little time for them; there was little to be gained from being arrested if the drama couldn't be played out on prime-time television.

Maria was at his side, gesticulating to the marchers to continue, while Makepeace refused to budge, his arms folded and studiously ignoring the eye and the commands of the beleaguered Harding. But then all was ready, the mike boom was thrust forward, the red eye glaring on the front of the video camera.

Slowly, as though in prayer, he clenched his hands and held them well away from his body. Once more he was asked to cooperate; again he refused, shaking his head. He held the hands out still farther, his eyes shut tight. They took his arm; he shook them off. He was going nowhere. Reluctantly the Chief Inspector gave the order and a pair of handcuffs were snapped around his wrists.

When his eyes flicked open, they shone with vivid intensity. Makepeace held his cuffed hands aloft, like a warrior triumphant in battle, shaking them for all to see.

“The chains of an Englishman!” he exclaimed.

Maria held out her hands, too. Then another, and yet another. All around there were marchers asking, almost demanding to be arrested. The confused constables looked to the Chief Inspector for instruction. Hell, he couldn't turn it into a massacre of the innocents. Makepeace would have to be enough. He tugged nervously at the cuffs of his sleeve and shook his head.

Then, and only then, did Makepeace allow himself to be led away.

And the marchers continued marching. Every time a policeman approached they held their hands out in front of them, priests, mothers with babes in arms, children, even some in wheelchairs. And each time the policeman turned away.

Two issues confronted the editors of television news programs that night.

The first was how on earth to get political balance into their programs, to ensure that during the election period all sides got roughly equal coverage to avoid accusations of bias. In the end, most said to hell with the alternative of Clarence cuddling grannies on the seafront at Skegness. Delivered unto them had been the enviable combination of hard stones and gripping pictures, TV news at its best. They went with it.

The second was more difficult, to decide which of the two contending items should get top billing. Some chose Makepeace, most featured Colonel St. Aubyn. A “Double Whammy!” as the *Mirror* was to call it the following morning. Disruption, diversion, and editorial delight.

Mortima glanced across at Urquhart, creases of concern about her eyes. He recognized the look.

“I don't know, Mortima, how this will end. We don't control it anymore. Fools are afoot and our fate lies in the hands and upon the votes of the graceless mob.”

“St. Aubyn. Makepeace. Are these stories of help or hindrance?”

“Who is to tell? All I am sure of is that these are contrary winds, and some

boats will be quite swamped before the gale has blown itself out.”

Forty-Two

Never show weakness, never. The only reason I bend the knee is in order to hit below the belt.

The custody sergeant was deeply unimpressed. A pack of tissues, a depleted tube of blister ointment, a couple of pens—one a cheap throwaway and the other a sparkling Parker Duofold—a comb, a watch, a paper clip, a mobile phone, and three envelopes containing letters of support thrust at Makepeace during the morning's march were all that he could produce by way of personal effects from his pockets. No cash, no credit cards, no visible means of support.

"I could 'ave you done for vagrancy," the Sergeant quipped.

"I was on a march, not an outing to John Lewis," Makepeace responded drily.

"Well, at least I can't book you for shoplifting, I suppose."

He finished completing the sheet of personal details, stumbling only over the occupation.

"Since Parliament is prorogued that means I'm technically no longer an MP," Makepeace explained. "Must make me unemployed."

The Sergeant sniffed, sucked the top of his pen, and wrote down "Election Candidate." Then he began reciting the words of the formal caution. "You are charged with the offenses shown below. You do not have to say anything unless you wish to do so..."

"Believe me, Sergeant, I wish to do so. I have no intention of staying silent."

"Which in your case makes for problems. As I understand it, Mr. Makepeace, it's your stated intention as soon as you've been released to go back out on the march—the very thing for which you've been arrested."

“Correct.”

“Can’t have that, can we, sir?”

“You going to arrest me again?”

“No. Not yet at least. Not necessary. Since you’ve made it clear you won’t honor any conditions of bail, I’m proposing not to release you.”

“You must.”

“I can hold you for up to twenty-four hours, sir. That’s the law. I suspect you voted in support of it, too. Give you a bit of time to consider, to cool down. Then we’ll put you before the next sitting of the magistrates’ court”—he glanced up at the wall clock, which showed nearly one on Monday morning—“which’ll be Tuesday.”

“I’m supposed to be in Banbury, almost halfway to London by then.”

“Not this Tuesday, I’m afraid.”

“Sweep out the tumbrel before you put me in it, will you?”

“Don’t be like that, sir. You’ll find your cell very cozy, I’m sure. Although we’re fresh out of feather quilts.”

“And justice.”

“That’s for the magistrates to decide.”

“And, thankfully, the people.”

The silver disk of the moon had risen to shed a pale, monochrome light across the cutting, supplemented at various points along the ridge by lamps that appeared to be powered from car batteries, and punctuated by the occasional brilliance of portable television lights. Across the road where the children sat, a line of candles had been lit, giving the cordon an almost festive appearance. Every twenty minutes or so some forty of the schoolgirls would rise and their places would be taken by a fresh contingent; they were running the human wall in shifts and by the coachload. But who “they” were was not yet apparent.

No shots had been fired, but the intention of those occupying the ridge was clear. Every time one of St. Aubyn’s men approached within twenty yards of the barricade of buses, rifles were raised, chambers loaded, and triggers very audibly cocked. Even had the President and his daughter not been accompanying them,

resistance would have been pointless. They had no cover, no way out apart from bulldozing through the children, so they sat and stared, sitting ducks.

Once the sun had melted from the sky and the inky umbrella of night emerged to cover them, they had discovered how insubstantial was the mountain air and how cold it could grow with nothing but starlight for warmth. Rations, too, were meager; no one had planned on this. And from beyond the cordon they could taste the smoky flavors of roasting lamb painted with garlic and rosemary. Torture on a hungry tongue.

Then three men emerged from behind the row of candles and made their way forward. One carried a battered oil lamp, another a large plastic bottle of water.

“Good evening, English,” the man holding the lamp greeted St. Aubyn as he moved to meet them. The Cypriot, a wrinkled man in his sixties, sported a huge mustache that grew like ram’s horns and entirely obscured his mouth. He held up his hand to indicate he was unarmed. “I hope you are uncomfortable.”

“What is the point of this?” the Colonel demanded. “You know that a thousand British soldiers could be here within hours.”

“And you and everyone in your convoy could be dead within minutes. But let us not deal in hypotheses, English.”

“What do you want?”

“Your surrender.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“Deadly serious. We want to show you British that you are not welcome in this island, not as military occupiers who meddle in our affairs. And by holding you here until you surrender we want to show the world that your game is over.”

“It cannot happen.”

“I don’t think you can prevent it.”

“My Commander at Episkopi will already be organizing our relief.”

“On the contrary, we have already spoken to your Air Vice-Marshal Rae and told him that if he lifts a single finger he will be responsible for an enormous loss of life, mostly British.”

“You’ve already been in touch with him?”

“Indeed. We thought it only fair to let him know since we suspect your own communication facilities on the convoy are somewhat inadequate.”

Damn right. Stuck in a cutting in the middle of the Troodos mountains with all the specialist communications equipment sent back to Episkopi, they might as well have been shouting down a drainpipe from the moon. St. Aubyn had been relying on a search party being sent out as soon as it was realized they were missing.

“And...?” St. Aubyn inquired uncertainly.

“It seems that he is seeking guidance from London. I am afraid you will have an uncomfortable night.”

“We have no food. Precious little water,” St. Aubyn explained, noticing the water bottle.

“Anyone who wishes either food or water will be welcome as our guests. But they will come unarmed and will not be allowed to return.”

The man holding the water placed the bottle on the far side of the line of candles, tantalizing, just beyond reach.

“I fear that on this occasion we shall have to decline your Cypriot hospitality,” St. Aubyn responded drily.

“For now, perhaps. But we shall see.” He glanced up to the starscape that hung in the clear sky where soon would hang the fire of a Middle Eastern sun. “We shall see.”

The Cypriots turned to make their way back beyond the line.

“By the way, who are you?” St. Aubyn demanded.

“Just ordinary Cypriots. I come from the village of Spilia.”

“The Bishop’s men?”

The old man turned and smiled wryly, a gold tooth glistening in the lamplight. “You don’t understand, do you, English? Since yesterday, almost everyone on the island is one of the Bishop’s men.”

Then he disappeared into the shadows.

“Did you have any trouble locating the boys, Jim?”

“None at all, sir,” the Squadron Commanding Officer replied. He’d been up at first light to fly the reconnaissance mission himself. “They’re on the main Nicosia road, just below the village of Spilia.”

He pointed out the location on the large wall map in the Air Vice-Marshal's office. "Bottled up in a cutting by a barricade of buses and"—he coughed apologetically—"what appeared to be a gathering of schoolgirls."

"You're kidding," Rae gasped.

"The schoolgirls appeared to be dancing, sir."

"What is this, carnival week?"

"It has some elements of that, sir. Long lines of cars and buses seem to be approaching the site from every direction. Looks as though it's becoming something of a tourist attraction. Whatever else it means, there's going to be no way to get a relief convoy up there without standing in line in a traffic jam."

"Helicopters?"

"We'd be hovering only feet above the top of the cutting with about as much protection as butterflies. They wouldn't even need to fire, just throw stones. Easier than a coconut shy at a fair."

The Air Vice-Marshal's voice dropped a tone. "So what's the answer, Jim?"

"Buggered if I know, sir."

Rae slumped in his chair over the telephone, which he knew would soon be ringing. "Tell you something, old friend. They ain't going to like this back in London. Ain't going to like it one little bit."

"Serves him bloody right."

The morning election press conference had approached a shambles. Urquhart had appeared on the rostrum at party headquarters beneath a neat Velcro slogan entitled "Growing Together." He had with him a carefully prepared press release and an equally carefully prepared Minister for Agriculture, intent on extolling the expanding fortunes of the great British farmer. The media would have none of it.

The position had been well rehearsed on matters Makepeace and military. No comment. The first was *sub judice* and up to the courts, the second a matter of national security. "You'll have to wait and see," the Party Chairman offered in his introduction, but of course they wouldn't. They attacked the position in waves.

“Is it true that our troops are being stopped by a bunch of schoolgirls?”

“It’s really not that simple...”

“Can you confirm that the military advice was against this convoy heading for Nicosia?”

“Such private discussions must remain confidential...”

“But are there really lives at stake, or is this simply a tangle with St. Trinian’s?”

“This is a serious matter...”

“Will you send in the SAS?”

“Better send in Michael Jackson,” a colleague offered.

“Gentlemen, this has nothing to do with farming...”

“Dig for victory, eh, Prime Minister?”

The television lights seemed uncharacteristically warm this morning. He could feel the prickle of perspiration on his scalp and Prime Ministers aren’t meant to sweat, to show pressure or exasperation. The cruel eye of television allows them nothing more than a cheerful glow, but he wasn’t feeling cheerful.

“And what about Mr. Makepeace, Prime Minister? Has there been any contact between Downing Street and the Birmingham police about his arrest?”

Claire looked on from the wings, studying him closely while she twisted inside. Means, ends, truth, principle, pragmatism. Politics. Weeds choking the rose. She knew he’d have to lie, to deceive, perhaps she would too in his position—except she would never have got herself into that position, would she? She had been trusting, naive. She still had much to learn, even about herself. And much still to do.

The question hung in the air. Urquhart offered a reproachful glance at his wristwatch. “You’ll forgive me, ladies and gentlemen, but this is proving to be an unexpectedly busy day.”

She would attempt to make the walk that day even if she were on her own. Fifteen miles to Stratford-upon-Avon, from a sloping farmer’s field outside Bentley Heath, south of Birmingham, where the M40 and M42 motorways intersect. To show Tom he was not alone.

She had arrived early after the confusion of the night before and had sat on the dewy grass, waiting. Time hung heavily upon the morning air, weighing down her spirits. There was, perhaps, little point in this gesture, but gestures have to be made. Sometimes that is all there is.

And others seemed to agree.

Like daffodils in spring, Makepeace's movement had grown, not yet in flower but already thrusting defiantly through the oppressive snow. They came, in families, with friends, on buses, by train and on foot, some solemn, some singing, carrying banners and babies, trickling into the field until they had grown to a river swollen on injustice. Then, with their unerring instinct for crowds, the first mobile kebab shops arrived. At last she ventured a smile.

She could imagine no more powerful symbol of success, of spring. The cuckoos of journalism would not be far behind.

By nine they numbered nearly five thousand. Not bad for a Monday morning.

Maria had grown with the movement, in confidence, in judgment and independence. She'd never stood before anything more formidable than a class of thirty infants, but armies march to the beat of a drum, and in Tom's absence someone had to do it. They looked to her.

She clambered onto the roof of the small Renault support van to face them. Slowly, the shuffle of noise subsided until all eyes clung to her. She had no words for what was in her heart, but somehow she felt that they all understood and shared.

The breeze caught her face, blowing back her dark hair and rubbing into her cheeks the flush of rebellion. Then, slowly and as though in great pain, she raised her clasped hands high above her head. As Makepeace had done the previous day, in chains. Five thousand pairs of hands rose toward the sky, clenched in defiance, and as many voices sang out in chorus.

From the control van parked in a lay-by beyond the entrance to the field, hurried conversations were flowing up the chain of police command, from the Inspector on the scene all the way to the Chief Constable's office. The marchers had started on their way before the decision came back down. There was little chance of the march being met by violent opposition, at least for the next few hours; skinheads wouldn't be out of bed yet. Anyway, the march was heading

away from Birmingham, out of West Midlands' jurisdiction; so good riddance and the Warwickshire Constabulary could pick up the problem.

Anyway, what were they supposed to do, arrest the whole bloody lot?

“Kiss 'em good-bye, Inspector.”

In the pink light of dawn the cutting glistened like the inside of a wolf's mouth, waiting to snap shut on its prey. It did not last. By midmorning the moisture had burned away and the rocks of pillow lava were batting the sun's rays back and forth in a cruel game of solar ping-pong. The temperature at the road surface was ninety and climbing.

Nicolaou had slept badly. The strain of the last few days was telling on a body that even in youth had been far from robust, and the reserves of character and resilience he had drained during his time at the Lodge had proved impossible to replenish. The sharp cold of the mountain night had cut through to his bones and he was in no mood to eat breakfast, even had there been any. His eyes had grown glassy, he was beginning to run a fever.

But there was still pride.

They had made him as comfortable as the circumstances would allow in the back of one of the four-tonners. He had uttered not a single word of complaint, offering only a brave smile for his daughter, but she was not fooled and refused to disguise her concern. And by midafternoon the temperature even in the shade was over a hundred.

St. Aubyn made hourly rounds of the besieged convoy, trying to maintain morale, emphasizing to all that had the Cypriots been intent on personal harm they would undoubtedly have inflicted it by now.

“Cypos are nice people, sir,” a corporal confirmed, wiping his reddened face with a rag. “Funny thing is, though, when I was a kid we had lots of beetles on the farm. I never got into trouble for crushing them, it was only when I tried to burn the bleedin' things alive with a magnifying glass that me old man gave me a belt. Think I'm beginning to understand what he meant.”

St. Aubyn passed on quickly, unwilling to tangle with such singular logic. The next truck was Nicolaou's.

“Fetch me a little water, Elpída,” her father asked, as St. Aubyn appeared at his feet.

When she was gone he turned to the soldier. “Colonel, I am desperately sorry to tell you this, but I’m not sure if I shall be able to last very much longer.”

St. Aubyn knelt beside him. “Mr. President,” he whispered, “the water your daughter is fetching is all but our final cup. I’m not sure how much longer any of us will be able to last.”

They were able to maintain intermittent radio contact with the outside world through the helicopters that flew surveillance at regular intervals high over the cutting. From this they were able to inform their base that their supplies were exhausted, and to learn that as yet no one had any idea how—or when—they might be released.

As dusk drew in a Wessex appeared on the horizon flying fast and low, no more than two hundred feet, the door to the rear cabin latched back. As it passed overhead two drums emerged, sprouted silken wings and began floating down, laminated red in the light of the melting sun. A straggling cheer rose from hoarse throats as the soldiers watched the water drums floating toward them and the Wessex begin its turn to start another supply run.

The drums were about a hundred feet from the ground when two shotgun blasts rang out on the ridge above. The parachutes exploded into a cloud of rag feathers and the supplies plummeted to the ground. On impact they burst, one drum almost taking a startled soldier with it into the afterlife.

With a dip of its nose, the Wessex abandoned its run and vanished into the evening sky.

Mortima woke to a clap of summer thunder. It was three a.m., the air dank and oppressive, outside the curtain of night was being torn by the white lightning of the storm. He was at the window; he hadn’t slept.

She joined him, her arm snaking through his like links in a chain. “You are troubled, Francis.”

“The gods are troubled tonight. I feel...” He shrugged, unable to finish.

“Francis, this is no time for secrets between us.”

He breathed deep and tried again. “I feel as though they are waging war over me, the gods out there. Fighting over who will dispose of Francis Urquhart.”

“Who will sit at his side in triumph,” she corrected.

He did not argue, nor was he convinced. In the bursts of sharp light pouring through the window she could see nothing but shadow across his eyes, which made them appear as the empty sockets of a skull. Thunder rattled like the chains of the Underworld. The mood frightened her.

“What is it?” she demanded. “Don’t lock me out.”

His eyes flickered back into life, he bowed his head in apology. “We have always shared, Mortima. Everything. The triumphs and the wounds. But now I’m afraid to.”

“Sharing a fear is to cut it in two.”

“I haven’t wanted to burden you.”

“Am I so weak or loose-tongued you feel you have to protect me?”

“I wish to protect you,” he chastised gently, “because I value you beyond all others. And my fears seem so infantile and superstitious. Yet so very real.”

She squeezed his arm more tightly. The atmosphere was stifling, the storm was about to break.

“I told you about Cyprus. Of sacrifice, many years ago,” he continued. “It took place not three miles from where the convoy is being held, near the village of Spilia. And it was marked by a symbol, a sign. A flaming pine. Like a torch that has flickered through my dreams in all the years since.”

“Sometimes it’s not healthy to dwell on dreams.”

“I saw the tree again. The other day beside the Lodge. Burning once more.”

“A symbol of future triumph,” she offered.

“Perhaps a life come full circle.”

“Then a completeness. A whole. Signifying strength.”

“A life that has come full circle can never go around again, Mortima.”

Mortality. With that she could find no argument. Yet the words had helped, he appeared more at ease now, the burden shared, his inner doubts confronted and out in the open. Better to see them. A mile away a trident’s fork of lightning

struck the BT Tower and a final, massive drum roll of thunder vibrated across the rooftops.

“What will you do, Francis?”

“Do what I have always done, the only thing I know how to do. Fight. And hope my gods win.”

He turned to embrace her and the rains came. The gods’ battle was done. They were ready to dispose of him.

It was almost two a.m. when Maria heard the knock on her motel door. She hadn’t been able to sleep, exhilarated by the success of the day’s march and tormented by thoughts of what might happen to Tom in the morning. The knocking grew persistent. She threw the covers aside and was halfway across the room before she hesitated. Who was it? What could be so urgent and why the hell hadn’t they telephoned? Anyway, she was wearing nothing but one of Tom’s shirts.

“Who’s there?” she inquired cautiously.

From out in the corridor a woman’s voice replied; it earned no hint of threat. Maria opened the door but kept it on the chain.

“I’ve brought a message for Tom,” the woman announced, addressing the eye and loose strand of hair that appeared around the door.

Tom. The password to Maria’s new life. Resolved, she slipped the chain and slowly opened the door. It was Claire. Maria didn’t fully recognize her, but Claire had already recognized the shirt—so it was true, they were lovers. The legs were great, long and finely toned. Tom always had appreciated good legs. “I think I’d better come in. Both you and I are a little too exposed here in the corridor.”

The shirt, the legs, and the attractive face with its long and darkly ruffled hair made way.

“Hello, I’m Claire Carlsen,” she said, extending her hand. “Francis Urquhart’s PPS.”

Instantly Maria took a step back and her look of sleepy half recognition turned to sharp disfavor. “Get out. I have nothing to say to you.”

“But I have something to say to you.” Claire held her ground. “Something for Tom.”

“Francis Urquhart wouldn’t lift a finger to help Tom.”

“You’re absolutely right. But I would.”

“You?” She made no attempt to disguise her ill feeling. “Why?”

How could she explain, to Maria of all people? “Perhaps because in helping him I may be able to help myself.”

Maria studied the other woman. The blond features were so different from her own. The salon-chic hair, the Italian shoulder bag, the considered, discreetly expensive style. Everything Maria was not. She had many reasons for distrusting this other woman, but there were also the raw eyes that said Claire hadn’t slept, not since she’d heard of Tom’s arrest and understood why Corder had been so keen to ensure that the driver was well out of trouble’s reach. Trouble Corder knew to expect. Trouble he must have planned. And behind Corder stood only one master.

“I don’t believe I want to help anyone associated with Francis Urquhart,” Maria said firmly.

“We are all associated with Francis Urquhart, whether we like it or not. Tom above all.”

Maria stood in the middle of the bedroom, her arms folded across the shirt, aggression squeezed aside by her concerns for Tom and, perhaps, feminine intuition about this woman.

“You would betray Urquhart?”

“I prefer to think of it as being true to myself. I don’t think I have been at times in these past weeks. I want to make up for it.”

“How?”

“By warning Tom. His arrest was no accident. There were politics behind it. Downing Street politics.”

“Where’s your proof?”

“I have none. It’s no more than a suspicion.”

“Not much to go on.”

“Enough for me to take the very considerable risk of driving through the night to come here.”

“Risk?”

“If Francis found out, there wouldn’t be much point in going back.”

“This could simply be a ruse, a distraction of some sort. Another trick.”

“Please. Let Tom decide that. Tell him I think it was Urquhart.”

Maria made no reply.

“One other thing,” Claire continued. “Urquhart knows you are lovers. He’ll certainly use it against you if he needs to.”

“Don’t try to threaten me.” There was anger now.

“I’m trying to save you.”

“He can’t prove a thing!”

“My advice to you is to stay out of his bed until the election is over. And stay out of his shirts.”

Maria started, looked down at her nightwear and then back at Claire, her intuition suddenly wide awake. “He said there had been someone who’d hurt him. Someone in politics, very different from me.” She studied the tired eyes closely, trying to find the woman within. “Someone who would know his shirts.”

“Someone who still cares for him very much.”

“We have more in common than I thought,” Maria acknowledged grimly. “He still thinks about you.”

“And I still think about him, as you see.”

“But more about yourself.” Maria’s tone carried accusation.

“Perhaps. And particularly about my family.” She hadn’t intended all this self-exposure and sharing of secrets, she wasn’t sure it had helped. “What are you going to do?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Funny thing is,” Maria replied, showing her the door, “neither am I.”

Forty-Three

Never trust a Greek man. The women of Greece don't, and they know them best.

A photograph of a grizzled old Cypriot dominated the front page of the *Independent*. He was seated on a splay-footed dining chair, old military beret pulled askew over his brow, a gap-tooth smile splitting his walnut face. A battered musket of pre-1914 vintage was propped against one knee and a lissom sixteen-year-old schoolgirl seated on the other. By such an army were the British being humbled, “held to ransom by a combination of hockey stick and blunderbuss,” as the *Independent* claimed.

The *Sun* was less tactful—FU! SAY CYPOS ran its headline. Of the carnival atmosphere among the Greeks there was much coverage; of the growing fear and suffering among the British troops very little.

The message of the media was unanimous: FRANCIS URQUHART: FROM TRIUMPH TO TURKEY. Two days is a long time in Fleet Street.

“So what is the military solution, Air Marshal Rae?”

A smell of furniture polish lingered throughout the Cabinet Room; it takes more than war to disrupt a Whitehall cleaning schedule. Over the satellite link to COBRA came the sound of an apologetic cough. “That’s difficult, Prime Minister.”

“Difficult?” Urquhart snapped. “You’re telling me you can’t handle this?”

Across the Cabinet table, Youngblood began to color. Out of sight, the climate was changing in Cyprus, too. The Air Vice-Marshal was a man minted at Harrow and molded by his passion for the brutality of croquet; an unsuitable

case for bullying. Rae blew his nose stubbornly, a noise that across the link sounded like a bull preparing to resist the matador's goad.

"Difficult, sir, because as you will remember this was an expedition that I recommended against."

"Schoolgirls!"

"Precisely. And I cannot envisage a military solution that would not risk endangering the lives of either those schoolgirls or my men, or both."

"Are you telling me you can find no solution?"

"Not a military one. A political solution, perhaps."

"You're suggesting I negotiate with a bunch of pirates?"

"They're not exactly that, Prime Minister. Which is part of the trouble. They have no clear leadership, no individual with whom to negotiate. These are simply ordinary Cypriots united around a common purpose. To get us out."

"What about President Nicolaou?"

"Seems they want him out, too. It's difficult to find much enthusiasm for politicians in this part of the world right now, sir."

Urquhart ignored what he was sure was the intentional irony. He needed Rae. "I have worked hard to bring peace to the island. If they throw out Nicolaou, they throw out the peace deal with him."

"They've never had peace, not in a thousand years. They're the sort who use sticks of dynamite even to go fishing. They'd manage to live without the treaty."

"Then if they want a fight, Air Marshal, I suggest we'd better give them one."

"How does the defendant plead? Guilty, or not guilty?"

Layers of dust and silence hung across the veneered courtroom, which was packed. Thousands more had congregated outside. The march had not happened today, they were needed here. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows, surrounding the dock in a surrealistic halo of fire as though Channel 4 were filming a contemporary adaptation of *Joan of Arc*. Did the defendant have anything to say before he was burned?

"Not guilty!"

Others apart from Francis Urquhart seemed prepared for a fight.

“If you can’t get to the convoy, Air Marshal, then get the convoy to you. Drive it out. Smash the blockade. Call their bluff.” Red-hot coals seemed to roll around Urquhart’s tongue.

“You’re willing to risk all those lives on a hunch they might be bluffing?”

“Strafe the ridge. Keep their heads low. Blow them off if necessary.” He spat the coals out one by one.

“At last count there were also half a dozen television crews on that ridge, Prime Minister.”

“You’d be surprised how fast a journalist can run.”

“And what about the schoolgirls?”

“Tear gas. Scatter them.” Out of Rae’s sight, Urquhart was waving his hands around as if he were already getting on with the job.

“Schoolgirls can’t run as fast as a speeding four-ton truck.”

“Are you contradicting me, Air Marshal?”

“Stating fact.”

“Enough objections. Take the simple route.”

“The simpleminded route.”

The exchange, which had thumped and pounded like hot blood through an artery, had suddenly faltered, its wrists cut.

“Did I hear you correctly, Rae?”

“This is not a game, Prime Minister. Lives are at stake.”

“The future of an entire country is at stake.”

“Forgive me, Prime Minister, if I find it more difficult than you to equate my own personal interest with that of the nation.”

“Do I detect even at this great distance the stench of insubordination?”

“You might say that.”

“Rae, I am giving you a direct order. Run that convoy out of there.”

There was a slight pause, as though the digitalized satellite system was having trouble encoding the words. When they came, however, they sounded throughout the Cabinet Room with the utmost clarity.

“No, sir.”

“How many others were arrested for participating in the Peace March on Sunday, Chief Inspector Harding?” Makepeace was conducting his own defense.

“None, sir.”

“And why was I singled out for your attentions?”

“Because we believed you to be the organizer of the march, Mr. Makepeace.”

“You were right, Chief Inspector. I was. The defendant admits it. I was, am, and shall be organizer of this march.”

In the public gallery a portly matron with bright red cheeks and hair pulled back in a straw bun was about to start applauding, but Maria stayed her hand and advised silence. The Chairman of the Bench scribbled a note.

“So this other march, Chief Inspector, the skinheads. This avalanche of acne about which you had such concern for public order. How many were arrested from their number?”

Although the policeman knew the answer, he consulted his notebook nevertheless. It added an air of authority, and gave him time to think.

“Fifteen, sir.”

The Chairman scribbled again. Clearly this had been a serious disturbance.

“For what offenses, Chief Inspector?”

“Offenses, sir?”

“Yes. Isn’t it customary to arrest someone on the pretext of having committed an offense?”

Laughter rippled through the public gallery and the Chairman frowned until it had dissipated.

Harding consulted his notebook again. “Variously for being drunk and disorderly, behavior likely to cause a breach of the peace, four on narcotics charges, and one case of indecent exposure.”

“Obviously a troublesome bunch. No wonder you were concerned.”

The policeman didn’t respond; Makepeace was being altogether too helpful for his liking.

“I understand the semifinal of the football cup was recently played in Birmingham. Can you remember how many people were arrested then?”

“Not off the top of my head, no, sir.”

“I’ll tell you.” Makepeace consulted a press clipping. “Eighty-three. There were several hundred police on duty that day; you knew there was going to be trouble.”

“Always is on a big match day.”

“Then why didn’t you cancel the match? Order it to be abandoned? Like my march?”

“Not the same thing, is it?”

“No, Chief Inspector. Not the Same Thing at All. Nor was the concert last weekend held at the National Exhibition Center. You arrested over a hundred then. So the disturbances that arose out of those trying to break up my march were really small beer. Barely even root beer, you might say.”

Harding said nothing.

“Well, I might say that. I don’t suppose you could possibly comment.”

Even the Chairman let slip a fleeting smile.

“Then let me return to matters you can comment about, Chief Inspector. Indeed, matters you must comment about. These skinheads, neo-Nazis, troublemakers, call them what you will: arrested for drink, drugs, obscenity, you say?”

Harding nodded.

“Not for offenses under the Public Order Act?”

“I don’t understand the point...”

“It’s a very simple point, Chief Inspector. Can you confirm that I was the only person to be arrested for marching? All the others were arrested for offenses that would have required your intervention whether they were marching, knitting scarves, or performing handstands in Centennial Square?”

Harding seemed about to nod in agreement, but the head refused to fall.

“Come on, Chief Inspector. Do I have to squeeze it out of you like toothpaste? Is it or is it not true that of the several thousand people present on Sunday I was the only one you arrested for the offense of marching?”

“That is technically correct, sir.”

“Excellent. So, we have confirmed that my march was entirely peaceful, that even the activities of the skinheads made it a relatively quiet day for the

Birmingham constabulary, and I was the only one you chose to”—he paused for a little dramatic emphasis—“arrest as a menace to public order.” He smiled at Harding to indicate there was no ill will. “Whose public order, Chief Inspector?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Whose public order? Someone obviously decided that my activities would, if continued, represent a threat. But that was a judgment rather than a fact. Was that your judgment? Did you arrest me on your own initiative?”

“Why, no, sir. Only after the most careful consideration...”

“Whose consideration? Who was it? On whose authority were you acting?”

Harding had known this might be coming, they had to show the police action was not hasty but considered, right to the very top. Even so his knuckles were beginning to glow white on the edge of the witness box. “I was acting on the orders of the Chief Constable.”

“And I wonder where he was getting his orders from?”

“How do you mean?”

Makepeace looked up to the gallery to catch the eye of Maria. He smiled. She nodded, understanding as always. He’d use Claire’s information; what had he got to lose?

“Can you tell me if the Chief Constable’s office was at any time before my arrest in contact with Downing Street?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“It’s easy enough, Chief Inspector. You seem to have had precious little grounds for arresting me as a matter of law. Therefore it was more likely to have been a matter of politics. Was anyone putting on the political pressure?”

“That’s pure speculation.”

“As was your opinion that my marching might cause trouble. Pure speculation.”

“But an opinion that gave me the authority under law to issue directions and you the duty to obey those directions.”

“Wouldn’t have gone down too well at Nuremberg, would it, Chief Inspector?” Makepeace mocked. “Come on,” he cajoled, “was there political pressure?”

“Of course not.”

“You can confirm that there was no contact beforehand between the Chief Constable’s office and any political office?”

“I...don’t know.” Harding was protesting truthfully, and beginning to fluster. The crossfire between a Prime Minister, his Chief Constable, and a former Foreign Secretary was way beyond his twenty-three years of experience. Early retirement beckoned.

“So you can’t confirm that.”

“No, of course I can’t. I wasn’t...”

“Let me be absolutely clear. Are you in a position to deny that there was any political pressure placed on the police to secure my arrest?”

Harding looked desperately at the Bench. The three magistrates stared back impassively, pens poised.

“How can I answer that?”

“A simple yes or no will do. Can you deny it?”

“No.”

“Thank you, Chief Inspector Harding. I don’t think I need to bother you any further.”

COBRA was designed to resolve hostilities, not to generate them. It was not having a good day.

“Youngblood, I want Rae out and replaced within the hour.”

“That will be difficult for me, Prime Minister.”

“Confound you! Will argument take the place of backbone in the British Army? What on earth can be difficult about replacing one officer with another?”

“Nothing difficult in that, Prime Minister. It’s simply that I won’t do it for you.”

“You are refusing me?”

“Exactly.”

The Prime Minister used a short, foul word.

“I realize that for such a refusal you will require my head on the block,” Youngblood continued, “but let me assure you that my speech from the scaffold will be truly magnificent. And forthcoming. I shall, for instance, relate how at

every stage you have rejected and ignored military advice, brought this calamity upon yourself. I shall indicate how the nature and timing of our military efforts in Cyprus have been twisted to what I can only assume is an election timetable—I may be wrong about your motives, of course, it may have been folly rather than downright political fraud that caused you to act as you have done, but I shall be happy for others to make up their own minds.” He cleared his throat, offered a perfunctory smile seeded with scorn. “I surprise myself; I’m rather enjoying this. I shall take considerably less enjoyment, however, from blaming you in public for each and every death, British or Cypriot, which might ensue from your folly.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Urquhart gasped; suddenly he was having difficulty breathing.

“Prime Minister, those are brave boys out there, *my* boys. And innocent children. If any of them comes to harm, I give you my word as an officer that I’ll peg you out on an anthill in front of every polling station in the country.”

The brown felt cloth across the Cabinet table had been rucked between Urquhart’s clenched fists. A film of confusion had spread across his eyes, dimming their brightness. He stared ahead but could no longer see, blind. Or was it that there was nothing to see but darkness? He felt as though he were falling backward into nothing.

The General cleared his throat once again and gathered up the papers before him into a neat bundle.

“To contemplate what could turn into a massacre of children before the television cameras of the world is a form of madness. I shall have no part in it.” He stood, straightened his uniform, adopted the pose of a Viking before the funeral pyre. “Now, sir. Do I have your permission to leave?”

“I am brought to this court for no offense other than my politics. My views do not find favor with some. There were bullies on the streets who tried to stop my march; there are others, lingering in the shadows, who are their accomplices. Who will not accept an Englishman’s right to disagree, to carve his own path, to decide for himself. We fought two world wars for those rights against enemies

without. Now we must face an enemy within. I am called unpatriotic, yet there is no one who loves this country more than I do. I am accused of inciting violence, yet I march only for peace. I am brought before this court, accused of a crime, yet no man clings more closely to justice than do I. And of what am I accused? If it is not a defense for a man to argue that he acted improperly because he was only obeying orders, then surely there can be no offense if a man refuses to obey improper orders. Stubbornness is a quality much to be admired in English oak. I defied the police not because I lack respect for them, but because I have greater respect for the inherent right of an Englishman to say—stuff the lot of you! I want to do it my way. If it is a crime to be English, then I acknowledge that I am guilty. If it gives offense to love freedom and fair play, then, too, I am guilty. If it is a transgression to want peace, then yet again I am guilty. If it is a sin to believe that this country deserves a better form of politics, then condemn me and throw away the key. And do it now. For I shall not hide my views, nor compromise them for the sake of office, neither shall I do deals behind closed doors for things I cannot support in the open sunlight. I have no party, only my politics. And in those politics there is respect, for the law. Love, for my country. Sacrifice, for peace. And defiance for those who would trample over the rights of ordinary men and women. It is they, not I, who are trying to turn this court into a tool of political manipulation, and if they start and succeed here in Birmingham, in the heart of England, where will they stop? And do we have to ask who are ‘they’?”

“Sit down, sit down,” Urquhart instructed, desperately attempting to reassess the situation. But Youngblood remained standing.

Urquhart felt drained; he reached for his glass of water. Everyone noted its tremble. He drained it in a savage gulp but it left trickles at the corners of his mouth and his upper lip damp. His eyes flickered nervously, staring up at Youngblood. “Sit down, man. There are lives at stake. Let us at least talk it through.”

Stiffly and with evident reluctance, the General subsided.

No one spoke as Urquhart’s teeth bit into a knuckle, trying to put himself

back in touch with his own feelings, even if they were only feelings of pain. For a moment he seemed to be floating, freed from his own body, observing the group from a distance, gazing down at a man sitting immobile in the chair reserved for the Prime Minister, a man who seemed trapped like a fly in amber. One of history's victims.

"I apologize, General, if I appeared rash. That was not my intention." He could not feel the tongue that formulated the words, his voice unnaturally taut as though he had swallowed neat mustard.

Youngblood cast a look to turn milk, but said nothing.

"If it is your advice that there is no apparent military solution," Urquhart continued, still stilted, "what suggestions do you have to make?"

Youngblood gave a terse shake of his head.

"Anyone?" Urquhart offered, staring around the table. For the first time he realized he had scarcely once over the last few days asked other members of COBRA to contribute, but even rubber stamps can make a mark.

No one had anything to say. Then the General coughed. "Rae's the man on the spot. I trust anything he has to say."

Urquhart nodded.

"Rae," the General barked, "your thoughts, please."

"My thoughts, gentlemen," the voice carried across a thousand miles, "are that this is a political situation that can only have a political solution."

"Please feel free, Air Marshal," Urquhart croaked.

"Reluctantly I reach the conclusion that if the Cypriots want the bases back, there is little we can do to stop them. Now, next year, sometime soon. They would win. These things have an undeniable momentum."

"But the bases are our most vital listening post throughout the Middle East. Giving them up would be a military and intelligence disaster," Urquhart objected.

"Depends, sir. The Cypriots don't dislike our presence here, indeed they welcome it. Off the boil they're very hospitable. And the bases bring them vast amounts of income and jobs. What they object to is our being freeholders in their own country."

"What are you suggesting, Rae?" Youngblood pushed.

“If I were a politician, sir”—his tone conveyed his delight that he was not —“I’d be thinking about a deal. Keep us all as friends. Let them know we’re happy to return the title to the base areas, then do a deal to lease them back. We keep the bases, the Cypriots keep the income. Everybody’s happy.”

“Intriguing,” Youngblood muttered.

Urquhart’s expression was of stone, his mind like an ice field that was slowly cracking. As he sat silently, independent thoughts began to swirl around him.

The Party Chairman shook his head. “It would be a political disaster.”

“Not necessarily. Not if we made it our initiative,” the Defense Secretary contradicted. “A solution that would keep our reputation as peacemakers in the island. After all, who could object? Dick Clarence has already publicly backed us in Cyprus, he couldn’t bleat.”

“And the only other likely source of sound is Tom Makepeace. He’s under arrest.” The Attorney General sounded positively cheerful.

A mood of enthusiasm began to warm the room, gradually beginning to thaw Urquhart’s frozen thoughts. Perhaps the fly was not entombed in amber; perhaps it had only brushed against a web and might yet struggle free.

A low knock at the door interrupted their deliberation. A tentative head appeared around the door, followed by the rest of a private secretary who made his way toward the Prime Minister’s chair. He placed a piece of paper on the table, then retired.

Slowly Urquhart’s eyes began to focus and read.

No matter how hard the fly struggled, there was no escape.

Thomas Makepeace had been acquitted.

Forty-Four

The rules of politics are simple. Don't expect too much, don't attempt too little, and above all, never, never sleep soundly.

The dying sun had cast a hard shadow across the cutting. The temperature was still over a hundred but Nicolaou was shivering, as he had been all afternoon. His heartbeat was irregular, his voice a low tremble, but his mind had not lost its edge.

"I cannot leave, Elpída."

"If you stay, Father, you will die." She knelt beside him, mopping his brow.

"I'm not afraid. I've grown used to being threatened with death in the recent days." It was his attempt at being lighthearted to dispel oppression, but it failed. The atmosphere remained fetid, laden with failure. The pool of pale light cast by the lamp inside the truck had drained the color from his face, leaving only two small spots of protest that suffused the very tops of his cheeks. The rest of him looked like congealing wax.

"Come with me. Now." Her plea betrayed her desperation. She pulled at him, feeling every bone in his frail hand, but he refused to rise from his mattress of blankets. He was no longer sure he was able, even if he tried.

"You should think about it, sir," St. Aubyn intervened, his squatting form indistinct in the gloom that was slowly beginning to devour the far end of the truck. "There's nothing to be gained from senseless suffering."

"That is...noble of you, Colonel." Nicolaou's breathing was growing shallow; he was struggling for his words. "But you risked your lives to rescue us. I cannot desert our British friends."

“Father, grow up.”

Her rebuke slapped across his face. His eyes, soft-glazed and distant, struggled to focus.

“They did not come to save our necks but those of their High Commissioner. And Mr. Urquhart,” she continued. “Isn’t that right, Colonel?”

St. Aubyn shrugged. “I am a military man. I do as I am instructed. A soldier isn’t trained to ask why.”

Nicolaou flapped his hand in feeble protest. “But Mr. Urquhart has been such a good friend to us, Elpída. The peace...”

“It is our peace, not his. And it’s probably lost, anyway.”

The old man flinched. His suffering had been borne on the hope that all he had fought for would yet come to pass; the contemplation of failure drained him like leeches. “Please tell me I haven’t thrown it all away.”

“You cannot fight on two fronts at once, Father, seeming to give so much away to the Turks while giving in to the British. As much as we want peace, we Cypriots also have our pride. Sometimes that’s more important.”

His hand shook in confusion, reaching for his daughter. “All I have done, Elpída, I have done for you and those like you. For the future.”

“No, *Baba*. You haven’t.”

Nicolaou started choking in confusion. St. Aubyn leaned forward, whispering—“Steady on, miss”—but she ignored him.

“That’s why I want you to leave here and join those people outside,” she continued.

“Why? Why?” her father moaned.

“Because, *Baba*, they are right. And for the British to occupy Cypriot land as lords and masters is wrong.”

“You never said such things before.”

“You never asked me. Nor did you ask anyone else. But Cyprus is changing. Growing up.” She turned to St. Aubyn. “Colonel, believe me, you will be welcomed in my house at any time. As a friend. But I don’t want you in my house as of right.”

He nodded, but said nothing. The concept of retreating from distant outposts was not a novel one to a British soldier.

“Why do you scourge me so, Elpída?” Flakes fell from the President’s fading voice.

“Because I love you, *Baba*. Because I don’t want your life to end in failure. Because if we cross the line, join them, you will not only be doing what I believe to be right for our island, but also what is best for you. Salvaging pride, yes, and a little justice from the wreckage that has been strewn about Cyprus by the British. Maybe even saving the peace, too.”

St. Aubyn coughed apologetically. “The gentlemen outside, sir, have insisted that you and your daughter will only be allowed across the line if you submit your resignation.”

“The presidency has become an uncomfortable bed on which to lie.”

“You cannot make peace with the Turks, Father, until you have brought peace back to our own community.”

“And, it would seem, to my own family.” Nicolaou sank back onto his rough pillow of blankets, exhausted but alert. His bony fingers gripped his daughter’s hand, flexing like the beat of his heart as he struggled to find a way through the maze of his emotions.

“What is to be done? Can I achieve more by remaining in office, or by resigning?”

“Father, you can achieve nothing by dying.”

“To lose everything? The presidency? The peace? You, Elpída?”

“*Baba*, you will never lose my love,” she whispered, and he seemed to gain strength from her words. He squeezed her hand with more certainty, propping himself awkwardly on an elbow, barely able now to see beyond the small pool of lamplight that lit his makeshift bed.

“Colonel, if I decided to leave, would you allow me to?”

“You are not my prisoner, sir.”

“Then, if you don’t mind, I think I shall.”

The Colonel nodded and reached forward as though to help Nicolaou rise. Elpída waved him away.

“No, thank you, Colonel. If he can, I would like my father to walk back to his fellow Cypriots without leaning on a British arm.”

“I do feel stronger somehow,” her father acknowledged.

“Why do you think I have been kicking you so hard, *Baba*,” she asked, kissing him gently. “You always become so stubborn when you get angry.”

As she helped her father down from the truck she turned to St. Aubyn. “I did mean what I said, Colonel. That you will always be welcome in my house. As a friend.”

It was twilight. The candles flickered, the gentle song of a Cypriot schoolgirl quavered on the evening air as the final colors of purple and fire stretched out along the horizon like fingers drawing on the curtain of night. Leaning heavily on the arm of his daughter, the President of Cyprus turned his back on the British and walked the fifty yards to rejoin his countrymen.

The new glass and front door had arrived that morning. A tax demand, too, along with an invitation to arrange a meeting with a sales tax inspector. Vangelis was ready to resume business and already the wolves were circling, drawing nearer.

He felt hounded in every direction he looked. On television he had watched the scenes of Makepeace rejoicing outside the magistrates’ court, raising his hands high above his head as though still manacled, receiving the same sign back from the spilling crowd and accepting their adulation and fervent endorsement. The victor. An Englishman who, so far as Passolides knew, had never set foot in Cyprus was now treated as his homeland’s savior. Honor built on the sacrifices of others. Sacrifices, thought Passolides, like his own.

The screen showed scenes of rejoicing from the island itself, too, as old men, gnarled and bent double like ancient olive trees, danced with young girls and waved rifles and flasks like some scene out of *Zorba* in celebration of the defection and deliverance of Nicolaou.

Everywhere he saw the happiness of others, but Passolides had no part in the joy. These should have been his victories, his accomplishments, yet once again as throughout his life he had found himself excluded.

And the crown-encrusted envelopes of officialdom sat on the table before him. They were pursuing him, the agents of British imperialism, as they had done all those years ago, into his every hiding place, leaving him no sanctuary.

Inside he writhed like a worm cleft by a spade, a dew of despair settled upon

his eyes, his mind blanked by bitterness. With a great cry of despair he lashed out, throwing the bottle from which he was drinking at the Satan's eye of a television screen. The bottle bounced off, hit the new window. Something cracked.

But Vangelis didn't care anymore.

Urquhart had watched those same newscasts as Passolides, his sense of despair equally profound. He had watched the clasped hands of Makepeace rise above his head, then fall, and rise, and fall again. To Urquhart it was as though Makepeace were clutching the haft of a dagger and he could feel the assassin's blade striking time and again into his own body. In Makepeace's triumph lay his own doom.

It was late; he had summoned Corder. "Still here?"

"Thought you might need some company."

"Kind. You're a good man, Corder. Good man." A pause. "I've got something for you."

Corder listened attentively, studying the Prime Minister all the while. Urquhart's stiff expression belonged in an abattoir, his voice strangely monotone, his reflexes mechanical. A man changed, or changing, struggling to hide the despair.

When Urquhart had finished, Corder could find only one word. "Why?"

He had never questioned an instruction before.

Urquhart's voice was no louder than a hoarse whisper; he seemed almost to choke on every word. "I have just given the order for the convoy in Cyprus to surrender; I have no option. To accept defeat is offensive to every bone in my body. It will kill me, Corder; they will flay me alive and demand my head on a pike. Somehow I must fight on, in any way I can."

"But why this way?"

"Please, don't ask me, Corder; I'm not even sure myself. Perhaps because it is all I have left."

The impact was catastrophic, utterly irresistible. Yet, like a dam that had held back the rising flood waters until it could no longer resist, the first visible cracks took some hours to appear. The news of the final humiliation, the announcement that St. Aubyn's men had set aside their weapons in order to engage in "unconditional discussions" with the Cypriots, came too late for the morning newspapers, and the TV images of the surrender shot through night lenses that appeared on breakfast news were too grainy and indistinct for full impact. Nevertheless, the rumblings of internal collapse were everywhere to be heard.

The noise emanating from the Member of Parliament for Milton Keynes resembled not so much a rumble as a drum being repeatedly struck like a call to arms, unable as he was any longer to confine beneath the straining buttons of his waistcoat all the righteousness that had been building since his hopes of preferment at the last reshuffle had been dashed. "Tom has been a colleague and friend of mine for many years," he pronounced from the back seat of the radio car parked in his driveway. "Both Tom and I have served our party faithfully and I have enormous respect for Tom." He clung to the name like a life belt in stormy seas, as though by continued repetition he might convince others of what he had only just convinced himself. "The March is due to pass through my constituency later today and I very much hope to be marching with it."

The battle for the Blessing of Makepeace had begun.

"The party does not belong to Francis Urquhart nor to any one man. I believe Mr. Urquhart should announce his intention to step down immediately after this election. My choice for his replacement will be Tom Makepeace."

"And if the Prime Minister does not make such an announcement?" the interviewer asked from the London studio.

"Frankly, I don't think he's got any choice."

From party headquarters came reports of a flood tide of telephone calls from activists demanding resignation—whether of the Prime Minister or the Member for Milton Keynes, the reports did not make clear. In any event a press release was issued in immediate denial, but when journalists tried to check the story they couldn't get through. The switchboard was jammed.

And from Cyprus came news of Nicolaou's formal resignation and the first pronouncement of his successor, Christodoulou, the former Vice President who

owned the BMW concession on the island. “We shall not rest,” he told a tumultuous press conference, speaking into a bouquet of microphones, “until the blood shed by our fathers has been honored and all soil on this island has been returned to Cypriot control.” Even many journalists started applauding. “And while I believe that we should pursue every avenue of peace with our Turkish Cypriot neighbors, I cannot sign the proposed peace treaty as it stands. A more fair division of the offshore oil resources is vital, and I shall be contacting President Nures immediately to seek further discussions.” Standing beside him was Elpída, strained but seraphic, who nodded encouragement before reading out a statement of support issued by her father from his hospital bed.

Throughout the day the cracks in the dam grew wider, support draining away, the trickles of defiance becoming great bursting geysers of rebellion that were sweeping Francis Urquhart into oblivion.

By the following morning the mood approached hysteria. The van bringing the early editions of the newspapers into Downing Street had a loose hubcap; the noise echoed from the walls of the narrow street like the rattle of a cart over cobbles on its way to the Tyburn scaffold. Since elements of both main parties and any number of pressure groups now claimed Makepeace as their spiritual leader, the outcome of the election was utter confusion; party lines were crumbling into the chaos of a civil war battlefield, and among the tattered ranks roamed packs of reporters trying to find a yet more injurious example of defection from the colors of Francis Urquhart. A telephone poll indicated that less than ten percent of voters wanted Urquhart to remain as Prime Minister; as the accompanying editorial claimed, they must all have been supporters of the Opposition. Attempts were being made to contact sufficient Government election candidates to discover who in their opinion should be their next leader; the answer was overwhelming. Makepeace—if he would have it. But Makepeace was unmoved, saying nothing as his march wound its way toward the outskirts of Milton Keynes, growing by the thousand with every passing hour.

It seemed that with every passing minute the mob at the gate grew in size. Words that in the morning could be attributed only to anonymous but highly placed sources within the Government party by afternoon were having definitive names attached to them; backbenchers, under pressure from small majorities and

small-minded wives, rushed to join the execution squad before they were placed against the wall themselves. Ministers were said to be in constant contact and cabal, to be in open rebellion. It was reported that at least two covens of Ministers would be gathering around the dining tables of London that evening to discuss the removal of the Prime Minister—not if, but when and how. The reports were so prolific that the venues had to be changed at the last minute.

And across the front page of Jasper Mackintosh’s new journal, the *Tribune*, was the most extraordinary allegation of all. Against photographs of sick and weary British soldiers, some of whom were on stretchers recovering from dehydration and heat exhaustion, stood the headline:

FU PLANNED GERM WARFARE

•••

It was feared last night that the Prime Minister planned to use chemical and biological weapons against the Cypriots before he was forced to surrender. The alarming condition of the British soldiers involved in the fiasco has led to allegations that they were contaminated by their own bioweapons which Francis Urquhart himself had ordered to be carried secretly on the convoy. “Such orders would make Urquhart a war criminal, guilty of the most serious breaches of the Human Rights Convention,” a peace spokesman said...

Mackintosh was on his yacht in St. Katharine’s Dock, the fashionable waterhole that nestles beside the looming columns of Tower Bridge, when the phone call came.

“Why do you print it when you know it’s not true?” The voice was hoarse, with a slight Scottish Lowland taint, as happened when he was on the point of exhaustion.

“Truth, Francis? A strange new suit for you to be wearing.”

“Why do you print it?” Urquhart demanded once more.

“Because it does you damage. Hurts you. That’s why.” From behind Mackintosh came the sound of an exploding cork and the tinkle of young female laughter.

“I thought we had an understanding.”

“Sure. You would poke sticks in my eye for as long as you could. Then it would be my turn. You’re through, Francis. There’s nothing more you can threaten me with, no taxation changes, no monopoly references. Because one week from today they’re going to hang you in front of every polling station in the country. And I’ll host the celebrations.”

“Is there nothing we can...”

But already the line was dead.

Forty-Five

I would like to take my time about getting old, but there is a time and a place for everything. Even death.

Late that evening he called them in, one by one. His Cabinet. The Praetorian Guard whose bodies would litter the steps of the Capitol before they would allow any enemy to draw within striking distance of Caesar. In theory, at least.

Claire had counseled against calling them in separately, but he had been firm. They were agitated, like sheep, if one scattered the rest would surely follow. Herd them, isolate them, stare them down, allow them to find no strength in numbers; on their own he might cow them into support before they melted away into the mob. But at his core he knew they weren't up to it; they would fail him.

He sat in the Cabinet Room, in the chair reserved for the Prime Minister, the only one with arms. Three phones beside him. The rest of the table was bare, stripped of blotters and any other sign of Ministerial rank, covered only with a sad brown felt cloth. He wanted his Ministers to have no hiding place, no trappings of office, nothing behind which to hide. He needed to know. Outside it was drizzling.

He had intended to start with Bollingbroke, but the Foreign Secretary was returning from a Council of Ministers meeting in Brussels and there was a delay somewhere along the way. Instead he got Whittington—how he wished it had been Whittington's wife; then, at least, he would have found some solid response. There was a knock at the door and Claire brought him in. He seemed reluctant.

"Come in, Terry," Urquhart encouraged quietly. "It's my scaffold you're

stepping on, not your own.”

The Minister sat opposite and dabbed at his mouth nervously with a handkerchief that then slipped surreptitiously to his temple, wiping away the dew that was beginning to rise.

“Terry, let me get straight to the point. Do I have your continued support as Prime Minister?”

“You will always have my personal support, Prime Minister.” A whimpering smile appeared on his damp lips, then as quickly evaporated. “But I can’t see how we can win, you know, with...”

“With me?”

“With circumstances as they are.”

He was bleating, even sounding like a sheep.

“Will you make a public statement of your support for me?”

The dew at Whittington’s temples had turned into an unmistakable nervous damp. “It’s so very difficult out there,” he muttered, waving a rubber wrist. “I would hate to see you defeated, Francis. As an old friend, I must tell you. I don’t think you can win. Perhaps, perhaps...you should consider announcing your resignation. You know, protect your unbeaten record?”

It sounded preprepared, secondhand. A ditty passed through Urquhart’s mind, about something borrowed, something blue.

“And what does your wife think?”

“She feels exactly the same,” Whittington added, too hurriedly. He’d given the game away.

Urquhart leaned forward. “A statement of clear support from my Cabinet would help give a slightly less striking impression of a sinking ship.”

Whittington’s lips moved in agitation but he said nothing, merely flapping his arms about. He was already swimming.

“Then will you at least give me until this weekend to decide? Before you say anything publicly?”

Whittington’s head nodded, falling forward, hiding his eyes. They were stinging; he wasn’t sure whether from the sweat or because he was on the verge of crying.

With a flick of his wrist Urquhart dismissed him. Claire already had the door

open. It was raining harder now.

Maxwell Stanbrook came in next.

“So, Max?”

“First, Francis, I want to tell you how grateful I am for everything you have done. For me. The party. For the country. I mean that, most sincerely.”

“So you’ll support me? Publicly?”

Stanbrook shook his head. “Game’s up, old dear. Sorry. You cannot win.”

“I made you, Max.”

“I know. And so I’ll go down with you, too. I’m honest enough to recognize that. Which is why you should recognize that I’m being honest about your situation.”

“There is nothing to be done?”

“Get out on the best terms available, Francis. Which is to announce your resignation now, before the election. Give the rest of us half a chance. And keep your unbeaten record into the bargain. ‘Undefeated at any election he fought,’ that’s what the history books will record. Not a bad epitaph.”

Protecting his unbeaten record. The same formula used by Whittington. An interesting coincidence, if it were.

“Will you issue a statement of support on my behalf?”

“If that’s what you want. But in my opinion it will do you no good.”

It hurt. He’d had hopes of Stanbrook. Deep within he felt a shaking, of foundations crumbling, of new fissures beginning to appear below the waterline.

“Thank you at least for being so honest. Please, give me until this weekend. Say nothing until then?”

“You have my word on it. And my hand on it, Francis.”

Melodramatically Stanbrook marched around to Urquhart’s side of the table and offered his hand. At close quarters Urquhart could see the lack of sleep that bruised his eyes. At least it hadn’t been easy for him.

Catchpole, the next, was in tears. He blubbed copiously, scarcely capable of coherent expression throughout the interview.

“What, in your view, should I do, Colin?”

“Protect”—*blub*—“protect”—*cough*.

“I think what you’re trying to say is that I should resign now in order to

protect my unbeaten record and place in the history books. Is that right?"

Catchpole nodded. Coincidence be damned. They'd been rehearsing, the whole wretched lot of them.

Except for Riddington. The Defense Secretary strode in, but declined to sit, instead standing stiffly at the end of the Cabinet table near the door. His double breast was buttoned, on parade.

"I have sat too long at your table, Prime Minister. In recent days at meetings of COBRA I have watched you abuse your position of trust for entirely political ends, putting the lives of British soldiers at risk for your own personal glorification and salvation."

"You never mentioned this before."

"You never asked me before. You never consulted anyone. You only bullied."

True enough. And Urquhart had expected no less from Riddington, who had refused to support him at the final gathering of COBRA, insisting with the others that St. Aubyn's men be allowed to bring an end to their misery.

Urquhart seemed to smile, parting his lips as though being offered a final cigarette. "So who will defend, if not Defense?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was merely musing. I suppose a public statement of support for me is out of the question?"

There was a whimsical tone in Urquhart's voice as though he found humor in his situation. Riddington offered an expression of bad oysters and did not reply.

"I have one last thing to ask," the Prime Minister continued. "You have sat at my Cabinet table for more than eight years. In return, I ask you for two days. By Saturday I shall announce my intentions. In the meantime, if you cannot support me, I'd be grateful if you could at least refrain from making public attacks. Leave me a little dignity. Leave the party a few pieces for someone else to pick up."

Riddington had on his most obstinate Dunkirk expression, but acquiesced. He gave a perfunctory nod, then turned on his heel and left.

For a long moment a complete stillness enveloped the Cabinet Room. Urquhart did not stir, did not appear to breathe. Claire, who had been sitting

discreetly in a corner by the door, wondered if he had gone into a trance, so deeply did he seem to have retreated within himself. A tiny pulse on the side of his temple seemed the only sign of life, beating away the seconds until...Until. There was no avoiding it. Even he knew it. Then he returned from wherever he had been, and was with her once again.

“Like trying to stoke a furnace with dead rabbits, isn’t it?” he muttered grimly.

She marveled at his composure, admired his resilient humor. “I wonder what *he* would have done,” she asked softly, indicating the portrait of Robert Walpole, the first and longest-serving holder of the office of Prime Minister.

Urquhart rose to examine the oil above the fireplace, gripping the white marble mantel. “I’ve been thinking about that a great deal in these last days,” he said softly. “They accused him of corruption, condemned him, even imprisoned him in the Tower. Called him a warmonger, even before Mr. Mackintosh got his hands on the media.” His eyes seemed to dissolve like children’s sweets. “They compelled him to resign. Yet he always found a way to bounce back from disaster. Always.”

“A shining example.”

“History has a devilish strange way with the facts. I wonder whether history will be as kind with me.”

“Is it important to you?”

He turned sharply, his eyes burning with mortification. “It’s the only thing I have.”

The bitterness, hemmed around by dogged humor, was about to burst forth but at that moment there was a commotion from the door. It burst open, and in bounced Bollingbroke, breathless.

“*Et tu, Brute?*”

“Beg pardon?”

Urquhart closed his eyes, shook from them the venom and self-pity, and smiled. “My little joke, Arthur. What news of Brussels?”

“Full of bloody foreigners. Sorry not to have got here earlier, Francis.”

“You are with me?”

“Till my last breath. I dictated a statement of support to the Press Association

from the car telephone on my way in.”

“Then you are doubly welcome.”

“Bloody thing is, Francis, it won’t do either of us the least bit of good.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause you and me are for the high jump, there’s no denying it. That bugger Makepeace has got this election by the balls.”

And Makepeace marched on. To Luton. Every hour brought Makepeace more support, and closer to London. With every step the march grew in size, slowing him down and giving the Metropolitan Police Commissioner cause for concern. But after the fiasco in Birmingham, he dared not bar the march from the nation’s capital.

So they marched, onward to Trafalgar Square. To Francis Urquhart’s funeral pyre.

Forty-Six

Love colors life, but it is necessary to hate in order to make a man truly happy and give him a sense of direction.

He had stolen away by moonlight. Through the Downing Street press department, down into the labyrinth of corridors that connects Number Ten to the Cabinet Office on Whitehall, past the old brick walls where the Tudor King's tennis court used to be. Not even Corder was with him.

Even at midnight the center of the city was bustling with activity, mostly vehicular, Whitehall becoming something of a racetrack for delivery vans and late-night buses. The activity helped hide him, ensure he did not stand out. As he came down the steps from the Cabinet Office, past the startled security guard, he ducked away from the police presence that stood at the entrance to Downing Street. George Downing himself had been a rogue, a spy for both sides in the Civil War, a man steeped in duplicities and lacking in either principle or loyalties. Educated at Harvard. And they had given him a knighthood and named the most important street in the kingdom after him. Whereas he, Francis Urquhart, would be fortunate if they allowed his name to be placed even on a headstone.

There were monuments to the dead everywhere. The Cenotaph. The Banqueting Hall beneath whose windows they had with one blow severed the head of their liege lord and king, Charles I. Statues to fallen heroes, *in memoriam* and immortal. The entire avenue stood on what had once been the old funeral route from Charing Cross to St. Margaret's until the King, disgusted with the wailings of the common herd outside his window, built them a new cemetery

at St. Martin-in-the-Fields so they could bury the dead without spoiling his dinner. At night in the shadows and with a scimitar moon overhead you could all but hear the creak of ancient bones in this place, a place of remembrance. And he so wanted to be remembered. What else was there for him?

He stood on the stone bridge at Westminster, gazing down into the silty-ink tidal water that lapped against the piers, its gentle murmurs haunting like the witching calls of Sirens. An emptiness yawned beneath him that seemed to offer peace, release, as easily as falling into the open mouth of a grave. What fragments he had left to lose could so readily be given up. Yet he would not do it, take the coward's way out. Not the way to be remembered.

He rattled the spiked and rosetted gates to New Palace Yard—the Members' entrance to the precincts of the House of Commons. Members of Parliament were forbidden access to the Palace of Westminster while an election was being fought, except for the sole purpose of collecting their letters. Even during elections constituents still complained, about drains, about neighbors, about missing social security checks, all the things that burdened a politician's life, and a carefully worded response might yet win a vote. The policeman who swung back the gate in answer to his call offered a respectful salute—Urquhart was well past, his heels clicking on the cobbles before the semislumbering officer had recovered sufficient wit to register what he had seen and wonder why on earth the Prime Minister was calling in person and at midnight to collect his mail. But he was entitled.

Urquhart did not head for the Members' Post Office, which in any event was closed; instead he made his way up the stairs and through the stone archways to the rear of the Chamber; he met no one. But he knew he was not alone, the echo of his footsteps accompanied him like a cohort of distant memories. He had come to the long corridor that ran behind the Chamber, usually noisy with the bustle of errands and anticipation, now ghost still. Before him stood the great Gothic doors to the anteroom of the Chamber. They should have been locked, as should the second set of doors into the Chamber itself, but electricians had been busy rewiring the sound system and the constant unlocking and relocking of doors would have put them into double overtime. The doors swung open on their great brass hinges.

The darkness was intense, split only by pale splashes of moonlight from the high windows of the west wall, but he knew every inch by instinct. He had stepped onto this stage, the greatest stage of all, so many times yet it never failed to impose its majesty. The atmosphere, heavy with history, clung to him, lifted and elated him; he could feel the memories of centuries crowding around, the ghosts of the great whispering in the wings and waiting for him, Francis Urquhart, to join them.

He pushed his way past the waving Order Papers and jabbing elbows, stepping over the outstretched legs, making his way toward his seat. At one point he stumbled, forced to rest a hand on the lip of the Clerk's Table for support, sure he had been tripped by some extending ankle—Gladstone's, perhaps, the rakish Disraeli's or recumbent Churchill's? Did he hear the clip of a closing handbag, smell stale Havana? But then he had reached it, the space on the bench left for the Prime Minister, waiting, as it always had been, for him. He sat, embracing the formal subtlety of its leather, savoring the spice of great events that lingered in its fabric and brought forth the familiar rush of adrenaline. He was ready for them. But they were quiet tonight, everyone waiting to hear him, hanging on his every word, knowing that these were momentous times.

He stood to face them, his legs propelling him firmly upward until he was standing at the Dispatch Box, gripping its sides, rubbing his palms along its bronzed edging, afraid of no one. He would have his place in history, whatever it cost, show them all, those faint hearts and foes who surrounded him like men of Lilliput. He'd make them remember Francis Urquhart, and tremble at the name. Never let them forget.

Whatever it cost.

He pounded the Dispatch Box and from around the Chamber came answering echoes like the thunder of applause washing down across a thousand years. He could hear them all, great men, one woman, their voices a united chorus of approval, emerging from the dark places around this great hall where history and its memories were kept alive. They spoke of pain, of the sacrifice on which all legend is raised, of the glory that waited for those with character and audacity enough to seize the moment. And their thumping acclaim was for him. Francis Urquhart. A welcome from the gods themselves.

“Excuse me, Mr. Urquhart. You shouldn’t be here.”

He turned. In the shadows by the Speaker’s Chair stood a Palace policeman.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the man repeated.

“You are of that opinion, too? It seems the whole mortal world is of the same view.”

“No, I didn’t mean that, sir,” the policeman responded, abashed. “I merely meant that it’s against the rules.”

“My apologies, officer. I only came here for...one final look. Before the election. A chance to reflect. It has been a very long time.”

“No worries, Mr. Urquhart. I’m sure no one will mind.”

“Our little secret?” Urquhart requested.

“Course, sir.”

And with a low bow of deference and a little light from the policeman’s torch, Francis Urquhart bade farewell to the gods. For the moment.

It was Passolides’s custom to rise before dawn, the habit of mountain warfare fingering in the mind of an old man. And while he embraced the cover of night and paid silent tribute to past times, he would gather the freshest of fish from the local market. A habit with purpose.

Unfriendly eyes watched him leave and it was while he was pondering over shells of crab and fillet of swordfish that hostile hands went about their work. Grateful, as Passolides had once been, for the cover of night.

When he tried to turn into the street, laden with paper-wrapped parcels of food, he found his way barred by a large plastic ribbon and a police officer.

“Sorry, sir. No one allowed in until they’ve finished damping down.”

The parcels slid to the pavement.

“But that is my house.”

A hundred yards away, hemmed in by fire engines, the windows of his home stared out sightless across the street, his newly restored restaurant now a gaping, toothless grin. He had been gone little more than an hour. It had taken considerably less than that to destroy almost every possession he had.

They set out that morning for Watford, on the very outskirts of London. It would be the final stop before their triumphal entry into the city itself, and already the route was lined with images of Makepeace and other trophies, strewn along their path like rose petals. A conqueror's welcome for a man of peace. And one day to go.

Forty-Seven

Grasp the moment. Grasp the dagger! Destroy others before they can destroy you. And if that is not possible, it is better to destroy yourself.

Claire, in answer to his summons, found him writing letters in his study. He brightened as he saw her; he appeared pale with exhaustion but more at ease, as though he had ceased to battle against the impossible current and was finally reconciled to being carried downstream.

“Can I help?” she offered.

“You may help yourself, if you want. I’m writing out a list. Disposing of a few baubles and trinkets to those who have been kind.” He looked at her intently. “My Resignation Honors.”

“You have decided to go?”

“That has been decided for me, I no longer have any say in the matter. But in the manner of my passing...” He waved the piece of paper. “Can I find something for you?”

“There is nothing that I want,” she replied quietly.

“For Joh, perhaps?”

She shook her head.

He fell to pondering. “My doctor. Corder, too. Mortima, especially Mortima. She must have something.”

“You sound,” Claire suggested slowly, “like a man disposing of his most personal possessions from his...”

“Deathbed?” He completed her thought. His cheeks filled with a little color, an expression of defiance began to erase the bruises around his eyes. “No!” he

said with feeling. "I intend to live forever."

He returned to the papers on his desk. "Tell me, what do you think Geoffrey deserves?"

"You want to give him something?" The words stuck in her throat like dry biscuit.

"But he surely merits some recognition." An ironical smile played about his lips but reached no further. The eyes remained like old ice. "You may have noticed he was unable to attend our little session in the Cabinet Room yesterday, sent a message saying that he was away campaigning around the country. So I tracked him down by phone. He swore loyalty. To me. Which was why he was working so hard in the constituencies, he said. Tireless, the man is tireless. D'you know, it sounded as though he was almost in tears."

She shook her head in evident bewilderment.

"You misjudge him, my dear; our Geoffrey has never been idle or lacked passion."

"In his own cause most certainly, but in others'?"

"Why, I even asked if he would issue a public statement of support, which he readily agreed to do. I have obtained a copy."

He indicated a press release on the corner of his desk. She read it quickly. An appeal for party unity. Emphasis on achievements. A call to arms, of battles still to be fought and victories to be gained even through difficult times. Of faith in the future.

"But there's not a single mention of your name."

"Precisely. His trumpet sounds, but not in praise of me or even in epitaph. It's the first rallying cry in his own leadership campaign. He wants my job."

"You expected any less?"

"Absolutely not."

"So why do you want to give him something?"

"Language is important in this job, and I've learned to use my words with care." It sounded almost as if he were embarking on a lecture. "I asked you what he *deserved*."

"Disappointment. But are such things still within your power?"

"I may be mortally wounded but that makes me dangerous, not incapable. I

am still Prime Minister. I can prick him, prick them all. If I want.”

“Do you?”

“In his case?” He pondered, one last time. “Yes.”

“Why are you so unrelenting?”

He picked up three envelopes, as yet unsealed. “Because some people are born to ruination. Geoffrey is one.” He sealed the first envelope, addressed to the chairman of Booza-Pitt’s local association, regretting that “in light of the new circumstances” the offer of an honor would have to be withdrawn.

“Because in that process of personal ruination,” Urquhart continued, “Geoffrey would also ruin the party.” He licked the gum of a second envelope, intended for the Chairman of the House of Commons Committee of Privileges, containing a copy of Geoffrey’s letter of resignation with its tale of marital and financial malpractice. It bore the day’s date.

“And because he has tried to betray me.” The third envelope, also with a copy of Geoffrey’s letter, was sealed. It was addressed to the editor of the *News of the World*.

“Power is there to be used, Claire. To command people and their destinies. We talk of economics, of ethics. But we mean people.”

“Destroy others. Before they destroy us. Is that it?”

“No!” His eyes were sharp. “You must understand, yet you don’t. We all talk about a vision for a better future but it is our vision and *their* future. People are our building blocks and you cannot build a temple without breaking a few bricks.”

“As I said. Destroy others, before they destroy you.”

He shook his head, but not in anger. “No. In politics, we destroy ourselves. We do such a good job of it we scarcely need the assistance of others. Although such assistance is so readily given.”

He sealed a fourth envelope. It was for Annita Burke’s husband. A photograph of her and Riddington engaged in the sort of detailed discussions that were impermissible even under the loosest interpretations of collective responsibility. A double blow to the ranks of those who might succeed him.

“It is given to few to cast their shadow across the land. If you desire success then you must stand tall, not constantly be bending down to commiserate with

the masses huddled in the shade. That is for nuns.”

“I am no nun.”

“But I wonder what you truly are, Claire. Whether you know yourself.”

“I am not you, Francis. Nor am I like you. That is why I want nothing from you. I already have what I want.”

“Which is?”

“A view of power. From the inside.”

“At the feet of a master.”

“A man who has destroyed himself.”

“Who may yet save himself.”

“I can’t see how.”

“That’s because, as you said, you are not like me. Because, after all, you are another who has turned away from me.” She could detect no animosity in his tone. He sealed another letter. To the editor of the *Mail*. In it was a copy of Max Stanbrook’s birth certificate, which showed him to be both illegitimate and a Jew. A doubly burdensome cargo that would surely sink his ship in the storm waters of a leadership contest. Pity. Urquhart liked Max Stanbrook and he was good. Perhaps too good, that was his problem.

“I haven’t turned my back on you, Francis. I’m still here.”

“And I ask myself why.”

“Because I’m not a silly girl who flees in tears at the first sound of gunfire.”

“No. Leave that to the grown men of my Cabinet.”

“And because I can still learn from you. From all this mess. If you’ll let me.”

“You want to watch the autopsy.”

“To find out how to do it better. When my turn comes.”

“Oh, you have ambition?”

“I thought for a while you’d destroyed it, turned me off politics and their ways. But I want to find a better way.”

“You won’t have long in which to learn. But you may still have much to learn.”

“Such as?”

“Who do you think will lead the party after me?”

“Tom.”

“And if he doesn’t want it? Or can’t have it?”

“Stanbrook. Riddington, perhaps.”

“But you see, they have all”—he straightened the pile of envelopes—“destroyed themselves. They cannot succeed.”

“Then who?”

“I fear it leaves only Arthur.”

“Bollingbroke? He would be a disaster!”

“He’s popular. After the party is thrashed at the election they’d cling to anything that floats.”

“He’d split the party.”

“Probably.” His eyes grew distant. “And then how they will sit around their campfires in the depths of fiercest winter and bemoan the folly of turning on Francis Urquhart. Not such a bad chap after all, they’ll say. A great chap, even. One of the finest.”

She hung her head in disbelief. “You are a remarkable man. Why, you’re trying to write history even...”

“Even from beyond the grave.” The clarity in his own thinking seemed to have brought about a remarkable transparency in her own. He rose and came around the desk to her. He took her arms. “Kiss me?”

He intended to have her, there in the study. Desire ran through his veins, a renewed sense of life. And lust. The final flicker of a guttering candle, perhaps, but a new energy, an electricity that stiffened his body and fueled his appetites. He would not back away this time.

She shook her head. “Once, perhaps, Francis, but not now.”

“Have I misunderstood you?”

“No, you’ve misunderstood the time. And timing is everything.”

It was well into the afternoon before they would allow Passolides to inspect the ruins of his home. He was allowed in with a fireman to see whether there was anything capable of salvage, before the place was boarded up.

It stank. He was surprised and disgusted at the overwhelming stench of rancid ashes and charred remnants of what a few hours before had been his life. It

scraped his nostrils and stung his eyes, which began to pour.

“Upsetting, sir,” the fireman commiserated, “but think of it this way. You were lucky to be out of the property. Particularly at that time of the morning. Have insurance, did you?”

Passolides detected the edge of suspicion.

“We’ll have to put a report in. Some evidence that the fire was begun deliberately...”

The fireman prattled on as Passolides wandered desolate through the ruins, poking at the sodden ashes with his walking stick. Vangelis seemed so much smaller now that the upstairs floor had collapsed and all the partition walls had burned down. Everything was black, charcoal, rafters, and jagged wreckage scattered around like smashed bones at the bottom of a medieval burial pit. On a wall where the first floor had been, a washbasin hung at a drunken angle; the old enamel bath now lay overturned in his kitchen. In what *had* been his kitchen. He scratched, he prodded, hoping to find something of value that had survived the blaze when his stick struck metal. It was the British military helmet that had adorned the back of his door. Flattened like a plate. Vangelis had gone.

“Know of anyone who might want to burn you out, old man?”

Passolides was standing on the site of his food store. The walls had gone, the freezer had melted and all that remained amid the other odors was the reek of scorched flesh. He closed his eyes. Was this how it had been, with George and Eurypides? Burned by the same people, these British whose game of war and death never seemed to stop, even after all these years?

“They have taken everything from me.”

“Got nothing?” the fireman inquired, compassion beginning to squeeze aside the suspicion.

“My clothes. My stick,” Passolides responded. Then he remembered the gun. Tucked in his belt. He still had the gun. It hadn’t all gone.

“Social services’ll take care of you.”

“I have a daughter!” he spat, fiery proud of his independence; he needed nothing from these British. Then, more sadly: “She’ll be back tomorrow.”

He sank onto the seat of the overturned bath, his forehead coming to rest on his stick, a bent and bleary-eyed old man, overflowing with miseries and

exhaustion. In his dark clothing and beret he seemed to melt into the soot-smearred surroundings as though he would never leave this place. The fire officer, wanting to check the stability of the party wall at the rear of the premises, left him to his private sorrow.

As Passolides contemplated the end of his world, something caught his eye, a figure standing in the screaming hole where yesterday had been the doorway. The stranger was clad in black leather and a motorcycle helmet with a courier's personal radio at his shoulder, and was calling his name. "Package for Passolides."

A clipboard was thrust at him and, in exchange for his signature, he was rewarded with a padded manila envelope. Without another word, the courier left.

The gnarled fingers fumbled as they sought to open the package. Tentatively he spilled the contents onto his lap. For a moment he did not understand. There was the photograph of Michael Karaolis, the young EOKA fighter with the defiant eyes and exposed neck around which in the morning they would put a noose. The photograph that, the night before, had hung on the restaurant wall. There was another photograph, a fading portrait of a young British army officer whom Passolides did not immediately recognize. And two scorched crucifixes that fell from his shaking fingers—God, how the memories pounded at him, made him gasp for breath, almost knocking him to the floor. The small engraved crosses were those he had given on their name days to George and Eurypides.

The dark world around Passolides seemed to stand still, only his tears had life, washing clean the ash-covered crucifixes as he retrieved them from the floor.

It was not finished. Two further pieces of paper slipped from the envelope. The first was a photocopy of a British Army service record, tracing the short career of a junior officer in a Scottish regiment from his induction in Edinburgh through service in Egypt. And onward to Cyprus. In 1956.

Passolides found the name at the top of the service sheet—now he recognized the officer in the photograph. Lieutenant, one day Prime Minister, Francis Ewan Urquhart.

And the second piece of paper. A primitive leaflet. Appealing to all to come tomorrow to the rally in Trafalgar Square.

At last Passolides knew the identity of the man he had been searching for. The man who had murdered his brothers. And, with a passion for Hellenic honor fermented over endless centuries, he knew what he had to do.

Mortima woke to find he had stolen from their bed again. She followed the noises to the narrow galley kitchen. He was busying himself at the refrigerator when she walked in.

“I am sorry if I disturbed you,” he apologized.

“Why can’t you sleep, Francis?”

“There seems so little to sleep for.” There was a finality in his tone. “Anyhow,” he offered in mitigation, “I was hungry.” He had before him a large slice of Dundee cake and cheddar cheese, a favorite childhood delicacy the family gillie always produced during their beats across the Highland moors in search of grouse and deer. It had been years, he’d almost forgotten the sharp-sweet flavor. He began to consume the pieces slowly and with considered relish.

“You pay your midnight feast more attention than you do me in recent days, Francis. You’ve locked yourself away from me, looked straight through me, you’ve neither heard me when I’ve spoken nor offered answers to my questions. There’s an anger, an impatience within you that drives you from my bed.”

“Bad dreams. They distract.”

“I’ve been your wife long enough to know it’s not dreams that bother you,” she rebuked.

“Go to bed, Mortima.”

He took another mouthful, but she would not be moved.

“You’re not running from your dreams, Francis, you’re no child. And neither am I. You’ve never been like this with me before.” Her distress was evident.

“You are angry with me.”

“No.”

“Blame me for my folly with the letter.”

“No!”

“Think that I have helped destroy you.” She reproached him and reproached herself still more.

“We destroy ourselves. All that I have done would have been done whether the letter existed or not. And all that must be done, too.”

“What will you do?”

He looked at her but would not answer. He began munching again, carefully breaking morsels from both cheese and fruit cake, gathering up the crumbs.

“You shut me out.”

“There are some journeys we can only take on our own.”

“After all these years, Francis, it’s as though you no longer trust me.”

He pushed aside his plate and came to her. “Nothing could be further from my mind. Or from my heart. Through all these troubled times you have been the only one I could rely on, could reach for in the darkness and know you would be there. And if I’ve hurt you through my silence then the fault is mine, not yours, and I beg for your forgiveness. Mortima, you must know that I love you. That you are the only woman I have ever loved.” He said it with such force that there could be no doubting his sincerity.

“What will you do, Francis?” she repeated, demanding his trust.

“Fight. With all I have, for everything I have achieved.”

“In what way?”

“So many men spend their lives in fear of doing something wrong, of making error, that they do nothing except live in fear and slip uselessly away.” His eyes blazed contemptuous defiance. “I will not go meekly into the night. The world will hear of my going. And remember.”

“It sounds so very final, Francis. You scare me.”

“If my life were to end at this moment, Mortima, there would be only one regret, that I would be leaving you behind. Yet we both know that the time must come. What matters is what I leave behind, for you. A legacy. A pride. Dignity. A memory people will applaud.” He smiled. “And that Library.”

“I can’t imagine life without you.”

“As I cannot imagine life without all this.” He waved his arms around the most private trappings of power. “But there comes a time when the body is worn, the spirit tires, the sword is blunted by battle—and even love must have its rest. What survives, for those chosen few, is the name, even after all else has faded away. Immortality. I want you to trust me, Mortima. To support me in

whatever it is I have to do.”

“I always have.”

“And know that whatever it is I do, I do for us both.”

“Then nothing has changed.” She seemed to relax, understanding bringing a measure of reassurance. She had always known he was not like other men; he lived by his own rules, it could come as no surprise to her that he intended to depart by his own rules, too. Whenever the time came. A time perhaps of his own choosing. She managed a smile as she reached for him.

He kissed her with great tenderness. “I have so many reasons to be grateful to you, I scarcely know where to start. But let me start with your cake. It’s delicious, Mortima. I think I shall have another slice.”

“I’ll join you. If I may.”

Forty-Eight

In the total darkness of fear and defeat, even a spark of misery can bring welcome light.

The morning broke wound-pink beyond the cupola of St. Paul's Cathedral, and already the preparations had been under way for many hours. Road diversions had been posted along the route to Trafalgar Square, lamp posts and shop windows festooned with posters and his portrait, banners were being painted, reporters were turning phrases such as "an Armada of faith" and "the irresistible gale of revolution." Makepeace was everywhere, the word upon all lips.

No one knew precisely how many would be joining Makepeace on the final stretch of his march from Watford or how many would be there to welcome him on his arrival, but after the derision that had been piled upon the West Midlands force following the fiasco in Birmingham, the capital's Police Commissioner had decided it was not a time for taking chances. Although there was no indication of trouble beyond the pressure of unknown numbers, the fountains in Trafalgar Square had been emptied, the great pump rooms beneath inspected for suspect packages, the metal crowd barriers collected like supermarket trolleys in neat rows across the square. The population of pigeons, avian mongrels, complained at the unexpected clatter and noise, rising in feathery spirals of protest and darkening the sky before trying to settle once again, furious at the continued disruption. Their homeland was being invaded; for the day, at least, the square would be snatched from them.

Urquhart had bathed early, Mortima bringing him a great soup cup of tea in the bath while the steam and hot waters restored the color in his sleep-starved

cheeks. She thought she heard him muttering, perhaps calling for her, but when she inquired he answered that he was simply practicing a few lines for his final election speech. She had noticed that the bulky draft provided by his team of speech writers remained untouched. “They believe I can’t win,” he explained, “and it shows.” Neither had he touched his Ministerial boxes.

By the time he had completed his ablutions with a meticulous manicure, as though he had all the time in the world at his disposal, the crowd barriers were being put in place and interlocked around the square. A small number were left at sensitive points around Whitehall and particularly near the entrance to Downing Street, just in case. To keep the hounds from the bear. But little trouble was expected; in less than a week Makepeace’s militia would be occupying the corridors of power as of right.

He selected from his wardrobe his favorite dark blue suit and a white cotton shirt, laying them out across his bed for inspection. He tried several silk ties against the suit; he wanted to wear the one Mortima had bought for him from the craft stalls beneath the castle in Edinburgh, a token from her last visit to the Festival, but it was hand-painted, a little florid perhaps. He put out his regimental tie instead. Then, attired in his silk dressing gown, he breakfasted. He was in good humor and of hearty appetite; the crossword was finished before his eggs had boiled.

There had been only two disputes concerning the organization of the rally that day. Superintendent Housego, the police officer responsible for security, would not allow into the square the two mobile kebab vans that had accompanied the march from its very first day. They were like mascots, Makepeace argued, veterans of some great battle who claimed their right to be present at the victory ceremony, but the Superintendent insisted that the congestion around them would be simply too great and potentially dangerous; in large crowds people could become so easily crushed, and in violent crowds such vehicles might become battering rams, barricades, or simply bonfires. No. Not worth the risk. Makepeace resolved the problem by inviting Marios and Michaelis, the two owner-drivers, to join him on the small podium that was being erected for his speech between the Landseer lions at the foot of Nelson’s Column. “And next week you can drive all the way up Downing Street,” he

joked. It was the first time he had allowed himself even to hint that he would be there to greet them.

The second dispute concerned the numbers themselves; Housego wanted a limit of fifteen thousand but on this issue Makepeace was unable to offer any guarantee. He had no idea how many would be joining in. He did not control the marchers; on the contrary, as he explained to the Superintendent, they controlled him. But in any event the problem would be much reduced, he suggested with only a hint of perceptible irony, since it was customary for the police count at demonstrations to be so much lower than the reckoning of the organizers. Discretion being the better part of promotion, the Super decided to take his cue from Nelson and turn a blind eye. He would put on a couple of extra serials—self-contained police units, twenty-two strong—as a precaution. He saluted and departed content.

Others were also busy. St. John Ambulance set up a field station in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, grateful at being able to borrow the facilities of the homeless shelter, while all morning television crews haggled to gain access to windows and rooftops around the square, determined to find the optimum vantage point and paying a handsome “disturbance fee” in hard cash to office maintenance staff. Even if they numbered only fifteen thousand it would still be the largest election gathering in living memory.

To it all Urquhart appeared oblivious. He nestled in his favorite leather chair, still wrapped in his dressing gown, and read. First from Margaret Thatcher’s memoirs, *The Downing Street Years*. The final pages. Scenes from a great drama. Anger. Heartache. Betrayal. Then *Julius Caesar*, his favorite play. Another great assassination. Yet how much kinder they were to him than to her, Urquhart reflected, ending great Caesar’s misery with a single blow, a final cut. Not lingering. In death to find the acclaim that those jealous and petty men around him would not confer in his lifetime. The way to finish great lives.

And Makepeace marched. All the way down Watling Street, the old Roman thoroughfare that led from Chester to the heart of London. Like the legions of old they tramped, five or six abreast, in a great phalanx that stretched for over two miles and which grew ever longer as the morning progressed and the great column drew nearer the heart of the capital. Two brass bands and a group of

Scottish pipers appeared as if from nowhere to add to the carnival atmosphere, and garlands had been placed around the necks of Makepeace and Maria as they passed before a Hindu temple in Edgware. Even the mobile police control van that hovered in constant close attention had been decorated; policemen in shirtsleeves smiled and waved at the children as though competing to rub salt into the still-weeping wounds of their colleagues in Birmingham. The noise of celebration grew so enthusiastic that Makepeace had difficulty in making himself heard to the radio and news reporters who accompanied him all morning, but there were others keen to make up for any deficiency of sound bites. Waiting for Makepeace in Trafalgar Square was a patchwork quilt of pressure groups spread right across the political spectrum, all chewing media microphones and trying to identify themselves with Makepeace. Even Annita Burke was there, arguing that her “old colleague and friend” represented so many of the values that lay at the heart of what she and her party had traditionally stood for. When asked if tradition excluded the present, she smiled. “Perhaps the immediate past,” she conceded.

As they proceeded down Piccadilly they passed by what had once been the town house of Lord Palmerston, a great Victorian Foreign Secretary who had become a still greater Prime Minister. Omens all the way; the flags that decorated the route seemed to stiffen in salute. The window of Hatchards was laden with copies of a book Makepeace had penned several years earlier and that until a few hours before had been heavily out of print; he signed several without breaking his pace. Drivers leaned on their horns, people waved from buses, tourists asked for autographs. The March for Peace had turned decisively into a celebration of victory. Yet even Makepeace was astonished as he came out of Pall Mall and into the amphitheater of great buildings that surrounded Nelson’s victory column. He had lingered behind in Hyde Park, allowing the body of the march to move ahead of him. In that great river alone he knew there were some fifteen thousand souls, but what he had not known was that the river was flooding into the still greater sea of those gathered to greet him in the square. As they sighted him, led by a skirl of pipers, they broke into an emotional tide of waving hands and banners that washed back and forth across the basin of the square, growing stronger as it did so in shouts and accents that represented all

parts of the country and some parts even beyond its shores. More than forty thousand people were gathered under the unseeing eye of Lord Nelson until Trafalgar Square brimmed and overflowed with their enthusiasm. Makepeace walked through their midst like Moses carving his path through the Red Sea, his hands raised, clenched above his head, and they thundered their approval.

Even behind the thick shatterproof glass of Downing Street, Urquhart could not mistake the roar, like the cry heard by Christians as they waited in the pit of the Colosseum, armed only with their faith in God. Urquhart had never placed much store in Faith, not if it meant being devoured by lions and the bones being quarreled over by rats. How much better to believe in oneself, to die a Caesar rather than a humble sinner. There came another clamor as Makepeace mounted the podium. Only then did Urquhart set aside his books and begin to dress. He had forgotten to put out any cuff links; he chose the pair of nine carat gold engraved with the family monogram that had once belonged to his father. He stood in front of the dressing mirror, checking all aspects of his appearance in the manner of a suitor about to propose marriage. He asked Mortima for her opinion. She approved, apart from the tie.

“But what are you planning to do this afternoon, Francis, that you should be dressed up so?”

“Why, I intend to address Tom Makepeace’s little rally.”

Urquhart was adjusting his tie in the mirror, one ear tuned to the radio and the speech upon which Makepeace had just embarked, the other turned deafly in the direction of Corder. “Friends. Brothers. My apologies—and sisters!” he heard Makepeace exclaim, before Corder’s voice pushed all else aside.

“You can’t do this,” the Special Branch officer was stating, emphatic to the point of shouting.

“You cannot stop me, my dear Corder,” Urquhart responded with complete equanimity.

“There are no security arrangements in place.”

“Our security is in the surprise. No one expects me.”

“There are thousands of your opponents out there, Prime Minister. They’ve

traveled from all over the country for the specific purpose of letting you know how much they dislike you. And you want to walk right into their midst?"

"Right into their midst. Exactly."

"No!" Corder's vehemence was genuine. "This is crazy."

"This is history, Corder."

"May I talk as an old friend, Prime Minister?"

Urquhart turned to face him. "So far as I am concerned, Corder, you always have."

"You've been under an immense strain recently. Might this have"—an awkward pause—"clouded your judgment?"

"Gently put. Thank you." Urquhart moved to place hands of reassurance on the shoulders of the other man. "But on the contrary, old friend, the immense strain about which you talk has brought great clarity. You know, the prospect of being hanged and all that? I know what I'm doing. I absolve you of any responsibility."

"They'll have me issuing parking tickets after this. You know that, don't you?"

"In which case you will be the first knight of the realm to be doing such work. I have already written out my resignation honors, Corder. I'm a Scot, not given to undue generosity, but you should know that you are on my list."

Corder blinked, shook his head to free himself of what was clearly a distraction from his purpose and returned to the attack. "I have to stop you."

"Corder, you cannot."

"Mrs. Urquhart," he appealed, changing tactic, "will you stop him?"

Mortima had, like Urquhart, been examining her appearance in the mirror, brushing away a few imaginary creases from her jacket. "I can scarcely do that, Corder."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going with him."

"Are you, by God?" Urquhart exclaimed, challenging her.

She moved over to him, with care and great tenderness enfolded him in her arms and looked closely into his eyes. "Yes, Francis, I am. I have come with you this far, I'll walk with you a few steps further, if you don't mind. And even if

you do.”

His face began to move in agitation, trying to find some words of contradiction, but she placed a finger upon his lips to still them.

“It’s only a little walk down the road,” she whispered. “I won’t hold you back.”

Forty-Nine

A man may die a thousand times in Westminster; on the field of battle, only once.

He stood on the front step of Number Ten, hand in hand with Mortima. Above him white clouds hung like gun smoke in the summer sky, while behind him Corder was ranting into his personal radio. Urquhart turned in rebuke.

“No, Corder! No great posse of police. I want no human wall to hide behind, no excuse for confrontation with the crowd. I’ll not have it.”

The tone was severe, brooking no argument. Corder muttered something into the radio and put it aside.

“Then may I accompany you, Prime Minister? As a family friend?”

Urquhart smiled. “In that capacity you have always been welcome.”

They began walking down the street. As they approached the tall stressed-steel barriers at its end, a uniformed policeman outside the guard booth saluted while another jabbered excitedly down the telephone. But it was too late. The great gate swung open, and they were in Whitehall.

Large numbers of people were still trying to squeeze into the square, crowding pavements, beginning to clog the approach roads. The Superintendent had need of his extra serials, and more. And as the Urquharts made their way up Whitehall, recognition of them had an immediate effect.

“FU too! FU too!” barked one youth with the appearance of having been lifted from the front half of a dry-cleaning commercial, but Mortima turned to launch a look of sharpest feminine rebuke directly at him and he subsided, his voice faltering like a slipping fan belt. His chant was not taken up; instead, a

ripple of attention ran through the crowd at the sight of the great opponent, normally only seen through television screens and surrounded by the trappings of power, who to all appearances was enjoying a weekend stroll in the sun with his wife. Cries of recognition the Urquharts received with a civil nod of acknowledgment, chiding rewarded with one of Mortima's most devastating stares. As they made their way the five hundred yards up Whitehall, past the mounted sentries at Horseguards, a tremor of interest rather than intolerance ran before them like a bow wave, heralding their arrival. By the time they had reached the crowded edges of the square, the tremor had become a shock wave that began to force its passage through the mass of bodies ahead. Urquhart was coming! Urquhart was coming! And many, particularly those who did not have a good view of Makepeace speaking on the far side of Nelson's Column, turned to face their adversary.

Urquhart's timing was providential—or pestilential, depending on the viewpoint. As Makepeace was about to begin his peroration, he sensed a distinct loss of interest among a substantial part of his audience. He looked out across the sea of upturned faces in front of him, through which a turbulent crosscurrent seemed to be sweeping past and dragging their eyes from him. Caught by their interest, Maria walked to the edge of the raised speaking platform to inspect the source of the disturbance; the look of alarm and confusion that took hold of her was enough to make Makepeace himself falter, serving only to fuel the distraction.

Superintendent Housego was there to meet them. At the first hint of the Urquharts' imminent arrival, relayed through the Information Room at Scotland Yard, he had uttered curses both profuse and profane. Then he had summoned the Tactical Support Group, his reserve of specially trained officers who were on standby in coaches parked in nearby Spring Gardens. But he hadn't enough; he wished he had a hundred more.

“I cannot allow this, Prime Minister.”

“You cannot stop me, Superintendent.”

“But I don't have enough men to force a way for you through the crowd.”

“I want no force,” Urquhart responded sharply. Then, more softly: “Please. Ask your men to stand aside.”

Housego, bewildered, subsided.

Urquhart was still grasping the hand of Mortima when he crossed the roadway and came face-to-face with the crowd. From this point on he knew he would lose all control, becoming little more than another pawn in the great game upon which he had embarked. The faces confronting him were impassive, frozen by surprise. He nodded, smiled, and took two steps toward them.

The British are cynics, always willing to believe in human weakness and bathe in the oils of collective skepticism that seep from their daily press. Yet on a personal level they are civil to the point of deception, hiding their real feelings behind a cloak of wooden etiquette in much the same way as they ask for the *News of the World* to be delivered wrapped between the sheets of the *Sunday Telegraph*. Had Hitler flown to London rather than requiring Chamberlain to come to Berchtesgaden, the entire country might have queued to shake his hand. The British are bad at personal confrontation.

So the crowd in front of Francis and Mortima Urquhart began to shuffle back, to make way and allow them through. Many even smiled in automatic reflex. And thus the Urquharts, slowly and arm in arm like a couple stepping out onto a ballroom floor, made their way toward the rostrum.

The impact of these matters on Makepeace was devastating. He knew he had lost the attention of the crowd, now he could see it parting like concubines before the Khan. With a half joke about the arrival of unexpected reinforcements, Makepeace himself turned to the edge of the platform to inspect the cause of the disruption. He found Urquhart and his wife, with Corder a pace to the rear, at the bottom of the steps to the podium and already beginning to climb.

“Tom, good afternoon,” Urquhart greeted.

“This I did not expect.”

“Forgive me, I did not mean to disrupt you. But the deed is already done, you have won. I am tired of the fight, Tom.”

“That is gracious of you.” Then, suspiciously: “Why are you here?”

“To salvage a little pride and respect in defeat, perhaps. On the radio at the start of your speech I heard you say that you did all that you have done more in sorrow than in anger. In that same spirit I have come to express my hopes for

conciliation, if not between the two of us then at least for our country.”

“But why?”

“Because I love my country. Because I have led it for too long to wish to see the end of my career languish in bitterness and anger. I have made mistakes, been unfair to you. I would like the opportunity to apologize publicly.”

“What—here? Now?”

“With your permission.”

“Never!” Maria interjected. “You can’t let him hijack your rally like this.”

“I wish only to apologize.”

“Then take an advert in *The Times*.”

“Maria, Maria,” Makepeace chided gently, “this is our meeting, these are our supporters. Not his. I’ve just been complaining about the lack of free speech and compassion in the Britain of Francis Urquhart; is the Britain of Tom Makepeace to begin in the same ugly fashion? What have I got to lose, apart from his public apology? Anyway,” he jested, trying to deflect her protest, “if I turn him back he’s likely to get lynched.”

“Then I may speak?”

Makepeace turned to the microphones. “It would seem that Mr. Urquhart is so impressed with our gathering that he has come to offer his personal apologies to us.”

Released from the confines of face-to-face formality, the crowd indulged their true feelings. A chorus of wolf whistles and jeers erupted.

“No.” Makepeace held up his hand. “Unlike some, we are forgiving and tolerant. Let us hear him. Before we condemn him.”

The cries scarcely subsided as Makepeace made way at the microphones for Urquhart.

“I still don’t care for it,” Maria was complaining. “I’d rather watch the lynching.”

How much more suitable she would have been as a leader than Makepeace, Urquhart reflected silently, if only she made a better choice of sleeping partner. He moved forward, Mortima at his side. The jeers grew in a crescendo. They volleyed back and forth across the square, gathering in pace and ferocity, the sea of arms and upturned faces turning turbulent and breaking like angry waves

against the base of the great column, threatening to overwhelm him.

Suddenly Urquhart threw his hands in the air. "Marchers! Marchers for peace! I salute you."

It was as though he had thrown a massive blanket over a fire. Calm.

"We carve the mistakes of men upon their headstones, and bury their accomplishments with their bones. If that is my fate, then let it be."

Even those few in the crowd who had continued to protest were now hushed to silence. This was not what they had expected.

"This is a rally to celebrate peace and I am indebted to your leader Thomas Makepeace for his permission to address you. I, too, have come in a spirit of peace. And reconciliation. For at the end of an election campaign it is time to accept the verdict of the people, no matter how personally hurtful. To bind the wounds. To move forward. Together. That is what I hope for our country today no less than when I first took office as your Prime Minister. I cannot deny that it was my wish to continue in Downing Street, and if that has seemed selfish on my part, then I accept the charge. If ambition is a crime, then I plead guilty.

"I have held ambition for my office, for there can be no greater privilege or higher accolade in a politician's life than to lead this country and you, its people. You have been kind enough to confer that accolade on me repeatedly for more than a decade, and if you choose to deny me that honor now then again I have no complaint. And certainly not against Tom Makepeace, for he is a decent man.

"I have also held ambition for the people, for it is only through the people that a country may grow great. And if their comfort and prosperity stand at levels that could only be seen as a dream some years ago, then I do not care one jot who is accorded the credit. It is enough for a leader to see those dreams fulfilled, and if others wish to ascribe such prosperity to the influence of Europe, to statistical euphemism, or even to economic accident, then, once more, I have no complaint."

There was a shout from the crowd.

"No! Not even against Tom Makepeace. For he was a member of my Government for so many of those years. And he is a decent man.

"Yet above all I have been ambitious for our country, to restore it to the ranks of those nations considered great. Great Britain. Not simply another anonymous

land indistinguishable from the others, but one for which we can raise our heads with pride and say ‘I am a Briton,’ and for that bold claim to be respected anywhere in the world. And particularly in Europe. I am not anti-European. It is not that I would be the last European, but that I would be the first Briton. That has been my ambition, and if it is an ambition you do not share, as Tom Makepeace does not, then I have no complaint.

“Earlier today Tom Makepeace said that I owe you an apology and I listened to his words, the words of a decent man, with care. And if it is the view of you and other decent men and women that an apology is due, then it is freely given. As freely as I have given my heart and my life for you over these many years.”

His voice seemed to be on the verge of breaking, and there was silence across the square. Maria was staring in hard reproach at Makepeace; he in turn stared stonily at his shoes. Urquhart appeared to be searching the crowd as though trying to reach for each and every one of them. Or searching for someone. On perches and pavements around the square, commentators were rapidly attempting to rewrite their scripts.

“But let me say that I have been brought to this place not so much for Britain as for Cyprus. An island I know well, and that I love. Many of you here will disagree not only with what I have done, but with what I tried to do in Cyprus. Say that I am guilty of confrontation and bloodshed. But that is not what I tried to do. My aspiration, as you all know, was to bring peace to the island. To stop the bloodshed. To bring together the communities. I have failed, but it is an attempt that has failed for over a thousand years in that unhappy place. Yet that prospect of probable failure did not stop me from trying. Yes, if you like, peace was my ambition, and why not? And if I should lose my office because of that failure, how much greater is the loss suffered by ordinary peace-loving Cypriots?”

And then Urquhart saw him, shuffling forward in the crowd, limping and with bent back, his features all but hidden beneath the beret. Drawing closer.

“There are those who do not want to see peace in Cyprus. Wicked men, men of violence. Who have never known peace and who cannot live with peace. Who linger over old death and lost graves rather than looking forward to new life. Who have tried to find division between Cyprus and this country, when some of

us sought only reconciliation.”

The attack on Makepeace was all too blunt yet it aroused surprisingly few cries from the crowd. “The bones. The bases,” one protester yelled from the foot of the platform, waving a banner.

“No, do not misunderstand me. I do not come to dispute Tom Makepeace’s views, decent though they may be; I come only to show that there is another, genuine way. And if there is a division between the interests of Cyprus and Britain then I for one make no apology for saying that I am British, the head of the British Government, and proud to accept the obligations that go with it. Perhaps I have loved my country too much. If so, it has been a fault—a calamitous fault. And calamitously am I asked to pay for it.”

Maria was muttering vehemently into Makepeace’s ear, nodding in the direction of the microphones, but Makepeace placed on her a restraining hand and shook his head. It was too late. The moment was indisputably Urquhart’s. As if to emphasize the point, Mortima stationed herself close behind her husband’s shoulder; if anyone were to make an attempt to seize the microphone, they would have to force her bodily out of the way first.

And Passolides had hobbled to the front of the crowd. He was leaning on his stick directly in front of the podium, less than twelve feet from where Urquhart was standing. He was looking up, the features beneath the beret contorted like an animal in pain, caught in a trap, who had chewed off its own leg in order to escape only to discover the hunter at hand. Urquhart lifted his club and began raining blows down upon his unprotected skull.

“There are some who will not forget, who cannot forget. Evil men who wallow in memories, in selfishness beyond belief, who will sacrifice an entire community in order to indulge their own personal vendettas.” He was staring straight at Passolides. “That is the evil of ambition. Not the ambition to fight for peace, but simply to fight. Old battles, any battles. Sick minds that refuse to forget.”

Passolides’s mouth was working in the greatest agitation. His eyes had filled with blood. Urquhart studied him with analytical care as might an actor on a stage involved in the greatest performance of his life, feeling for his audience, reaching for their emotions, flaying them alive. He believed in this role without

reservation, nothing else in the world mattered.

“I have no family, apart from Mortima.” He turned to look at her, a look of absolute trust and gratitude. “I have no children. No brothers or sisters. Tom Makepeace has claimed you all as brothers and sisters today...” A fog had entered his voice; he allowed the words to hang across the square. There was no applause, no one any longer rushing to be identified with Makepeace. Urquhart had them, had turned them. The play was nearly at its end.

He smiled at Passolides. The same cold smile with the touch of British arrogance he had held when photographed as a young Lieutenant in Cyprus. Sneering. Contemptuous. Spitting the words at him. The old man was fumbling at his belt; Urquhart’s eyes never left him.

“Perhaps he had the right to do so. But if he claims the living, then let me claim the dead.”

Passolides seemed to be crying, his jaw adrift. Urquhart claiming the dead. George. Eurypides. This man was the Devil himself...

“The children and brothers and sisters who have dreamed fine dreams, as I have, who have laid down their lives in Cyprus over the years, sacrificed for the peace that I too have sought...”

And then he stopped. Caught his breath. Felt something on his chest. He looked down to see a dark patch beginning to grow on his crisp white shirt. Then a second patch appeared and he felt his knees begin to give way. But not yet. His body seemed reluctant to answer his calls but he turned toward Mortima, saw the look in her eyes, reached toward her, to embrace her, to protect her as another blow hit his back and pushed him into her arms. He slid to the wooden floor as he heard two sharp explosions very close at hand. His eyes were misting but he could see Corder standing with a gun in his hand, pointing it into the crowd. He could see Mortima bending over him, fighting to be brave. And he could see something very bright in his eyes. Was it the sun? Or a burning tree? It was growing brighter.

“Mortima? Mortima! Where are you?”

She was very close, but he could not focus; she was gripping his hand, but he could no longer feel. There was no pain. A sense of exhaustion, perhaps. And exhilaration. Triumph. At having cheated them all, even at the end. And cheated

them by his end. Cheated them all, except Mortima.

His lips moved; she kissed them, cradled him as close as she dared, ignoring the blood and the screams about her.

He smiled, his eyes finding her once more, and whispered.

“Great ruins.”

She kissed him again, long, until Corder bent over to separate her from the body.

Epilogue

A nation held its collective breath as it watched and rewatched the televised scenes of Francis Urquhart, his body already mortally wounded, throwing himself protectively in front of Mortima. A noble death. A great death, even, it was said.

Not so for Evangelhos Passolides. He died even before Urquhart, felled by Corder's bullets. It was never discovered why he had chosen to assassinate the Prime Minister, "Britain's JFK" as the tabloids put it, but the public knew who to blame. Thomas Makepeace. Close associate and, as was almost immediately revealed, adulterous lover of the old man's daughter. Criminal-conspiracy charges were considered but nothing could be proved in court, although the circumstantial proof against Makepeace had been established in the minds of the voters long before election day.

From Monday until polling day Urquhart's body lay in state in the Great Hall at Westminster where the public filed past to pay homage without pause. And on polling day itself they queued to return his now-united party in numbers unprecedented in modern electoral history.

He had won. The final victory.

Not everything was as Urquhart would have wished. The chairman of Booza-Pitt's constituency party, on opening the letter withdrawing his knighthood, had a heart attack and died on his kitchen floor. He was never able to denounce Geoffrey, who claimed that the photocopied letter sent to the Privileges Committee and the *News of the World* was a forgery. Indeed, his hand had shaken so much in the writing that his claim was persuasive, and in any event the

editor decided there was little profit in attempting to disgrace such a new and obviously grieving widow. So Geoffrey survived, for the moment, in the new Administration.

That Administration was led by Maxwell Stanbrook, whose Jewishness and dubious parentage proved to be distractions rather than direct hits during his campaign to become Prime Minister. The party decided there was nothing wrong with ability. And he made Claire a Minister.

It took a couple of years before Mortima, the Countess Urquhart, had founded the Library on a site beside the Thames donated by the Government, and it was many more years before peace talks began again in earnest in Cyprus. It was still longer before revisionist historians tried to dislodge the memory of Francis Urquhart from the hearts of a grateful nation.

They did not succeed.

The End

About the Author

Michael Dobbs is also Lord Dobbs of Wylde, a member of the British House of Lords. He is Britain's leading political novelist and has been a senior adviser to Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and David Cameron. His bestselling books include *House of Cards*, which currently airs on Netflix, as well as *To Play the King*, *The Final Cut*, *Churchill's Triumph*, *Churchill's Hour*, *Never Surrender*, and *Winston's War*. Read more on his website, www.michaeldobbs.com.