CROW ON THE CRADLE

TIMELINE 10/27/62
BOOK TEN



JAMES PHILIP

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Crow on the Cradle

Timeline 10/27/62 – BOOK TEN

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Crow on the Cradle

[Book 10 of the Timeline 10/27/62 Series]

Chapter 1

Wednesday 20th January 1965
Rosyth Naval Base, Firth of Forth, Scotland

Forty-year old Rear Admiral Simon Collingwood picked up the phone on his desk half-way through its fifth loud ring. He had been immersed in the latest tranche of reports from HMS Vulcan, the Admiralty Research Station attached to the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority test facility at Dounreay in distant Caithness on the northern coast of Scotland.

Lessons learned with HMS Dreadnought, the Navy's first operational nuclear attack submarine had led to a series of modifications to the Rolls-Royce PWR1 reactors which would power both of the vessels currently under construction at Barrow-in Furness, HMS Valiant and HMS Warspite, and ought theoretically, to significantly increase the longevity and the reliability of the proposed plants; but the man responsible for building the Royal Navy's future undersea fleet made a point of understanding *everything* that passed across his desk. For a submariner no detail was too small, no caveat too slight because when a man lived and worked deep beneath the oceans a mistake or a technical defect that might be wholly incidental to his 'surface' colleagues could be, and often was fatal.

"Collingwood," he intoned, his thoughts still unravelling the complex mathematics underpinning the majority of the findings and recommendations of the report before him.

"The First Sea Lord's helicopter is en route from the Gare Loch, sir," his secretary, a petite WREN who was so new that she was still terrified of him squeaked apologetically.

"Thank you. Please inform *Dreadnought* and *The Teacher* that I will join them on the pad shortly."

'Dreadnought' signified the commanding officer of HMS Dreadnought, 'The Teacher' was the officer who ran the Royal Navy's Submarine Command Course, the infamous '*Perisher*' ordeal. Oddly, given that he was the most well-known – and in some corners 'infamous' nuclear submariner in Christendom – Collingwood himself had never suffered 'The Perisher' first hand. Most men went through it – had their one shot at it – in their late

twenties or early to mid-thirties but he had never, as strange as it seemed now, really seen himself as submarine commander ‘material’. Oh, he had had his pipe dreams, what man who had lived and breathed the Submarine Service all his life did not but had it not been for the war, he knew that nothing would ever have come of those dreams.

It was a funny old World...

Collingwood put down the handset.

The building around him reeked of newness, of fresh paint and even the furniture had that glossy, just out of the workshop look and feel about it. There were a lot of people who were uneasy about the transfer – partial at present given that Valiant and Warspite were still over a year away from commissioning – of the Undersea Fleet Programme’s headquarters to Fife. The problem was that the project had outgrown Barrow-in-Furness, and by the time the envisaged ‘commissioning of at least one or more boats a year for at least the next decade’ building schedule came to fruition from financial year 1965-66 onwards the much larger Naval Dockyards of Rosyth would be connected to the rest of the country by the new road bridge over the Forth.

Barrow for all its seclusion was too small, scope for expansion was too limited and much of the districts to the east and south across the other side of Morecombe Bay remained bomb-damaged bandit country. Up here in Scotland where austerity, shabbiness and economic stagnation were visibly threatening to give way to the first spring shoots of the fragile flowers of a quiet new post-October War recovery, the dockyards sat in an untarnished landscape in a region whose population had by and large, escaped all the worst after effects of the October War.

He gathered up the documents before him.

There was a nine by six-inch monochrome portrait of Maya and the children beside his in tray at the edge of his blotter. It still seemed incredible that he had only met his wife a few days short of a year ago...

She and her sister and three frightened orphans, a boy and two girls aged five, three and two had been rescued from the sea off Cyprus. The sisters had fled from their home town of Golbasi, near Ankara all the way to the Mediterranean coast, boarding a motley refugee fleet that was harried and eventually, shot to pieces by the Red Navy acting as Krasnaya Zarya’s despicable seaborne arm.

The first time he had set eyes on Maya – really looked at her – she had

been barefoot in a dark blue boiler suit at least two or three sizes too big for her, her dark eyes framed by the scarf concealing her hair and he had fallen completely, headlong under her spell.

The portrait on Simon Collingwood's desk was less than a week old. Maya was wearing a simple dark dress, its hem dancing modestly around her slim calves, her hair concealed by a loose-fitting dark blue hijab that also covered her throat and flowed down and over her shoulders. Normally, his wife wore a simple head scarf in public but the family portrait was a thing to be seen by everyone, and therefore, proper modesty was appropriate. Yannis was grinning his normal toothy grin, Yelda, six years old now had feigned shyness until the last shot of the photographic session, and Meryem, their baby daughter was wrapped in a shawl in her mother's arms. Maya had torn her eyes from her new daughter just long enough to gaze proudly into the lens.

He and Maya had married days after her arrival in England in March last year, adopting Yelda and Yannis as soon as the paperwork could be finalised. In post-October War Britain arranging such things was uncomplicated; likewise, whereas in the 'old days' a naval officer finding himself 'encumbered' with a Muslim wife might have found it to be an insurmountable impediment to his future advancement, nowadays, nobody really cared.

Meryem had emerged squalling and protesting a week or so early but now, a fortnight old she was, mercifully, thriving. Maya and he had tried not to fret, or to think about all the things that could go wrong with or afflict their child but everybody knew of horror stories, babies aborting, stillbirths and anecdotally stories of grotesque hyperthyroidism in new-borns...

Notwithstanding that the medical fraternity steadfastly maintained that thus far it had seen evidence of only a 'very low rate' of radiation-related birth defects; what prospective parent would take that at face value in this brave new World?

In the last year Yannis, Yelda and Maya had learned to speak English with complete fluency, albeit with a faint Lancashire-Cumberland burr now touched by local Fife inflexions, just like 'real' natives...

Meryem meant 'beloved' in Turkish; Maya's choice, for in matters of family and domesticity the man who was 'God' in his nation's nuclear submarine programme had happily deferred to his remarkable young wife

from the moment he had – pretty much ecstatically - welcomed her off the plane at Brize Norton.

All that now seemed like a fairy tale, its details blurred, fuzzy around the edges. He had been ‘collared’ by the Prime Minister on the flight back to England from Malta; she had been ‘taken’ with his thoughts on the ‘possibilities’ offered to a relatively small country like the United Kingdom to ‘punch above its weight’ by being at the cutting edge of, specifically, nuclear submarine technology, and *hey presto*, within days he had found himself ‘running with the ball’.

Margaret Thatcher’s personal intervention had spirited Maya, her sister and the three children in their care from Malta to England within days and the rest...was history.

He knew that he was a very lucky man!

Although these were better times than a year ago; life could still be cheap around the margins of the growing oases of normal society, and sickness still came and went at will, sweeping through apparently healthy, robust communities. Maya’s younger sister, Reyha, had very nearly succumbed to the influenza which had carried away her three-year-old niece, Jamilia, and several other children at Barrow-in-Furness. Collingwood still felt guilty not ‘organising’ Reyha and Jamilia’s transfer to Rosyth until it was too late. His precious principles of what it was right and wrong for a commanding officer to do for his ‘family’ might have cost a child’s life. But then he had a responsibility for *all* the people in is ever-growing Royal Navy and civilian fiefdom; how could he justify prioritising his own ‘relations’ over the needs of the many?

Maya, for all that she was fifteen years his junior, sensing his dilemma had earnestly counselled him not to blame himself. God’s will had been done, and that was that. She had had a harder life than he, grown up in a village in the middle of nowhere where lives were lived as they had been for centuries immemorial, and yet, in many ways, she was infinitely the wiser of them.

Reyha, who worked in a local nursery, was engaged to a dockyard electrician. Collingwood had no idea if it was any kind of love match; in this new age young men and women who still had their health naturally gravitated towards each other and made the best of things.

Yes, he was a lucky man...

Locking the reports from HMS Vulcan in his office safe he retrieved his uniform jacket and scooped his cap off the hook by the door. This was not the time to be distracted by his wife's limpid brown gaze, or thoughts of his children's antics. Today he needed to be on his toes and in tip-top form.

Yelda, whose name meant 'Summer Rose' in her native language, had started attending the Base School during the middle of last year's Autumn Term; another step towards the normality that they all craved. Presently, there were less than fifty pupils aged five to eleven at the school but within a couple of years the nuclear boat programme would bring hundreds, then thousands of new jobs to the region and the wages of Naval personnel and their families would fuel the rapid growth of the local economy, and children would soon fill the currently vacant newly constructed classrooms.

Collingwood emerged into the watery sunshine and paused a moment to survey the activity in No 3 Dock. The old cruiser HMS Belfast was two months into a seven-month refit and systems upgrade: one of her four triple 6-inch turrets – X turret - had been removed, as had her original secondary armament of pre-World War Two eight twin dual-purpose 4-inch mounts. Relieved of that top-weight the redoubtable old warhorse, a veteran of the Battle of North Cape and the sinking of the German battleship Scharnhorst, the D-Day landings, the First Korean War, and latterly Operation Manna, the Second Battle of Trafalgar and Operation Grantham, the re-conquest of Cyprus, was to be equipped with the latest quadruple launcher version of the GWS-21 Sea Cat surface-to-air; one to port and one to starboard amidships on platforms above the old 4-inch turret mounts. The old ship's entire electronics suite – radars and communications aerials – had been 'brought down' for inspection, upgrading where possible, re-installation and re-calibration and the cruiser's 1945 War-vintage mechanical gun director was being replaced with the same modern electronic version fitted in the now sadly depleted Tiger class.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the Flag Officer Nuclear Submarines (Design, Development and Operational Training) said returning the salutes of the members of the small party awaiting the arrival of the First Sea Lord.

'Dreadnought', thirty-five-year-old Commander Max Forton had shed his prized ginger beard when he was confirmed in command of HMS Dreadnought at the end of her year-long sojourn in dry dock. He had been Collingwood's executive officer and, in every way, his right-hand man

throughout both of Dreadnought's eventful war patrols.

'The Teacher', forty-three-year-old Commander Francis Barrington had come to Collingwood's attention on account of his – positively stellar – operational record in command of the old diesel-electric submarine HMS Alliance in the Mediterranean last summer. Barrington had served at Malta in the 1945 war but between 1948 and 1962 spent fourteen years in the Reserve – working as a solicitor's clerk in a quiet country practice in Hampshire - before returning to arms and distinguishing himself with the 2nd Submarine Squadron in *everything* he did. A quietly spoken, superficially introverted man he had been Collingwood's sole nomination for the Senior Instructor posting at the newly commissioned Submarine Service Training Establishment – HMS Neptune - at Faslane in the Gare Loch tasked to host the annual 'Perisher Course' for aspiring submarine commanders, and with developing and testing tactics and training exercises for the crews of the Dreadnought, and her future sisters.

But for the normal hidebound infighting of the Admiralty bureaucracy both Collingwood's key lieutenants would have been promoted Captain by now as befitted their contribution too, and critical importance within the organisation he was building to deliver the undersea fleet which, one day, might truly allow the United Kingdom – and the Royal Navy – to once again punch above its weight and exert truly global influence.

An honour guard of thirty members of HMS Dreadnought's crew was on parade, lined up facing east with their backs to the Rosyth dockyard's huge square basin. Beyond the sea gates the tide was ebbing fast, within the great tidal lock the County class destroyer HMS Kent was fitting out and half-a-dozen minesweepers were moored broadside to broadside. In the distance the massive 'construction sheds' where the next generation of British nuclear-powered submarines would be built were rising, as yet skeletons, uncompleted like the great structure taking shape out in the Forth.

At the time of the October War the Forth Road Bridge, its panoply of associated highway and elevated sections, and the radical re-shaping of the road network across Lothian on the south bank, and Fife on the north, had been one of biggest civil construction projects in the World.

Presently, the great steel towers joined only by suspension cables reared out of the Forth in the mid-stream, and massive concrete arches stood near to or on shore on either side of the river but no roadway connected the piers of

what would one day, be the longest steel suspension bridge in Europe.

Work had of course, ceased in late October 1962 on the bridge itself and the nine miles, and twenty-four new bridges, flyovers and elevated sections of the approach roads to it. Much of the re-shaping of the local, 'feeder', road system had actually been completed by then, including the key two-level interchanges at Burnshot and Echline, linking with the B924 and the A904 respectively. Similarly, a bridge already spanned the railway lines at Dalmeny, and the associated access projects linking the Naval Dockyards, and the towns of Inverkeithing and Masterton to what was planned to be the terminus for the M90 motorway, had also been well advanced when the cataclysm struck.

Collingwood had not recognised the near mind-boggling scope of the great civil engineering project until he had begun to examine the 'potential' of Rosyth for his own 'endeavour' last summer. For example, the so-called 'octopus junction' at Masterton alone included six separate bridges and a six hundred feet long viaduct. The jewel in the crown of the magnificent design was the bridge itself rising like some contemporary, infinitely more elegant incarnation of San Francisco's Golden Gate out of the grey waters of the Firth of Forth just upstream from the iconic iron late Victorian railway bridge east of Edinburgh. Just looking at it sent shivers up the spine of a true born engineer!

In the last few weeks the whole 'Bridge dream' had come alive again. The billboards of the contractors had been dusted off and where necessary, re-erected at the turn of the year and shortly thereafter construction traffic and workers had begun again to pour into Leith, Rosyth and Inverkeithing. At the time of the October War the bridge had been approximately fifteen to eighteen months from completion and despite fears that the two year interregnum – during which work yards had been neglected, ransacked and part-finished structures neglected and left open to the ravages of the elements – there was growing confidence that the installation of the carriageway across the Forth might be achieved within a year and the bridge opened as soon as sometime in early 1966.

North of the border with England the Forth Bridge had become *the* symbol, its completion *the* litmus test of Scotland's future prosperity. In a bankrupt, part-wasted United Kingdom the vast treasure being poured into the bridge was a statement of a national will more profound than the words of

any politician. Even the words of Margaret Thatcher, whose rousing speech in Edinburgh Castle in December had proclaimed – confirming months of rumours - that the 'the Forth Bridge will be completed!'

The rotors of the Westland Wessex helicopter bearing the professional head of the Royal Navy and the Minister for the Navy thumped and thrummed over the Firth, circling the unconnected towers of the bridge before swinging towards the northern bank of the great river.

Collingwood and his two 'operational' right-hand men had been chatting informally, just out of earshot of the guard of honour. As one they stepped into their positions as the Wessex flared out, touched the ground and rolled several feet before halting in a storm of grit before its engines abruptly cycled down.

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Varyl Cargill Begg was a slighter, somewhat less substantial presence than either his dashing predecessor, the late Sir David Luce who had so sadly perished in last April's IRA atrocity at RAF Cheltenham, or Julian Christopher, the man everybody in the Navy had expected to supersede Luce. Thus, at the age of fifty-four he had found himself catapulted into his present role some years before he, or anybody else, had anticipated the vacancy arising. Notwithstanding, he had led the Service with dignity, purpose and supreme competence through the disasters and triumphs of the previous summer, and throughout its sanguinary period of retrenchment and adjustment in the last six months.

"Good morning, Collingwood," the First Sea Lord smiled sternly, before turning to the stooped, prematurely aged man who had emerged from the cabin of the helicopter in his footsteps.

Lord Carington, the Minister for the Navy, was almost a decade Begg's junior but illness had taken a heavy toll on him. Today, he looked a little stronger, and his gaze steadier than Collingwood could remember.

"Welcome to Rosyth, sir," he greeted the politician.

The other man's handshake was reassuringly firm.

Collingwood introduced Max Forton and Francis Barrington to the Navy Minister and escorted the two VIPs down the line of the men in the honour guard.

Officially, the First Sea Lord was conducting a snap inspection of the base; in reality the purpose of the visit was to confirm – ahead of its announcement – a huge expansion of the nuclear submarine programme, and

to discuss the role of the Navy in what one – highly classified policy 'briefing' paper – had called the '*Future British Independent Nuclear Strike Force*'.

Varyl Begg might have been the gunnery officer of the battleship HMS Warspite at the Battle of Matapan in 1941, in which 'sharp action' the Mediterranean Fleet sank three Italian cruisers - two of them, the *Fiume* and the *Zara* in literally two minutes flat – in a particularly savage night time artillery encounter; but he was no old-school, old-fashioned Navy man hankering for a past in which the big gun ruled the waves. Before the October War he had been infuriated by the Navy's slow development of guided weapons and the lack of urgency of successive peacetime Governments in maintaining and building up the Royal Fleet Air Arm and the carrier fleet; now he was the corporate technocrat in uniform currently plotting the radical modernisation of the entire Service.

"I'd like Forton and Barrington to be present at our 'little chat' as soon as I've 'inspected sufficiently' to convince onlookers that this is just a routine 'First Lord's junket'," Begg informed Collingwood as the small party walked towards HMS Dreadnought's berth.

The footsteps of the Navy Minister and his attendant officers rang dully on the quayside roadway in the shadows of the tall, skeletal cranes. In the middle distance the racket of machine hammers and generators drifted south from No 3 Dock where HMS Belfast's weary old bones were being laid bare and inspected.

"The Prime Minister is not optimistic that the new Administration in Philadelphia will wish to engage in any manner of Naval co-operation other than the transfer of obsolete hulls to replace our recent ship losses," the First Sea Lord explained brusquely as the party approached the gangway to the Royal Navy's solitary operational nuclear-powered attack submarine.

"Nuclear co-operation is not even on the table," Lord Carington added, a little breathless despite the leisurely pace of the group.

"Recent war experience tells us that the RAF's V-Bombers, even equipped with the new Blue Steel stand-off missile, are too vulnerable to constitute a long-term viable deterrent threat," Varyl Begg stated.

Blue Steel, which could only be carried by the RAF's Avro Vulcans, had a range of about a hundred miles but that was nowhere near sufficient range to guarantee that the V-Bomber Force 'would always get through' to targets

deep within the Soviet Union. The ‘deterrent’ threat of the much-depleted V-Bomber force was a rapidly depreciating asset.

“That means,” Lord Carington declared portentously, “that at some stage in the coming decade if we are to maintain a credible deterrent, given that land-based ICBM silos and launchers would be the first targets in any future conflict, that the ‘deterrent ball’ will be passed to the Navy; specifically, to the Submarine Service!”

Chapter 2

Thursday 21st January 1965
Kalkara (Capuccini) Naval Cemetery, Malta

The bus rattled, wheezed and squealed to a painful, juddering halt around the corner from the entrance to the cemetery on the stop at Triq San Leonarda.

Joe Calleja stepped down, careful to avoid the muddy puddles along the verge. It had rained overnight; the last angry downpour of a week of stormy weather and even for January there was a chill in the air that made him instinctively pull his donkey jacket closer around his stocky torso.

Outwardly, nothing which had happened to him in the last two years; internment by the British, his short-lived black-listing by the Admiralty Dockyards, or his unwelcome post-Battle of Malta notoriety and rocky introduction to the politics of the Archipelago, had affected the twenty-three-year-old part-time dockyard electrician and full-time trade union organiser and workers' rights activist. A mop of dark hair still fell rebelliously across his forehead, the people around him still encountered the perennial twinkle of mischief in his brown eyes, and he was still the same barrel-chested life and soul of any party; except he knew now that he would never be the man who he had thought he was before the war.

He always tried to visit the cemetery at around this time of day, early in the afternoon; the same time of day that so many of his English brothers had died that dreadful day last April.

Another ritual: before he stepped through the gates of the Kalkara (Capuccini) Naval Cemetery he always got out the case with *the* medal in it and pinned *it* – which he still did not believe he had any right to wear – on his chest. For how else could he stand in this place and respect the memory of his brothers?

Joseph Mario Calleja, GC.

George Cross, the Empire's highest award for civilian gallantry.

That was a joke...

But then very little that had happened on *that* day almost ten months ago – or had happened to him since - made very much sense.

He guessed that some of that was – ever since bidding farewell to her on

the dockside in Southampton last May - not having Marija around to keep him on the straight and narrow. His sister had always been there for him; sometimes scolding, sometimes infuriated, forever understanding and her love unconditional. He had been his Mama's favourite son, and although his Papa's weary, resigned constant affection had been no less uncompromising, well, Marija had been by example and sweet temperament, in retrospect the rock upon which he had lived his whole, 'awkward' life. Nobody had understood him the way she did and he missed her as if a part of him had left Malta with her when she married Peter Christopher.

Her regular letters took the edge off his aching sense of loss; especially the most recent, folded in his inside jacket pocket protecting the precious two-inch square picture of his baby niece, Elisabetta Margo. Marija had sent several photographs from the same session to his parents; but the one he carried close to his heart was for him alone, not to be framed, or hung on a wall, or stood on a mantelpiece to be viewed by visiting aunts, uncles and friends at the family's Tower Street apartment in Sliema.

People were surprised by how famous his sister had become in America. Not Joe. Some sixth sense, some quirky intuition within him had warned him that once she left Malta that the World really would be, as his English friends said, 'her oyster'. Marija had captured the imagination of her own people when she was just a kid, the crippled little Princess of Vittoriosa-Birgu who had risen from her litter and walked among her people...

Joe smiled every time that thought crossed his mind.

Marija had cemented her place in the hearts of *her* people leading the Women of Malta in their long campaign to free hundreds of men like him from their post-October War internment. Hotheads had tried to persuade the women to eschew their non-violent protests, to take 'direct action' against collaborators and the British 'occupiers'. *She* had forbidden it and basically, that was that. Even before the British recanted their former ways and appointed Peter's father, Sir Julian Christopher C-in-C in the Mediterranean, Marija's occasional column in *The Times of Malta* had become required reading in *every* household in the Archipelago. Since then she had of course, married her very own Prince Charming, and met Prime Ministers, Presidents, Royalty and become so famous – her face so well known – that she, and Peter, were probably among the most recognisable people in the Western world; like movie stars, in fact.

In her latest letter his sister had confided to him how she fretted over her ‘letters from America’ which appeared practically every week in *The Times of Malta*.

‘I have to be so careful because I know Paul would not dream of editing out a single comma or slip of the pen... Rosa and Alan read everything I post to him but it would be so easy to be misunderstood...’

Paul Boffa, a man of little more than Joe’s age – twenty-three – who had found himself promoted from being an earnest, hard-working stringer to editor of Malta’s most prestigious newspaper after virtually the entire editorial staff of the *Times* had been killed or hospitalised in the December 1963 bombing, was frankly in awe of Marija. Her ‘letters’ to the Maltese people, chatty, proper, sensible, one housewife talking politely, plainly to a people who desperately craved ‘normality’ had made Paul impregnable against the machinations of the old timers who had come out of the woodwork after the Battle of Malta last April trying to wrest back control of the *Times* from the ‘young upstart’.

Joe had been astonished by how adroitly his friend had played his hand. Exploiting his good relations with the C-in-C’s – Acting Air Marshal Sir Daniel French, presently also the Governor of the Maltese Archipelago – Staff, and shamelessly using his friendship with Marija as a shield against all evil, he had been steadily building a new, young, energetic ‘editorial team’ at the *Times*. Joe still complained to his friend that the paper was too ‘conservatively-orientated’ and ought to give more time and space to what ‘young people think’, but given the paper’s steady circulation of around forty thousand copies – effectively sucking up most of the available newsprint and therefore quashing competition at source – it was hard to see how any re-constitution of the *Times’s* board of directors was likely to unseat him any time soon, or ever.

Joe crossed the road. There was nobody around as he walked through the gates of the Protestant Section of the cemetery where all the Talaveras, his brothers in arms, had been laid to rest.

In the days after the Battle of Malta, the bodies of sixty-nine of the one hundred-and-fifty-one men killed – including four civilian workers who, like him had been caught onboard the destroyer when she cut her lines and raced for the open sea as Russian shells crashed into the waters of the Grand Harbour – had washed ashore or been recovered from the sea. Now these

men lay together in a special row, joined by five of their brothers who had died of their wounds on land in the days after the battle.

No man had his own grave. The topsoil on Malta is everywhere shallow, across most of the archipelago the ground is exposed rock; and it had been common practice ever since the British had been in Malta to cut multiple, communal graves into the unforgiving strata. Each grave marker in the 'Talavera Plot' bore as many as six or seven names.

Joe had not known the names of any of the men scythed down around him on the deck of the destroyer at the height of the battle off Sliema. He had since learned the name of every one of the Talaveras who lay now in the ground above the tranquil fishing village of Kalkara.

That day early last April seemed as surreal now as it had at the time; he had heard the alarm, watched crew members sprinting to get back onboard the destroyer, and his fellow dockyard workers desperately trying to get ashore. He had just stood and watched until the last moment and then something, he knew not what, had told him to step onto the deck of the Talavera at the very moment the water frothed angrily under her stern and she began to move away from the quayside.

He had not known that a near miss was about to kill and maim every one of the ship's torpedo men; or that within minutes he would be the only man left onboard who knew how to operate the destroyer's newly installed single quadruple torpedo tube mount...

He often thought about Jack Griffin, the bearded, terrifying Petty Officer who had goaded, bullied and eventually persuaded him to get the mount working and to launch those 'fish' at the Russian battleships. Jack was in America with Peter and Marija now; legend had it that last spring he had thrown himself under the wheels of a motor bike-riding assassin and saved his sister's life. That sounded exactly like the sort of thing Jack Griffin would do!

Just for a laugh...

Joe walked down the row reading the names, pausing at each recumbent marker slab, bowing his head. Finally, he came to the end of the line.

Leading Seaman M. Akers.

Sub-Lieutenant P.L. Randall.

Lieutenant-Commander M.D. Weiss.

Joe could not put a face to Sub-Lieutenant Randall. Peter had told him

he had come onboard after ‘the Aisne was lost’. Randall had been in hospital with a suspected burst appendix at the time his former ship, Talavera’s sister HMS Aisne had been vaporised by the one megaton airburst south west of Malta that had set the USS Enterprise on fire and wrecked the nuclear powered anti-aircraft cruiser USS Long Beach.

Maurice ‘Mo’ Akers had spent most of that ‘adventure’ fighting to get the Enterprise’s raging fires under control clinging to a fire hose on Talavera’s foredeck. He was another hero.

They were all heroes...

Miles Weiss had been Talavera’s Executive and Gunnery Officer. The ship was fully crewed but not by men of all the necessary trades and talents at the time of her final action. Weiss had staggered bloody and dazed out of the destroyer’s wrecked gun director after an eleven-inch round fired by the First World War-era dreadnought Yavuz had torn off the top of it and hacked down the destroyer’s great lattice foremast as if it was made of balsa wood. At first it was thought he was merely concussed, and true to form once onshore at Royal Naval Hospital Bighi – no more than a brisk walk from where Joe now stood – he had repeatedly put himself to the back of the queue as he marshalled Talavera’s walking wounded into the ministering hands of the impossibly hard-pressed medical staff. Nobody had prioritised his examination until he collapsed, retching, vomiting and fitting uncontrollably. By then it was already too late; he had suffered a cerebral haemorrhage, almost certainly caused by the shock wave of the passage of the large, high velocity projectile which had demolished the gun director around him the previous day.

Miles Weiss had been Peter’s best friend in the Navy.

His best friend...

Joe moved to stand before the second row of graves.

Talavera’s fated consort that day off the main island’s east coast, the frigate HMS Yarmouth, had been run aground wrecked from bow to stern in St Paul’s Bay. All bar three of her eighty-five dead were buried here at Kalkara including her commanding officer, John Pope. Pope had been posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross and promoted full captain for his part in thwarting the Soviet attempt to seize Malta.

A dark cloud passed over the face of the sun.

There were flecks of rain in the cool breeze.

On the day of the battle there had been a twenty-mile-wide electrical storm blackly roiling out to sea; at the height of the battle great tridents of lightning had speared down into the dark choppy waters through which Talavera was racing.

But that was then and this was now and before he returned to Senglea to chair that afternoon's Workers' Council meeting at the Admiralty Dockyard, he had one last port of call in the Catholic section of the cemetery.

His late brother Samuel's mortal remains lay on the opposite side of the cemetery. His older brother – there had been eight years between them – had been a distant, often disapproving presence in his life. Joe had wondered if that had been because he and Marija were so close, or if Sam had felt left out, neglected during all those years that Marija was in hospital, slowly being mended.

The way Sam had died did not bear thinking about; trapped chained to a pipe in the engine room of the frigate HMS Torquay when Soviet agents set off the charges that broke her back. It was a long time before they discovered what had actually happened; and there had been bad, terrible rumours implicating Sam in the sinking of the ship. People had said the foulest things; it had been unimaginably awful for his wife, Rosa, even though from what Marija had hinted Rosa and Sam had never had the 'happiest' of times together. But then British Intelligence had captured Red Dawn operatives who had confessed to the whole thing. Sam's good name was vindicated, he had been a totally innocent dupe and subsequently, human remains had been discovered – as expected chained to engine room pipe work in the sunken hull of the Torquay - and conclusively identified by a comparison with dental records, confirming that Sam was just another tragic victim of Soviet mendacity.

That was back in the Autumn, simply tying up a legal loose end pre-empted by a decision in the High Court in Oxford in April of last year declaring that Sam was deceased permitting Rosa to re-marry.

Joe doubted his parents would ever be the same again.

Marija had done what she always did, grieved and moved on.

He smiled involuntarily and chuckled; news of their first granddaughter had at last brought a little sunshine back into their Mama and Papa's lives...

Marija was right; one had to live in the present. There were millions of people who had lost so much more than they had; who lived in graveyards.

Joe often felt that walking through the cemetery was like strolling through the misery of the twentieth century. There were many military cemeteries on Malta, but this one on the outskirts of Kalkara only dated to the spring of 1915. Around one hundred and thirty-five thousand sick and wounded from Gallipoli, Salonika, Palestine and Mesopotamia had passed through the hospitals of the Maltese Archipelago in the First World War, and the majority of those who had died at nearby Bighi had found their last resting place here, in the ground around him. In those years Malta was the 'nurse of the Mediterranean'; but here, in neat rows lay the men for whom the 'nurse' could do nothing.

History had repeated itself in Hitler's War.

And again, in recent times...

When he brought his Mama to Kalkara they went straight to the grave of his brother, one of over a thousand non-military burials in the cemetery.

Now he walked with leaden-footed dutifulness, his mind wandering back to that morning's shouting match with 'the Dom'. During the Battle of Malta Red Army paratroopers and a gang of 'Spetsnaz' killers had systematically hunted down prominent men across the main island. Aided by fifth columnists, traitors, the Soviets had virtually wiped out the leadership of the Maltese Nationalist Party and several senior trade unionists and middle-ranking members of the Labour Party. The knock-on effect of this was that the nationalists – among whom whole clans had been mercilessly obliterated – were still in abject disarray; while the Maltese socialists effectively, made hay. The British tried to be even handed but the trouble was that the only credible, active, and in any way 'serious' political party in the Archipelago was the Maltese Labour Party.

Well, 'trouble' not so much with 'the Party' as with its leader, the Chairman of the Civilian Authority of the Maltese Archipelago, effectively the Prime Minister – as he had previously been in the 1950s – of the Maltese.

In the first year after the October War Duminku, or as the British knew him 'Dom' - a diminutive of his Anglicized name – Mintoff, the forty-eight-year-old former Rhodes Scholar at Hertford College, Oxford, had been placed under house arrest but ever since the Battle of Malta he had been treated with kid gloves. Or so it seemed to Joe.

By profession an architect and journalist, Dom Mintoff was anti-Catholic – not an intrinsically wise thing to be on the Archipelago – and over the years

he had gone from being aggressively in favour of ever closer links, ‘integration’, with the British to demanding ‘dominion status’ on the model of that granted to Australia and Canada in the past.

The other – possibly less tractable - drawback with ‘the Dom’ was that he was famously thin-skinned and never forgot a slight, real or imagined. Oh, and that he was a bully. That morning he had brought three of his ‘bodyguards’, backstreet bruisers by any other name, to what was supposed to be a routine party meeting.

In some ways Joe admired Mintoff for the way he had held the Labour Party together and exploited the changed political climate after the battle of Malta to develop closer links with the Labour Party in England. However, mostly he wondered why he had ever got involved with the little monster in the first place.

The thing that really rankled was the man’s undisguised, over-weaning ambition. It was as if the three years he had been the colony’s Prime Minister in the 1950s had whetted his appetite for power to such an extent that his whole life was now devoted to grabbing as much as possible of it for its own sake.

‘But for the Americans and the British getting involved in the Cuban Missiles fiasco we’d have had our independence by now!’ Mintoff would complain. ‘And we’d be free of foreign tyranny.’

But, Joe suspected, not free of home grown tyrants!

Mintoff had tried to draw Marija into the internecine spider’s web of Maltese politics when she had been leading the Women of Malta campaign. She had politely kept her distance from him; not because she disliked him – she had been very clear about that – but because any agreement with him ‘would have a price’, and she was not interested in making ‘deals’ – hostages to fortune - with a career politician who could be relied upon to ‘lean whichever way the wind was blowing’ to further his career.

Marija had gently counselled Joe to ‘think twice’ before he got involved with ‘the Dom’. But he had known better and besides, initially, he had been flattered by the attention Mintoff had lavished on him when he got back to Malta from England last summer. In retrospect, all the fuss and bother surrounding his presence in Oxford and the George Cross had rather turned his head; and getting into bed with the Labour Party had only been one of many, thankfully in the main small, blunders during that period.

However, as Marija was liable to say ‘whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger!’

Joe was still trying to work out what was really bothering him about this morning’s confrontation. Mintoff wanted more of his own people on the Dockyard Workers’ Council; Joe had told him that was not *his* decision. If the Labour Party wanted a bigger say in the dockyards it ought to get more of its members elected to the Council. He suspected that was not Mintoff’s real gripe; he believed the continuing influx of skilled ‘settlers’ and their families from the United Kingdom was a deadly threat to his political power base – in the General Workers Union, presumably - and he wanted ‘direct action’ to slow down what he called the ‘Anglicization of the docks’.

Personally, Joe thought that was a bit like King Canute asking the tide to ‘go back’ where it came from while it was still coming up the beach! It was not as if the new workers were putting Maltese men out of work; there was far too much work for everybody all the time, the harbours and creeks were filled with ships queuing to come alongside or to enter dry dock. Moreover, working side by side with trade unionists from the North of England who had been representing their fellow workers all their lives; he was learning hand over fist lessons he would never have learn in a million years cocooned in the small, narrow world of the old ‘Malta only’ society of the Admiralty Dockyards.

What with one thing and another Joe had had enough of being pushed around by ‘the Dom’ and his thugs.

He turned one final corner and walked on, lost deep in his thoughts. He had walked these cemetery paths so often he navigated from A to B on pure muscle memory, his head miles away.

Knowing he had arrived he collected his wits.

He sighed.

And blinked uncomprehendingly in horror at the graffiti painted crudely on his brother’s grave marker...

At first, he was shocked.

Then he was disbelieving even though he read the words again and again.

And then he was...

Angry, and oddly...a little afraid.

Chapter 3

Thursday 22nd January 1965
Hertford College, Oxford

There was a sprinkling of fresh overnight snow, no more than a dusting on the lawn of the Old Quad of the ancient college. Thus far there had been no heavy snowfall and until the last few days the weather had been almost spring-like in Oxford. Even today after the night time frost the morning was bright; and the sunshine streaming in through the leaded windows of the old refectory – now converted into the Prime Minister's conference and cabinet room – was, after the gloom, both existentially and climatically of recent times, almost like a good omen. There had been few of indeed of those in the last two years but perhaps, just perhaps, things were beginning to look up at long last.

That morning Sir Henry Tomlinson, the greying eminence grise at the heart of the governmental machine had knocked at the open door to Margaret Thatcher's first floor office, and as always, on these occasions informed his principal that: "The Cabinet awaits, Prime Minister."

A wry, possibly fond fatherly half-smile had quirked his pale lips as he realised he had inadvertently interrupted *The Angry Widow* in a rare moment of wool-gathering. She had been gazing out over the wintery quad, a little lost in her thoughts.

The Prime Minister snapped out of her reverie and greeted the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service with what a third party might have taken for a filial, possibly daughterly smile of her own.

"Good morning, Sir Henry," she welcomed the man who had been at her side, and guarding her back, ever since she had – much to her surprise and consternation – been invited to step into Edward Heath's shoes thirteen months ago. "Do we have a full house?"

"General Anderson sends his apologies," the man informed her. "The way things are at the moment in Londonderry he needs to be in Northern Ireland at present. The Chief of the Defence Staff spoke to him by telephone overnight to ensure that he is in a position to update Cabinet. Otherwise, everybody is present and correct." Sir Henry Tomlinson allowed himself a

moment of whimsy: “Standing to their chairs around the Cabinet table ready for inspection, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher gave her friend a contemplative schoolmistressy look which bounced off him like a pebble off the three-inch thick inclined cemented armour plate protecting the front of a Centurion tank.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Tom put his head around my door earlier,” the man remarked, brightening. “I gather that Pat is back on her feet again.”

Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, the novelist wife of the Foreign Secretary had befriended Margaret Thatcher – a woman over twenty years her junior – in the aftermath of the regicidal attack on Balmoral shortly before she had had the premiership thrust upon her. Pat had become indispensable, at first as a non-political feminine confidante, dresser, and general pressure release valve, later as the de jure guardian of the eleven-year old Thatcher twins – Carol and Mark – and more recently as her personal speech writing ‘advisor’ and, in a funny sort of way, as a wise, very worldly older sister-mother figure always in the background...

Pat had been very ill over the New Year; in these days when all manner of pestilences stalked the land – many said spawned in the corruption of the wrecked cities – and antibiotics were strictly rationed and periodically unavailable, even everyday infections could be fatal. Mercifully, this present winter the waves of influenza sweeping the country seemed relatively benign; either that or those most vulnerable to the latest strains had already succumbed in the last two years. All of which was academic because Pat was on the mend, no longer bed-bound, able at last to keep down sustaining broth; and finally, she was starting to ‘look better’. For several days she had acquired a dreadful, ashen pallor and everybody had feared the worst but now, it seemed, the crisis was behind them.

“Yes, I plan to visit her this afternoon before I go to Brize Norton.”

There was no prospect of the newly inaugurated US President coming to the United Kingdom in the foreseeable future so she had invited herself to Philadelphia.

Sir Henry moved on.

“I gather the dinner at the American Embassy last night was a great success?”

“Yes, but the Embassy serves such huge portions of *everything*,” the

Prime Minister bemoaned, “and one feels so infernally guilty leaving so much as a morsel on one’s plate.”

“America is the land of plenty,” the Head of the Home Civil Service commiserated dryly.

“Actually, the evening went off very well,” Margaret Thatcher agreed, collecting her wits and girding her loins for the coming Cabinet meeting. “I confess I had reservations about letting Colonel Waters ‘weave his spell’ as Airey calls it with the Brenckmanns but he was on his very best behaviour throughout. Over drinks he had Walter and Joanne very nearly splitting their sides with laughter.”

“Ambassador Brenckmann and his wife have not had a lot to laugh about lately,” the man observed diplomatically.

Henry Tomlinson had not yet made up his mind whether the return of the former SAS hero cum eponymous star British Broadcasting Corporation war reporter to Oxford, was worth the risk of exposing the Prime Minister to his influence. It was not that she was in any way overtly ‘taken with’ the man; more that she *might* be if she spent much more time with him.

As for Colonel Francis St John Waters, VC, he was clearly smitten head over heels with her and given half a chance would follow her around like a faithful gundog every minute of the day. Which made it all the odder that Airey Neave, the Secretary of State for Security, himself a gold-plated national treasure, seemed to be doing his level best to ‘push’ what, to outside observers, were the most unlikely of ‘co-respondents’ together. The danger was that if Waters and the Prime Minister were to become any kind of public ‘twosome’ tongues would wag with a fearful vengeance; and then what would happen?

Problematically, there could be no remaining doubt, none whatsoever, that the Prime Minister found Frank Waters’s company inordinately...*amusing* and diverting.

The Cabinet Secretary put those premonitions aside to focus on today’s business; the year’s first meeting of the full Cabinet since the formal announcement of the forthcoming General Election, now scheduled for Thursday 11th March. Personally, he thought it was far too soon for anybody to be seeking a ‘new mandate’ or for a return to any kind of ‘politics as normal’. Worst of all it offended his sense of propriety that the upcoming election was going to be administratively, inevitably a very ‘messy business’.

Any notion of preparing an ‘electoral roll’ along pre-war lines was impossible and it was likely that nearly half the seats would be elected on a ‘list system’; with the only thing stopping people voting more than once being that they would have two fingers daubed with indelible printers’ ink once they had voted the ‘first’ time. Frankly, to run a general election in such an undocumented, haphazard way offended his administrator’s sensibilities. However, the one thing everybody knew about Margaret Thatcher was that once she had made up her mind there was no going back. Her fortitude and well, for want of a better word, ‘stubbornness’ were her defining political signatures and one day they would probably be her downfall, *probably* if the pollsters were to be believed, as soon as March although anybody who claimed to know what was going to happen was in Henry Tomlinson’s opinion, a fool or a charlatan, or both.

“Now, Henry,” the lady said to the old man without warning. This time it was he who had been caught distracted in his own ruminations.

Henry Tomlinson started with understated alarm.

“Who is this man from Aldermaston who will be briefing me before I leave for Philadelphia?” The Prime Minister inquired. There was an unmistakable note of pique in her question.

“Mr Johnston is the Deputy Head of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment,” the Cabinet Secretary replied, recovering his equilibrium in a moment. “Among other things he also fills the role of Chief Physics Package Officer at Aldermaston.”

“Yes, I gathered that from your note, Henry. But I still don’t understand why you want me to see him.”

Henry Tomlinson was a little surprised Margaret Thatcher had not taken him aside before now. He had assumed it was because the sponsoring Secretaries of State; Alison Munro and William Whitelaw, of Supply and Defence respectively, must have previously cleared the ‘briefing’ with her.

Apparently, this was not the case.

“Physics Package Officer,” the Prime Minister mused aloud, her expression suddenly quizzical. By training she was an industrial chemist *and* a barrister and now that she had turned her mind to this particular matter she was joining up the dots. “You mean that Mr Johnston is this country’s nuclear bomb maker?”

“Yes, Prime Minister.”

“Why have I never heard his name before?”

Sir Henry Tomlinson smiled apologetically.

“You did not need to know it.” The man smiled again, shrugged. “Until now, Prime Minister.”

This went down like a lead balloon.

“What about my predecessors, did they need to know?”

“Mr Heath demanded regular briefings on the status of all our atomic installations, whereas, Mr MacMillan was not a man who concerned himself overly with ‘administrative’ matters.”

Margaret Thatcher was regularly ‘briefed’ about the condition and operability of the United Kingdom’s main nuclear installations. The Calder Hall complex at Windscale in Cumberland had been ‘secured’ soon after the October War and re-commenced supplying power to the electrical grid over a year ago. In Scotland the experimental Dounreay ‘fast breeder reactor’ at Caithness had recently been re-activated to develop new reactors for the Royal Navy’s future undersea fleet. The Chapelcross 1 and 4 reactors located near Annan in Dumfries and Galloway – commercially up-scaled versions of the Calder Hall prototypes had just been coming on stream in October 1962, both were shut down at present, as was the United Kingdom’s first atomic site at Harwell, little more than fifteen miles from where they now stood. The two partially built nuclear power stations at Hunterston in West Kirkbride in Scotland, and Hinckley Point in Somerset were ‘secure’ building sites, no work having been done at either place since the war.

Her briefings about the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment – AWRE - at Aldermaston and its nearby ‘related’ facility at Burghfield in Berkshire had always been of a somewhat ‘terse’ nature. Up until now she had been happy to consider the two AWRE ‘bomb factories’ as the most secret places in England. Up until now...but now two of her Cabinet colleagues had decided to confront her with...

What? She wondered.

And why today of all days; just before she flew off to the United States to pick up the cudgels with a new Administration in the White House?

“I see,” Margaret Thatcher sighed. The Cabinet Secretary would not have included a meeting with ‘Mr Johnston’ unless he thought it was important. “Very well, Henry.”

That morning she marched into the Cabinet Room with an oddly sunny

air; it was as if the travails of the last year had both tempered and mellowed her, and her life, which had been on hold ever since that dreadful night over two years ago, was beginning anew. It was not that she had forgotten, or in any way forgiven all that had been lost, rather that she glimpsed for the first time the way ahead.

"Good morning, everybody!"

Her colleagues had been standing in groups, talking shop or exchanging gossip. They responded as one.

"Good morning, Prime Minister."

People settled around the long, oval table.

Before the war the Cabinet had comprised twenty-one ministers and Edward Heath had attempted to mimic this in his post-war government - named in accordance with the provisions in place for such a national disaster the *United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration*, and abbreviated to UKIEA – but from the outset of her premiership Margaret Thatcher had resolved that a Cabinet of no more than twelve members including the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, currently General Sir Michael Carver, was quite sufficient.

In the thirteen months of her premiership a cacophony of World events, the sad death of Iain Macleod, and her decision to create a new national Security Department under the leadership of her friend and mentor Airey Neave's, had necessitated an increase to a thirteen-member Cabinet with Northern Ireland – due to the security situation in the province – being in effect ruled from Oxford by the 'Ulster Section' of the Home Office.

During her premiership Margaret Thatcher had – with the support of her major partner in what was a 'national government' first renamed her government the *Unity Administration of the United Kingdom*, and as of 1st January 1965, simply '*the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland*'.

The Conservative Party ministers around the table were: William Whitelaw, the forty-five year old Member of Parliament for Penrith and the Border, at Defence; Peter Thorneycroft, the last surviving grandee from MacMillan's days, who had been reinstated in the post he had held in the late 1950s at the Treasury; Airey Neave at Security; Alison Munro at Supply; Nicholas Ridley, the Minister of Information, and representing the Scottish Office, the one intact pre-war ministry, John Scott Maclay, the fifty-eight

year old MP for Renfrewshire.

The Labour Party group was led by James Callaghan, the leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party, who was Margaret Thatcher's deputy. If anything happened to her he would automatically become the next Prime Minister. He also held the portfolio of Secretary of State for Wales. To balance the 'unity' of the Cabinet the posts of the Home, Labour and Health departments had been assigned to Labour Party nominees; respectively Roy Jenkins, Barbara Castle and Christopher Mayhew.

Insofar as had been practical, junior ministerial and departmental posts had been allocated across the parties in the same ratio across all governmental institutions; and despite everything, the arrangement had worked a lot better than anybody could possibly have predicted.

This said, with the promise of a little 'normality' beginning to threaten to stick its head above the political horizon it was anybody's guess how long the present 'accommodation' between the two major pre-war parties would survive.

When Margaret Thatcher had told James Callaghan that she planned to call an election the news had been greeted without rancour, accepted as a necessary step towards re-establishing the good order of British political life. The country had survived – albeit terribly damaged – the October War and the vicissitudes of the last two years but to move forward its leaders need a new mandate.

What happened next was up to the British people.

Chapter 4

Friday 24th January 1965
Grand Harbour, Malta

Lieutenant Heidi Takawa had been told that the best view in town was from the gardens directly above the ‘Saluting Battery’. It was quite a climb up to the top of the rocky ramparts – the ancient-looking lift from the dock to the heights, whose twisted footings had never been removed, had been destroyed in the bombing of December 1963 – necessitating an ascent with several dog-legs and dead ends because places were still roped off or under repair from last year’s battles, in fact from what she had seen most of the harbour and all of its ‘creeks’ were pretty knocked about still but it was a cool day and it was good to be on dry land again. Not that she had any complaints about life onboard ship; which had been even more ‘fun’ when she had been the only female member of the crew of the USS Dewey (DLG-14).

Trudging ever upward she reflected on the crazy rollercoaster ride of the last few months. First there was her sudden transfer onto the Dewey from the fast transport USS Paul Revere (APA-248) in the aftermath of the two Battles of Kharg Island, the endless stream of terribly wounded men, interrupted by the high-speed steaming of the air action against those Red Air Force bombers which, in retrospect, had bookended the war in the Persian Gulf. Then there was the surprise news that the frigate’s Captain and Surgeon had got together to recommend her for the Navy and Marine Corps *Commendation Medal*, awarded for ‘sustained acts of heroism or meritorious service’, *and* that the acting Fleet Commander had promoted her to acting full lieutenant for her ‘courage and tireless dedicated performance of her duties in a combat zone’. Her Ma and Pa would be proud of her but she had just been doing her job.

At the time she had assumed that as soon as the ‘emergency’ was over – that is, the guns stopped firing – she would be shipped straight back to the Paul Revere or a boring shore station, and probably stuck in the boondocks some place no sane person would want to stay overlong. But no, under War Order 64/172, issued a fortnight after the sinking of the flagship of Carrier Division Seven, the USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63), female ‘medical staff’ were

unconditionally permitted to serve on US warships at the discretion of individual Fleet Commanders, and hey presto, she had become the only girl – the ships' Chief Nurse - on a ship with a crew of over three hundred men.

The Dewey had been one of the first US Navy ships permitted to transit the re-opened Suez Canal ten days ago. Scuttlebutt was that Colonel Nasser had held out as long as possible but that his buddies, the British, had sweet-talked him into opening up the canal for selected US ships for 'strategic reasons'.

Heidi assumed that it was for those same 'strategic reasons' that the Brits had let the Sixth Fleet back into Malta shortly after Richard Nixon kicked LBJ out of the White House last fall. That was just a guess; she had never really been very interested in politics which in a way, was odd, given that she had been born in an internment camp on account of her parents being second generation, American-born, Japanese unjustly imprisoned because they did not look like 'real' Americans. Her Ma and Pa had never made a big deal out of that; heck, once the Government wised up and let them all out of jail her Pa, a college maths and physics teacher, had helped to build the atomic bombs which had won the War!

Onboard the ship Heidi wore uniform slacks – there were a lot of ladders to climb – for the sake of practical modesty; off duty off the ship or for anything ceremonial she always wore skirts. What was the point of being the only girl onboard if you dressed like a boy all the time?

Yes, what with one thing and another she had had the time of her life the last year. She was going to miss the Dewey – well, her many friends mostly – and she was a little afraid that once her posting ended things would never be quite the same, damned nearly perfect, again.

Still, like Walter Brenckmann said in his letters, 'everything changes' because 'that's life'. Walter was a nice guy; it would have been a real crime if the Navy had gone bad on him after all he went through in the Persian Gulf. She had told him at the time that 'there's no way they're going to treat you bad'. He had not believed her.

Now the guy was a hero again, on the USS Midway in the Sea of Japan off Korea. He was already back stateside, about to pick up his career in the Submarine Service. Nobody in the Dewey's Wardroom had a bad word to say about him, and not just because they all knew Walter and she had been friendly before he went ashore at Damman to get his injuries properly fixed

up.

Heidi had met a lot of heroes on the Dewey.

During the Battle of Malta in April last year a big shell had demolished one end of the terrace overlooking the Saluting Battery. The rubble still lay where it had fallen but somebody had planted flower beds and palm tree saplings on the level ground to the north and west of the wrecked area.

Finally reaching the upper plateau overlooking the Grand Harbour Heidi felt as if she had stepped into an oasis of greenery commanding an unobstructed view of what her Wardroom comrades called ‘the finest natural harbour in the Mediterranean’, and an unparalleled vista across a large swath of the Maltese mainland.

The view was...*breath-taking*.

The Dewey was moored fore and aft to No. 2 Emergency Destroyer Buoy roughly in the middle of the harbour between where she now stood and the broad entrance to French Creek, where, tomorrow morning the destroyer would be dry docked for at least a week prior to being rotated back to her new home port, Norfolk, Virginia. The plan was to return via Naples, Barcelona, Gibraltar, a ‘good will’ trip to Portsmouth, England – that was going to be ‘interesting’ – before transiting the North Atlantic sometime in late February.

There was talk about Heidi staying onboard all the way back to Norfolk. The Navy wanted to make a big thing about the ‘ladies of the fleet’ on the medical staffs of many ships who were rapidly becoming ‘indispensable to the Service’. It was all baloney; nothing new. Two decades ago the ships carrying the Army and the Marines from island to island across the Pacific towards the Japanese homeland had been full of ‘female’ nurses and doctors.

Heidi’s Ma had brought her up on the story of Margo Seiffert, the ground-breaking Boston surgeon who had volunteered for the Navy the day after Pearl Harbour and ended up operating on wounded men on a hospital ship under attack by Kamikazes off Okinawa. Heidi had always wanted to meet the late Doctor Seiffert and hoped that one day the Navy would bring her to Malta where her personal role model and girlhood heroine had built a new career after she left the post-World War Two Navy. She planned to visit the hospital she had set up – St Catherine’s Hospital for Women in Mdina – and the great woman’s grave while the Dewey was in dock. She had five days leave due to her and things were going to be kind of slow on the Dewey

in the next few days.

Beyond the guided missile destroyer, a big flat salvage barge with an overlarge ‘A’ frame crane was anchored in the shadows of the ramparts of Senglea. The Skipper had said that the Brits were dismantling the wreck of HMS Torquay and working elsewhere to ‘clear the navigation’ of the harbour. Apparently, some of the most problematic wrecks had lain undisturbed since the 1940s.

Another salvage barge was anchored alongside the old Passenger Quay. Onshore nearby the buildings still wore fading, flaking signs ‘Custom House’, ‘Disembarkation No. 1’. The word was to keep away from that area because the divers were recovering ordnance from an ammunition ship scuttled in 1942 to stop it blowing up. The British had done the bare essential pieces of ‘clearing up’ during the 1945 war and just afterwards; but anybody who had ever served in *any* Navy in *any* era knew there was always something left over to be done at *another time.*

A destroyer, HMS Maori had been sunk at the next Emergency Buoy along, No. 2 and ‘mostly salved’ by 1946. However, pieces of her still lay on the bottom although the main hull section had been towed out of the Grand Harbour and scuttled in St Elmo’s Bay well away from the main channel into Marsamxett Anchorage and Sliema Creek. HMS Kingston, written off while in dry dock now formed an artificial reef in St Paul’s Bay. HMS Jersey, another destroyer snapped in two by a mine close to the main breakwater light had had to be blown to bits with demolition charges to unblock the entrance to the Grand Harbour in 1941, and large sections of the wreck recovered and moved later. Notwithstanding, there was still wartime wreckage strewn all around the harbours of Malta. War, as Heidi, had discovered, was very, very messy.

There was a single, freshly painted, guard rail along the part of the terrace open to the public.

“*Welcome to the Barraka Gardens*’ the sign said.

Heidi stared down at the lean, hungry lines of the USS Dewey. The overcast of the early morning had parted, now bright Mediterranean sunshine bathed the Grand Harbour turning the waters aquamarine blue, almost translucent. Along the wharfs beneath the ramparts of Valletta to her left half-a-dozen fishing boats were unloading their freshly caught cargoes, across the anchorage in Kalkara Creek beneath the Romanesque-looking

portico of the Royal Naval Hospital Bighi the British cruiser HMS Lion was moored alongside a grey fleet oiler.

The Lion was the last of her class; HMS Blake lay on her beam ends in forty feet of water in Limassol Harbour, and the wreck of the Tiger, gutted and shattered grounded on the shifting sandbanks of the Shatt al-Arab opposite the mouth of the Karun River north of Abadan Island. Beyond the Dewey one of the Brit's new Leander class frigates was moored alongside Parlatorio Wharf. In between cranes in French Creek an Alan M. Sumner class destroyer was high and dry in dock.

A thin, shimmering plume of fumes shot through with the merest hint of grey smoke rose from the Dewey's aft stack, and even from two to three hundred yards away Heidi imagined she could hear the familiar quietly roaring song of her fire room blowers.

"It's quite a view, isn't it?"

The man's voice caught Heidi completely unawares, lost in her thoughts for a moment she started with alarm. The Executive Officer had solemnly warned crew members 'thinking of going ashore alone' that 'feelings are still running high' on the island and that 'all personnel are to take extreme care and to do their utmost to avoid causing offence to the British or to the locals!'

Heidi had taken that with a pinch of salt.

Fired up with stories about Margo Seiffert she had wanted to visit Malta since she was a teenager and nothing was going to stop her 'visiting' and 'exploring'. True, she was a woman on her own but that had never stopped her before.

Nevertheless, she very nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Forgive me," the man apologised instantly. "I didn't mean to creep up behind you. That was stupid of me, sorry."

Heidi turned to scowl at him.

She opened her mouth to rebuke him

Then shut it again, like a fish out of water, the next moment.

"Do I know you, Mister?"

"Possibly," he confessed, nodding down into the harbour, "if you are off that fine ship down there?"

Heidi guessed the man was in his mid to late twenties, perhaps five nine or ten tall and lean made, probably without an ounce of spare flesh on his bones. He was wearing a freshly pressed, newish Royal Air Force uniform;

two-and-a-half rings on his sleeve; a Squadron Leader. His wings were sewn above a row of medal ribbons – including a new wine red one which caught her eye for a moment – and his shoes were brightly shined, cap neatly under is left arm; like he was about to go on parade or report to a senior officer. His dark hair was a little over-long by US Navy standards and he wore – quite well really – one of those bushy moustaches that so suited...some men, and others, not at all. There was a green-grey in his eyes that spoke to an Irish lineage and something indefinably *boyish* about the way he was shifting awkwardly on his feet.

"I don't think we were ever formally introduced last year, Lieutenant," the man confessed, now very sheepish. "And from what I've been told when I was the guest of the USS Dewey I did not look, er, in any way, as I do now..."

She suddenly knew who the man was.

"You're the..."

Heidi got no farther because the man nodded and stared at his feet before visibly gathering his courage, standing tall and reporting with no little formality: "Squadron Leader Guy French, at your service."

The last time Heidi had seen the British flyer his face was half as big again as it had every right to be because every blood vessel in it, and his eyes, had burst. Those eyes, now green-grey had been crimson red, his features a puffy, bruised mess. X-rays had shown a series of hairline, fortunately undisplaced, skull fractures, several of his ribs were broken, one of his arms, a leg, the list went on and on...

In fact, she was absolutely astonished that he was standing in front of her looking so...*well* just six months later.

"Heidi Takawa," she blurted.

"It is an honour to meet you again."

"How did you?" She asked. "What are you doing here?"

"It is complicated," he half-smiled, no less apologetically than before. "After I was transferred ashore from the Dewey," he nodded down into the harbour at the ship, "I was flown here. For all sorts of reasons, I've been here pretty much ever since. Apart from a brief spell back in England last month at a flight assessment centre in Lincolnshire, that is."

Heidi was silent.

"Knowing the Dewey was in port I came up here to gather my, er,

thoughts before ascertaining whether it would be possible to go aboard to extend my personal thanks to the Captain of your fine ship, and her crew, for well, saving my bacon last July."

Heidi was – despite herself – a little ambivalent about meeting again the man, one of them, leastways, who had sunk the Kitty Hawk; she was even less sure how he would be received onboard the Dewey.

"That may not be a good idea," she murmured.

The man shrugged.

"That was what my father told me," he admitted. "In fact, he ordered me to lie low while the Dewey was here. But," he shrugged, "*you* didn't have to pull me out of the water and you certainly didn't have to keep me alive. But *you* did and frankly, I don't care what people think about it, or what's politically *acceptable*, and I certainly don't give a damn about embarrassing anybody. If I say or do nothing while the Dewey is at Malta it would be an insult to all the brave fellows who died that day." He sighed, shook his head and looked away. "Sorry, that must sound awfully pompous..."

Heidi was gazing now at the newest, wine red, ribbon on Guy French's breast.

The man followed her stare.

Momentarily, a flash of pain passed his eyes.

Heidi decided she had missed something.

"Your Pa gets to order you to do stuff?"

The man smiled a wan smile.

"Yes, he does, actually."

"But you still want to come onboard the Dewey?"

"Yes." It was said with a doggedness that suggested he planned to swim out to the ship and clamber up her anchor chain if that was what it took.

Heidi viewed the man who had pointed his huge bomber's nose at the middle of the USS Kitty Hawk's flight deck and subsequently ejected – or been blown – out of it at supersonic speeds at an impossibly low altitude, and yet, somehow, against all the odds survived.

Nobody needed to tell her that the human body is simply not equipped to cope with, in any meaningful way, with sudden massive atmospheric pressure differentials, or the unimaginable g-forces inherent in being suddenly flung into a supersonic airstream, let alone then floating corpse-like in the water for twenty-four hours. The only thing that had stopped the man's head exploding

was his tight-fitting helmet.

Heidi began to trawl through the ‘other’ things the Executive Officer had said to the Dewey’s crew last night before the destroyer had entered the Grand Harbour.

There was stuff about the history of the ‘Archipelago’ and he had finished by reading a ‘welcoming’ message from the Governor of Malta.

Air Marshal Sir Daniel French...

Spontaneously she giggled and the tension, which had never really wholly dissipated since the man had crept up behind her and made her jump, evaporated.

His Pa had to be the Governor!

“So, what was your plan, Mister?” She checked, rhetorically: “To just turn up at the bottom of the gangway?”

“Yes,” the man nodded. “Something like that.”

“It would be better if somebody invited you onboard,” she decided, mischief glinting in her tawny eyes. “That way you don’t get lynched.”

“I don’t know anybody onboard and besides, the last thing I’d want to do is cause anybody on your ship any embarrassment...”

Heidi shook her head.

The Brits were something else!

She was talking to the man who had sunk the biggest goddammed warship in history seven months ago and he was worried about ‘embarrassing’ somebody!

“How about if I was to ‘invite’ you onboard the ship?”

“I couldn’t possibly presume...”

“It’s no sweat. I’ll clear it with the XO first, anyway. You got any other ‘plans’ for this evening?”

“Er, no.”

“That’s settled then. Walk me back down to the quay so you’ll know where to pick up the boat to the ship, and in the meantime, I’ll square it with the XO.”

The man was clearly utterly baffled.

“This is really kind of you. How on earth can I ever repay you?”

That was easy.

“You know your way around this island?”

“Oh, yes, very well...”

“Good. You can show me around. Deal?”

“Why that’s, yes, well, marvellous,” Guy French mumbled, blushing like a schoolboy.

Chapter 5

Friday 25th January 1965
Embassy of the United Kingdom,
Montgommery County, Philadelphia

Margaret Thatcher had expected her scheduled three-day stay in Philadelphia to be a somewhat strained, frosty experience. Not so much from the point of view of her dealings with the new US Administration – who did not want to talk to her at all - but in respect of her dealings with the embassy regime of Captain Sir Peter Christopher and his fiercely loyal *coterie*. But of course, as she had discovered many times in the last year what one anticipates and what one actually finds 'on the ground' were, sometimes, entirely different things.

She had been greeted at the airport with impeccable courtesy by the new US Secretary of State, Henry Cabot Lodge, and then – literally – enveloped by the assembled embassy party.

The Ambassador and Ambassadress, Sir Peter and his wife, Lady Marija, and Nicholas 'Nicko' Henderson – the relatively newly appointed *chargé d'affaires* - and his wife, Mary had greeted her like a conquering heroine, Boadicea and Florence Nightingale rolled into one and basically, she had felt as if her feet had not touched the ground ever since. Within minutes of arriving at the Embassy she had been rocking the Christophers' eight-week-old baby daughter Elisabetta in her arms, and suddenly she was unaccountably guilty she had not brought the twins with her.

She had said a lot of hard – harsh, actually - things to Peter Christopher when he had been recalled to Oxford in December for 'consultations'. She had subsequently regretted some of the things she had said, but not others. To his credit he had taken it all in remarkably good heart, and in retrospect his brief rejoinders to her 'points' had been succinct and respectfully civil, starkly contrasting with some of the responses she got from members of her own Party and Government when she took them to task. But then he was an officer and gentleman very much in the mold of his late father, and that was where the emotional side of things crossed over with the practicalities of government. Had his father lived by now she would most likely be his step mother, and little Elisabetta's grandmother. Try as she might conundrums

about what might have been complicated everything, even though in her heart she knew that Tom Harding-Grayson was probably right when he said they had accidentally got the best possible man for what was, by any standards, an impossible job in America in Peter Christopher. The fact that the United Kingdom also got the man's equally remarkable wife as part of the deal was just one of those miracles of nature, inexplicable.

Her Foreign Secretary had hit the nail on the head when he said 'leave the politicking and double dealing to me in Manhattan; Peter and Marija will keep the peace in Philadelphia whatever goes wrong at the peace conference in New York'.

The people around Richard Nixon thought Tom was an anti-American closet Communist – actually, there was still a remote possibility he would stand at the forthcoming election on the Labour Party lists – so she had come alone to Philadelphia so as to not unnecessarily discommode her hosts.

Elisabetta had quietened and was now dozing contentedly in the Prime Minister's arms. The Ambassadress was telling her how excited her parents in Malta were about the new arrival and how nice it was that American ships had been allowed back into Maltese harbours.

"Sir Peter," Margaret Thatcher inquired presently, astonished at how at her ease she was within the circle of 'friends' around the hearth next to the crackling wood fire that keep out the winter cold of Pennsylvania. There had been no fresh snow for several days but that which already lay on the ground had frozen and a bitter wind had chilled her to the bone the moment she stepped out of the British Overseas Airways Corporation – BOAC - Boeing 707 which had transported her from RAF Brize Norton to the temporary American capital. "What are your thoughts on the vessels the Administration are offering us in part-reparation for our losses in the Gulf?"

The Ambassador hesitated.

"Obviously, given a choice I'd opt for more modern ships with sophisticated missile-age weapon systems, Prime Minister," he remarked, seated in an armchair on the opposite side of the hearth. "But that's not realistic and even if we got our hands on those kind of 'hulls' I'm not sure we have the capacity – the technical infrastructure specifically - to actually crew and operate them effectively, not," he spread his hands, "without robbing Peter, as it were, to pay Paul, a thing I strongly suspect the First Sea Lord would strongly object to. No, realistically, what we have been offered – or

rather, will probably be offered – is generous, and consistent with our medium-term trade route protection priorities."

"Should I press the President to transfer old aircraft carriers from his mothball fleet?"

Margaret Thatcher's man in Philadelphia shook his head.

"I know the First Sea Lord's priority is to get Ark Royal, Victorious and Hermes fully operational. Those three, and of course, the Eagle are fully capable of operating all the aircraft types we have available presently, and that we are likely to have available for the foreseeable future."

The Ambassadress came and settled on the arm of her husband's chair, keenly interested in this discussion.

"All the ships the Americans are talking about are mechanically and," she shrugged, "in terms of their engineering layout and efficiency, *better* than Royal Navy cruisers and destroyers of the same generation."

Peter Christopher smiled.

"Marija is a daughter of the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta," he reminded his guest. "She spent her whole life on Malta watching our ships, and all our allies' ships coming and going, and every evening the talk around the dinner table would be of centres of gravity, roll rates, and why it was profoundly unwise to manoeuvre at high speed in company with a Weapon class destroyer!"

The Prime Minister's eyes widened.

"My Papa was, *is* a big man at the dockyards," Marija expanded, proudly. "He sometimes complained that he really did not know what went on the head of certain naval architects," she went on fondly. "For example, he detested the 'Weapons' – in our house we never used the word 'class' talking about ships, just the 'class name' – and described them as 'war time lash ups'. He said the turbines installed in the whole class were 'accidents waiting to happen'. The design of the turbines was so 'botched' that several years ago an emergency 'fix' resulted in the removal of the steam feed to part of the reversing turbine. This stopped the Weapons breaking down so often but at the price of halving the power available to retard the forward motion of the ship, and making the Weapons handle like 'pigs' in normal, everyday situations. In comparison, as Peter will tell you, the bigger Battles, like HMS Talavera, handled much more nimbly both in the open sea and in harbour."

Margaret Thatcher was struck dumb for several seconds.

Elisabetta's grumbling saved her; she rocked the baby until she settled again.

"So," she posed, "what the Americans are offering is better than what we've got? Of the same vintage, I mean?"

Marija nodded thoughtfully.

Her husband had put his arm about her waist and that was always pleasantly distracting.

"Operating and maintaining 'American' ships is going to cause problems," he explained. "Their guns are different calibres to *our* guns. And their ships tend to be more 'fuel greedy' because they are ship for ship, bigger with more powerful machinery sets. And the US Navy won't let us have any modern radar equipment either, but those are things we can sort out in due course."

Again, Marija nodded assent, frowning in thought.

"Because ship for ship the American ships are bigger," she prefaced, "future modifications to allow them to carry more advanced 'British' weapons systems if and when they are developed would be," she shrugged, "more practical. The other thing is that it would be expensive and time-consuming bringing the old mothballed cruisers in England – of which I think there are three or four, all in a bad state of repair - out of mothballs. The same goes for many of our smaller ships still in the 'reserve'. A lot of the American ships we are talking about will have been moored in relatively warm climates for several years, *and* properly looked after mechanically while they were deactivated, whereas the Royal Navy's Reserve Fleet," again, she smiled as if nothing more needed to be said about the British climate.

The Prime Minister held her peace, realising the girlish Ambassadress had not finished.

"The other thing to remember is that generally speaking the Americans have a greater interchange-ability and standardisation of parts and machinery, certainly in their ships than those of similar age in the Royal Navy; which," Marija declared, "means that maintenance and normal operational wear and tear could probably be managed for several years just by cannibalising a proportion of the hulls they give *us*."

The Prime Minister absorbed this, a question forming on her lips.

Marija pre-empted this: "The American ships were built with money no

object; *our* war-time designers were always pinching pennies and 'bodging' things together to cut corners and to get around shortages."

Why am I hearing this from a slip of a girl in Philadelphia not from the Admirals in England?

Margaret Thatcher decided she would revisit that subject another time. There were twenty-seven 'candidate ships' on the lists she had been given: including four cruisers and seventeen destroyers or 'destroyer escorts', all 'gun ships', she had been informed of wartime or immediate post-1945 war builds, most of which had been in mothballs several years.

"Of course," Marija felt obliged to point out, "all of the ships *we* are being offered aren't just old, they're completely obsolete."

The Prime Minister blinked at the younger woman.

"Obsolete?" She queried.

The Ambassadress nodded.

"They are marvellously well designed and equipped to fight the battles of the Second World War but none of them has been modernized for the 'missile age'. They are magnificent 'gunboats' but outclassed by the ships the Americans have converted to guided missile cruisers, and all the big warships in the US Navy currently under construction." She shrugged philosophically. "But even if our friends in America really felt as guilty about what happened in the October War or to my home islands at the hands of General LeMay's bombers, or in the Battle of Malta, or in the Persian Gulf, no President is ever going to offer us his best ships."

The quiet, utterly non-judgemental, amiable manner of her hostess very nearly took Margaret Thatcher's breath away. Every time she started to believe that she was beyond being surprised 'the Christophers' could be guaranteed to confound her.

"I shall still ask for a pair of old aircraft carriers," she said defiantly. And then, to her own consternation, she asked: "or would that be a mistake?"

"Oh, no," Marija assured her, "they might not show it but a lot of Americans feel very badly about many of the things which have happened. President Nixon will not give *us* an aircraft carrier but he may be advised to soften the pill," she glanced to her husband as if checking that she had understood the idiom correctly, "by offering us 'generous terms' on access to dockyard facilities, or the future supply of ordnance, much of which would otherwise rot in US Navy stores anyway."

A few minutes later, with untypical reluctance, Margaret Thatcher passed Elisabetta – a remarkably tranquil baby - back to her mother, made her excuses and retired to her room to carry on working through the papers she had brought to America, and the telegrams which had piled up for her attention during her transatlantic journey.

She had had a most civil meeting with Henry Cabot Lodge that afternoon and felt herself well-prepared for her 'session' with Richard Nixon scheduled for tomorrow morning. It was to be a low-key affair, no fanfare, billed as a 'frank exchange of views with a view to furthering an ongoing improvement in US-UK relations'.

It was the Johnson Administration which had mooted the new 'lend lease' arrangements for vital strategic supplies, food, fuel and medicines, and the transfer of warships from the US Navy Reserve to the Royal Navy; and undeniably, in the initial discussions of the practicalities conversations about many other matters had begun, bilaterally government to government, at the Manhattan conference, and between diplomats in the margins around it. Indubitably, as a result of LBJ's largesse US-Anglo relations were immeasurably improved – albeit starting from rock bottom - in comparison to what had pertained previously although it remained to be seen how long the lukewarm rapprochement lasted.

Margaret Thatcher had made a point of thanking Henry Cabot Lodge, in what for her were gushing terms – for the 'emergency' and 'other humanitarian' aide which had already reached the United Kingdom under the 'Johnson rapprochement'.

Of course, what the country really needed was a new 'Marshall Plan' along the lines of that in which Harry Truman's Secretary of State had poured over $13 billion into the wrecked post-1945 economies of Western Europe.

The current 'lend lease' stop gap settlement was a lot better than nothing but it was no basis upon which to start the reconstruction of London or Liverpool, or to rebuild the terribly damaged cities of Leeds, York, Hull, the blasted cities of the Medway, or the Kentish Weald or a hundred other blasted places, let alone to build a new Jerusalem out of the ashes of the old World.

The meeting with Cabot Lodge had gone well; the real test would be her encounter with President Nixon.

The Prime Minister was under no illusions that she was playing high

stakes poker with a hand that was already well and truly ‘busted’. If she had ever been under any illusions about that – she had not been – her briefing about the ‘state’ of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment and its present, and for the foreseeable future, inability to add to, or for that matter, even safely maintain the nation’s small stock of viable nuclear weapons, would have been horribly sobering.

The Assistant Director of the AWRE had confirmed her worst fears; which was exactly why Airey Neave and her Defence Secretary, William ‘Willie’ Whitelaw had wanted her to meet, face to face, with the United Kingdom’s chief ‘bomb maker’. Presumably, just to ensure that when she was talking to President Nixon she kept her feet firmly on the ground.

Notwithstanding the Chief Physics Package Officer, he was only twenty-eight and had joined AWRE only in 1958 straight from university; the young scientist had made a deep and lasting impression on her.

The son of a Scottish jute buyer and mill manager Ken Johnston had been born in Narayangunj in India in 1936, and his early childhood had been spent at Chandpur and Northbrook Mill, on the River Hoogly, North of Calcutta. Unsurprisingly, he was fluent in both Hindi and English by the time he attended the Morgan Academy in post-World War Two Dundee. He had joined AWRE after graduating from Queen’s College, Dundee, with a first in Chemistry. It had helped that he was precisely the sort of ‘scientist’ with whom Margaret Thatcher, the former industrial chemist could empathise with, and who talked her kind of scientific language.

Even though she had felt that she had ‘got the message’ before she discovered who Ken Johnston was; she had ‘got it’ doubly now and that was a problem, because if recent history had taught her anything it was that the one thing that was potentially lethal to everything she stood for, it was to betray weakness.

Now at the very moment she needed a big stick in one hand to allow her to talk confidently with soft, reasonable conviction she found herself clinging onto little more than a broken reed.

AWRE was effectively ‘shut down’, operating on a care and maintenance basis in which the priority was the containment of the numerous toxic and highly dangerous materials stored on, or partially processed on site at both Aldermaston and Burghfield. The problem was lack of trained and, or qualified staff who were actually prepared to work for AWRE. So many

‘experts’ had died in the war and since, that this was now a critical situation for AWRE, and moreover, if it was not already, it was going to become one at every single other atomic installation in the United Kingdom unless something was done about it ‘soon’; or as Ken Johnston had suggested, ‘preferably immediately’.

The situation at AWRE was so bad that it was virtually impossible to carry out regular safety, or routine operational testing protocols on existing ‘physics packages’ – that is, nuclear weapons – and unless something was done about it the ‘production’ facilities at Burghfield would remain dormant ‘indefinitely’. As for the Aldermaston complex; no development work had been carried out since the October War and presently, the Nuclear Chemistry and Metallurgy departments were mothballed. At this time the United Kingdom possessed approximately three dozen nuclear warheads but had no idea if any of them would actually work or were even safe to load onto aircraft. Or, by pre-war standards, safe to move or *touch* and AWRE had recommended to the Royal Air Force that all ‘physics packages’ be immobilised ‘in situ’ pending an urgent review of existing handling protocols.

Prior to this the components of several ‘weapons’ had been disassembled and returned to relatively safe storage in ‘hutches’ at 92 Maintenance Unit, Nuclear Bomb Store (Permanent Ammunition Depot), RAF Faldingworth in Lincolnshire.

‘It was a bloody miracle nobody was killed and we didn’t contaminate half of the Midlands in the process,’ Ken Johnston had informed the Prime Minister.

There were a handful of ‘viable’ nuclear weapons at RAF bases in England, onboard HMS Eagle, the Royal Navy’s one operational aircraft carrier, and in stores at Malta and Gibraltar but the consensus was that the United Kingdom’s ‘nuclear deterrent’ had become a paper tiger.

At any one time there were less than twenty operational V-Bombers available to Bomber Command; the Royal Navy was exhausted, and the Army poorly equipped and over-extended at home and abroad, and the problem was that the Nixon Administration had to know that.

Chapter 6

Saturday 26th January 1965
Saint-Germain-des-Fossés, Department of the Allier, France

Situated about nine kilometres north of the centre of neighbouring Vichy, history had done its best to pass the picturesque commune of Saint-Germain-des-Fossés by. It was where it was because of the establishment of a Cluniac convent – or priory, it depended who one was talking to – by Papal bull by Pope Alexander III in the year 1165. Roads had straggled through it in the Middle Ages, and the railway had come in the nineteenth century. It was the railways which had attracted the interest of marauding Yankee fighter bombers in 1944, the price of Liberation that year. Its sons had died in the Great War of 1914-18 as had the sons of every city, town and hamlet in France. Long before then the Revolution had put paid to the founding convent; after the Second War the village square had become the Place de la Libération, and things had settled down as they always did in rural France, the everyday life of Saint-Germain-des-Fossés hardly troubled by the turmoil which roiled in the big cities in those troubled years after 1945.

All of this Vera Bertrand knew because she had been born in the back room of a bourgeois house in the Rue de l'École four months after her father – an officer of the Chasseurs - had died at Verdun. Her mother had lost her mind, killed herself a year later and Vera had been brought up by her Aunt Mathilde, a hard-faced woman whom, perversely, had had many lovers.

She thought about those days when she was small as she halted to gather her breath on the iron bridge over the now rusting, unnaturally quiet railway that carved through sleepy Saint Germain on its way down to Vichy. However, right now her thoughts were less on her disorderly childhood than on trying to commit everything she was seeing to memory.

“Come, we haven’t got all day, Madame Bertrand!” The boy with a dirty American carbine complained.

“Patience, patience,” she complained. “We’re not all as young as you, you know! Let an old woman catch her breath, won’t you?”

She was forty-eight and ought not to feel as old as she did most mornings especially if she had been ill-used by a man. She tried to avoid younger men

in her bed, they were too energetic, too demanding and afterwards she was often exhausted but then how else was a woman like her to survive? And besides, she had her girls to look out for; and she hated being away so long. The girls had thought that business would slow down when the hunger set in; the trouble was that there were some appetites only a woman could satisfy no matter how hungry and lousy a man became.

Limping, slipping on the ice underfoot she had got through the barricade below the village blocking the road to Vichy without getting shot; so perhaps it had not been such a bad idea after all offering to ask what 'terms' the invaders might consider for *not* sacking Vichy and refraining from killing *all* its defenders.

Having been shot once before – over twenty years ago by the Gestapo – she had not been keen to get shot a second time; the Nazi bullet had gone straight through her but she had not got to a hospital for over a week, and then the Germans had caught up with her. It had surprised her ever since how little the scars bothered her clients. That was men for you! Two arms, two legs, two tits and a vagina and they were like ferrets down a rabbit hole! They were all convinced they were Casanova, a woman's dream come true...

The kid with the American carbine jabbed her in the ribs with its wooden butt, timidly, bless him!

"Get a move on!"

He would probably be in a mad rush between the sheets, too.

The little shit!

Two or three thrusts and he would be shooting his load all over her and the sheets!

"What's the big hurry?" She sneered, exaggerating her limp as they crossed the tracks below. The railways had kept on running, diverting around the bombed cities of the north and west, avoiding the ruined towns along the German border until last spring. Everything had gone to Hell since then. The trains became sporadic, and one day they stopped coming altogether, either from the south or the north, traffic on the roads dried up and with it what passed for the postal system. In the weeks immediately after the war people had pulled together, waited for a new Government to be formed. Then the bitter reality of it all sank in; Paris was gone, there was no France any more, just a collection of fractious, soon to be warring departments at daggers drawn with their neighbours. Down here on the borders of the

Auvergne the Communists and the Nationalists had come out of the woodwork, and soon dominant regional towns like Vichy began to tax and prey on the surrounding countryside. Last year there had been a harvest of sorts; livestock in the fields to slaughter; now there was only the cold and the hunger, fuel was scarce, the draught animals, and most household pets had already been butchered to keep the worst of the famine at bay as successive waves of sickness whittled away at the survivors.

The influenza had swept down the valley of the Allier River in December, as soon as the spring came the time of cholera would surely return. Children in the countryside who had never been inoculated against the common childhood killers, diphtheria, measles, and whooping cough now died as they had died a hundred years ago, their parents helpless, and desolate.

Everybody who could had left Saint Germain before the invaders arrived, forewarned of their coming by the fires of nearby Saint-Felix and Magnet and the trickle of terrified refugees who had fled in time. Some locals had remained, too ill to flee or unwilling to leave invalid family members to their fate alone but most had streamed into Vichy only to be turned back or away, herded through the town and over the bridge to Bellerive, chased with bursts of gunfire over their heads until they disappeared into the wintery landscape to starve and freeze in the wilderness between the few remaining enclaves.

The once neat lawns of the Town Hall - a chateau, its tower topped with a handsome spire – were tangles of brush and shrubs. Several ground floor windows were broken and boarded over, camouflaged vehicles, including a battered Jeep were parked on the muddy ground in front of its steps.

From the vantage point of the railway bridge Vera Bertrand had counted four tanks – either Patton M-48s or M-60s, she was no expert on such things – and at least a dozen other large military-type vehicles partially concealed from the air by netting in the side streets of the village. That was just force of habit; nobody had any aeroplanes these days!

She had left Saint Germain – run away to avoid a marriage that she knew would begin and end in grief with a man twice her age, but that was another story – and travelled to Paris when she was seventeen. A pretty girl with jet black gypsy hair in those days she had found a lover, then a protector, and quite soon, a pimp and that had been that. Her natural strength of will, feral cunning and in those first years, her beauty – a passing thing not to be relied

upon – had made her indispensable to powerful men, friends to others and when the German's marched up the Champs-Elysees her clientele had changed but little else. Not at first; at the outset there was no *Resistance,* not then or for a long time afterwards as the country was partitioned between the German-occupied north and the quisling defeatists in Vichy in the south.

Eventually, she had found somebody who was interested in the pillow talk of the officers who fucked her and her best girls; German officers liked to have a pretty woman on their arms, it made them feel like real men not Nazi lickspittles. The first cells of what eventually became 'the resistance' were leaky, amateurish constructs and within months the arrests began and she was on the run. Things were bad down in the territory of the Vichy collaborators, old men with no pride or appetite for the fight surrounded by the very men who had been the first to beat the drum for war in 1939. Close to the nexus of collaboration in Vichy the Marquis had been driven into the countryside; her band of fighters had fought on in the foothills of the distant Pyrenees, fled more than once over the border into Spain. When her luck ran out she had been in Bordeaux, running couriers and co-ordinating the escape of shot down Allied airmen to the south. She had never stopped being a whore; how else would she have lived among the traitors and the invaders so long without being betrayed?

Before the October War she had run a *house* for the rich and the self-important, faded aristocrats and pretentious civil and regional functionaries, offering the most discreet of services, no questions asked, all tastes satisfied. Only the best girls with all the right people's palms suitably greased, just to make the world go around a little more smoothly...

She had had a chalet in the woods; become the confidant of men whose success depended upon their secrets never getting out, a woman of means and influence in Vichy and its surrounding communes.

And then the Yankees and the Russians had fucked up everything...

The Reds had recruited her as long ago as 1943.

She had fallen in with a guerrilla band of the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Français* – the FTPF – the armed resistance movement created by the French Communist Party. The FTPF regarded the so-called 'Free French' forces as 'runaways', deserters who ought to have stayed behind and fought the invaders. So-called 'free' Frenchmen were under De Galle's thumb in London, out of the war. When De Galle demanded the British support for

‘his kind of resistance fighters’ ahead of the Normandy landings many of the brave men and women of the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Français* were betrayed; and like her comrades Vera Bertrand spat whenever she heard the name ‘Churchill’. After the ‘great betrayal’ she had known that socialism was the only way for France.

Not that she had much time for the *Aube Rouge* – Red Dawn – zealots down in the Auvergne. Her loyalty was to George Duclos’s wing of the Revolution even though until the last month or so she had had to deal almost exclusively with Maxim Machenaud’s fanatics. People used to joke that Machenaud was Trotsky to Duclos’s Lenin; but actually, Machenaud was more like Lavrenty Beria. This she knew because *she* had only lived this long because he still believed she was his woman in Vichy.

It was because she was a madman’s agent in a nest of vipers she had decided that the time had come to make plans to extricate herself, and her girls, from their prison in Vichy.

Unfortunately, this was not going to be a straightforward exercise; each step to some kind of safety was going to be fraught with deadly peril. Nevertheless, having determined to not meekly accept her fate today was the day she put phase one of her plan into action.

“What’s she doing here?” A man in the threadbare fatigues of an American GI demanded in English stepping forward to intercept the boy and his companion.

The kid stammered.

“I am here to speak with Colonel Krueger,” Vera told the GI, an older man who was self-evidently, several ranks higher up in the pecking order at the Town Hall.

“That’s what you think, lady.”

The man had not bothered to move his gun, an M-16 assault rifle, from its sling on his right shoulder. He nodded to dismiss the kid.

“I’ve got this, Karl.”

“I am the personal representative of the Mayor of Vichy, his Honour Monsieur Chevalier. I am here to make arrangements for the unconditional surrender of Vichy.”

“What’s in Vichy we ain’t got here, lady?”

Vera Bertrand gave this question serious thought.

“There is an undamaged bridge over the Allier, the Pont-du-Bellerive.”

“We’ve got all we need here, what do we need a bridge for?”

Another good question; she was warming to this man. He was in his thirties, above average height, raw boned, tough like soldiers become when they enjoy campaigning. His hair was a little unkempt but otherwise he was close-shaven, ‘soldierly’ despite the obvious wear and tear of his uniform fatigues.

Why does he wear no insignia for rank?

No, I will not ask him that.

“I didn’t say you needed it. But you will want it soon. The Russians are coming,” she said blankly.

“How many?”

“I don’t know, yet.”

The man eyed her thoughtfully, said nothing.

“The Russians are coming and,” Vera smiled resignedly, “there are still ‘clean’ women in Vichy.”

Chapter 7

Saturday 26th January 1965
The White House, Philadelphia

It was not that President Richard Nixon had not wanted to meet Margaret Thatcher face to face; he had just wanted to do it on his own terms. Instead, she had invited herself to Philadelphia – which was unheard of in polite diplomatic circles and in any other age would have been a huge faux pas – and not so much distracted him but taken him completely out of his...comfort zone.

Nevertheless, he had 'held the line' with *the lady*.

Or at least, he thought he had...

Heck, he had gone out of his way to communicate to the British that the rapprochement initiated by Lyndon Johnson would continue under *his* Administration; basically, they could have as many mothballed warships as they wanted however loud the Navy Department cried foul. As to money to prop up what they laughingly called 'their economy' back home, well, a couple of billion Dollars hardly registered on the US Treasury's abacus, even in the present climate of fiscal turmoil. If the US Dollar had been the World's reserve currency before the October War it was the Goddammed Gold Standard now!

Besides, throwing subsidies at US grain wholesalers to empty some of the silos in the Midwest before the merchandise rotted, and boosting selected pharmaceutical and other technology sectors to help out the 'old country' at a time like this was good for business on both sides of the Atlantic, and moreover, it had got the Canadians off his back a month before Inauguration Day. Now things had quietened down the Canucks had re-committed to NORAD and the pre-October 1962 'Five Eyes' intelligence agreement under which Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States had once shared information, intelligence gathering resources and actively co-operated with each other in secret operations under a joint defence framework.

Although thus far all attempts to bring the British and their Australasian allies back into the 'Five Eyes' family had failed, leaving gaping holes in the

US's 'World View', this was an area in which he had hoped to make progress.

To that end Nixon had broached the question of trialling 'confidence building' measures between the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation with their British, and eventually Australian and New Zealand counterparts with Prime Minister Thatcher.

She had politely side-stepped any discussion of 'intelligence matters'. He had been willing to offer to scale back the activities of the big CIA listening and logistics facility at Casement Air Base outside Dublin had she brought up the subject; but she had not. Mrs Thatcher had wanted to talk about the really 'big ticket' issues: 'the freedom of global navigation', the post-Gulf War settlement of the Middle Eastern 'situation' – keeping US oil giants out of the region, basically – and, extraordinarily, wanted to know if the US Government was prepared to discuss the 'transfer of submarine-launched ballistic missile technology' to the Royal Navy!

Nixon had been struck dumb, as had his wing man in the 'informal conversation', Secretary of State Henry Cabot Lodge junior who had had no inkling of the 'substantive' matters on Prime Minister Thatcher's mind after his initial, exploratory 'conversation' of the previous day.

'Just before the war Harold MacMillan and Jack Kennedy were on the point of agreeing exactly such a transfer,' Margaret Thatcher had claimed. 'The United States had been going to sell us the Douglas Corporation's GAM-87 Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile system which the RAF would have adapted its Vulcan V-Bombers to carry but *you* cancelled that project, leaving *us* in the lurch with a 1950s free-fall bomb option which was potentially obsolete as the 1960s got under way!'

She had not said it as a straight-out accusation; more in the manner of a woman scorned and it had been all that the President and his Secretary of State could do not to scratch their heads in astonishment.

'Isn't that so, Sir Peter?' The woman had demanded, turning to the fourth man in the room, the handsome, dashing young British Ambassador. He seemed to have come along as her chaperone; a silent partner up until then.

When Nixon had discovered that Ambassador Christopher was escorting 'the lady', he had decreed that there would be no photographs in the Oval

Office. With Margaret Thatcher in her war paint – damned nearly a 'blond bombshell' - standing next to the man Walter Kronkite had once wryly referred to on network TV as 'Odysseus returned from the Trojan Wars', Nixon was afraid he would look like a used car dealer on a bad day.

'Yes, I believe so, Prime Minister,' the fair-haired young hero with the oddly old, grey-blue eyes had confirmed.

The President had looked to his Secretary of State to restore a little sanity to the conversation.

'You mentioned the 'Five Eyes' agreement earlier,' the lady had continued. 'That was all well and good in the circumstances pre-October 1962; and may be again at some point in the future. Clearly, if as you have indicated that the transfer of submarine launched intercontinental ballistic missile technology is *not* even on the table then...'

Nixon had thought she was finished.

He had opened his mouth to speak.

'I'm sorry,' she had continued. 'Goodness, after the trouble we have had with *your* intelligence agencies only selectively sharing Jericho with us!'

The British had broken the Soviets' codes for a three-month window last spring and shared their 'treasure', reluctantly, with their old transatlantic allies in full last autumn as a quid pro quo to oil LBJ's 'lend lease' initiative.

The deal had been that the National Security Agency got the 'treasure'; in return the encrypted traffic intercepted by *both* sides would be de-ciphered and *shared* without editing or redaction by either side. As yet the United States had only 'shared' a tiny fraction of the intercepts the NSA's hugely more capable computers had thus far de-ciphered with GCHQ in England. Administrative problems had been cited; backlogs in 'traffic processing', 'computer breakdowns', and even the winter storms trotted out to fob off the British. None of which clouded the main issue; that the US Intelligence community had never had the remotest intention of 'playing ball' with the 'Brits'.

LBJ had fired off a couple of stinging memos.

Richard Nixon had no intention of picking a fight with the NSA, FBI or the Secret Service, or for that matter, Naval, Air Force or Army Intelligence, or anybody else in the secret underbelly of the Federal Government. As long as they were on his side, or at worst, not actively undermining him he planned to leave 'those guys' to get on with whatever they were doing just so

long as they never allowed the Soviets – or the British – to get away with another stunt like the invasion of Iran-Iraq, or the Kamikaze attack on Carrier Division Seven *without warning*.

Besides, less than a week into his Presidency, Nixon was already fighting – literally – on several fronts. There was the escalating war in Korea, the flawed peace with the Kingdom of the Church of the Great Lakes (or whatever those religious fanatics called themselves), and a crying need to arrest the Johnson Administration's runaway World War II-style re-mobilisation, or failing that, to at least fund it properly – that is, in such a way as to not bankrupt the country – and to do that Wall Street had to be persuaded to buy the tens and hundreds of billions of Dollars' worth of new bonds and Treasury notes that this would require. If that was not bad enough he had J. Edgar Hoover in his ear telling him he had to 'do something' about the Southern Civil Rights Movement, and specifically about Dr Martin Luther King junior, or quote 'the lid is going to blow off the whole South this summer'...

The list went on and on.

From watching Ike all those years, he knew the score. There was no need to panic; the thing was to keep a level head and to use those levers available to one wisely, efficiently and to never lose sight of where you wanted to get to.

The Defence Budget ought to be containable – Korea or not – providing the generals and the admirals could be prevailed upon not to start another war someplace else any time soon. He had asked Robert McNamara to stay on, hoping that the former President of the Ford Motor Company would keep a lid on the sky-rocketing military expenditures. The reason he had offered Nick Katzenbach, JFK's US Deputy Attorney General and LBJ's man at the Department of Justice to join his Administration was because King and the other hotheads in the Civil Rights Movement trusted him. Bringing sixty-two-year-old Henry Cabot Lodge onboard had been a no-brainer.

These were good men well-versed in what was, and what was not possible in government. Realists, not unseasoned first-term Administration go-getters who needed to fall flat on their faces a couple of times before they figured out that politics was the 'art of the possible'.

Cabot Lodge had not originally been going to attend this meeting but Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, had pretty much

insisted that either he or the Secretary of State be present. Kissinger had been Nelson Rockefeller's man, so Nixon was still feeling his feet with the former Director of the Harvard Defense Studies Program but he had already recognized that if Kissinger said a thing needed to be done, he probably needed to listen.

Cabot Lodge had graduated *cum laude* from Harvard in 1924 and served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives between 1933 and 1936 before being elected to the US Senate in 1937. He had resigned his Senate seat in February 1944 – the first sitting member of the US Senate to act so since the Civil War – to return to the Army. A fluent French speaker, having been partly schooled in Paris, by the conclusion of the war in Europe he was serving as an aide to the commander of the US Sixth Army, General Jacob L. Devers at the time of the surrender of the German forces in Austria to the Allies. Only recently retired from the Army Reserve, *Major General* Henry Cabot Lodge II, was therefore, as at home with the generals as he was with the diplomats; two things that Richard Nixon accepted he would never be.

His new Secretary of State had been Nixon's running mate against JFK in 1960. A lot of people in the Republican Party still blamed Lodge for losing that race. Notwithstanding, the presence of a grand old man of Massachusetts – Kennedy family home turf – politics who had eloquently represented the pre-October War United States in the old World's premier international forums throughout the 1950s, lent real substance and prestige to the newly formed Administration. Before the Cuban Missiles disaster Lodge had been the Director General of the Atlantic Institute for International Affairs, a highly respected non-governmental organization dedicated to the promotion of economic, cultural and political relations between members of the now defunct North Atlantic Treaty Alliance – NATO – ideally qualifying him to be the obvious man to get on with the monumental task of restoring if not 'good', then 'better' *relations* with the British.

This had turned out to be a theory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had seemed Hell-bent on testing to destruction.

When at last 'the lady' had departed Richard Nixon had looked to his Secretary of State as if to ask: 'what just happened there?'

Obviously, the tapes would have recorded everything so by later today he would have the full transcript in his hands, but even so: '*what had just happened*?'

Clearly it had been a bad idea raising the question of requesting the Australian authorities to re-open their ports and air bases to US forces; and of mooting the possibility of setting up training areas in the remotest areas of the Australian 'outback', or of setting up forward 'strategic depots' to facilitate the more rapid build-up of US forces ahead of that summer's operations in Korea.

No, 'the lady' was not going to 'put pressure' on Britain's staunchest Pacific Ally, and in any event, 'it would be pointless'. He ought to know that 'no Australian Government would give such *nonsense* the time of day!'

Margaret Thatcher had asked him: 'What are you going to do about the Argentine?'

'The Falklands situation, you mean?' Richard Nixon had queried, taken aback.

'Yes, the outrageous seizure of the islands – British Sovereign Territory - the murder, torture, internment and subsequent forced expulsion of the *British* citizens and the ongoing militarisation of the archipelago and other illegally annexed South Atlantic dominions of the British Crown?'

Henry Cabot Lodge had attempted to intervene.

'Argentina was a Spanish possession at the time of that power's prior claim on the *Malvinas*, Prime Minister. That claim pre-dates the British claim...'

'Please do not refer to the Falklands by *that* name!'

'Forgive me...'

'The Argentine has no claim whatsoever in respect of South Georgia or the South Sandwich Islands or any of the British Antarctic territories,' the lady had protested. She made no attempt to conceal her disappointment with Cabot Lodge; clearly, he had no idea what he was talking about!

'We will of course,' the Secretary of State had gone on urbanely, 'support raising this matter as part of the ongoing Manhattan peace process.'

'Yes, well!' Margaret Thatcher had huffed disgustedly. 'A lot of good that will do!'

It was an exchange which reflected the tone of the whole meeting. It was as if the parties were separated by their common language.

For Richard Nixon, who saw the challenge of his first term in the White House as being to encourage the growth of the domestic US economy and to rebuild a new, US-centric World order, the notion of completely alienating

the entire South American continent by betting everything on sorting out a bunch of islands populated by a million penguins thousands of miles from anywhere, was never going to be any kind of priority, not now or ever. The Argentine's 'victory' over one of its former 'European oppressors' in the South Atlantic had unified a divided country, deterred a likely war with its neighbour Chile, and awakened a nationalistic realisation that South America might, after all, be a major player in global affairs. The 'Falkland Islands' were no more; long live 'Las Malvinas'. Sure, the Argentines had probably committed atrocities during and after the invasion but the British had torpedoed several of their ships; the time had come for both sides to call it quits.

He had attempted to say this, very tactfully, to the British Prime Minister.

'One day, I or one of my successors,' the lady had said, apparently seriously, '*we* will re-conquer the Falkland Islands and South Georgia and throw the Argentine out of Antarctica.'

The woman was crazy!

Fortunately, according to the latest reports from Oxford, Ambassador Brenckmann was indicating the most likely result of the upcoming British election in March was that Margaret Thatcher would be ousted from power and probably, fed to the wolves by her own Conservative Party, never to be heard of or seen again. The CIA's analysis was not dissimilar although they thought there was a fifty-fifty chance she might stay as leader of her Party because 'none of the best qualified candidates would necessarily be willing to step up to the plate in the aftermath of a crushing electoral defeat'.

The problem was that Richard Nixon – arch political realist – was asking himself, now that he had actually met Margaret Thatcher face to face, if the lady was even capable of 'going quietly into the night'.

One way and another he doubted the World had seen the last of Margaret Thatcher.

"I want to talk to Kissinger as soon as he's read the transcript of the recordings," he decided.

It was only after Henry Cabot Lodge had left that the President, pausing for reflection ahead of his next diary appointment, a courtesy handshake for the cameras and a ten minute 'talk' with the President of Mexico, before he lunched with two senior congressional leaders, wondered if, remembering the Angry Widow's remarks about re-conquering the Falklands, that transferring

two dozen old but very heavily armed surplus US warships – that would be just the thing for supporting a distant amphibious landing, because that was what they had been built to do in the 1945 war in the Pacific - to the British was such a good idea after all...

However, the next moment Bob Haldeman his crew cut, clinically organised Chief of Staff walked into the Oval Office and placed a sheaf of papers in front of him for signature, and Richard Nixon's momentary existential unease passed.

Not even 'that woman' would be dumb enough to try to send a fleet eight thousand miles from England to assault a heavily defended archipelago.

He snorted, shook his head.

He had plenty to worry about without getting side-tracked by flights of fancy.

He signed the next document.

Bob Haldeman removed it and placed the next before him.

The other thing that Richard Nixon had learned from Ike was that regardless of whatever else was going on – or going wrong – it was the President's job to get on with business as usual.

Chapter 8

Sunday 27th January 1965
Marseilles-Marignane Air Base, Provence, France

Forty-nine-year-old Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov was the first man to emerge out of the shadow of the high tail plane of the Antonov An-12 Red Air Force transport aircraft to walk, haltingly down the tunnel formed by the thirty-strong mixed honour guard of green-fatigued Kalashnikov-armed Spetsnaz and KGB troopers who had hurriedly disembarked the moment the plane had rolled to a halt.

In common with the majority of the leading apparatchiks in the ever-changing leadership cadre of the Soviet Union Andropov came from a humble background. His father had been a railway official from a family with a Cossack bloodline, his mother a watchmaker's daughter. Born in Nagutskaya in the Stravropol Region of the old Tsarist Empire he had been orphaned at the age of thirteen, and as a boy worked as a loader, telegraphist and deck hand for the Volga Steamship Line. He had joined the Komsomol – then styled the All-Union Leninist Young Communist Party – and in his late teens become secretary of the Komsomol at the Rybinsk Water Transport Technical College from which he graduated in 1936. Throughout the Great Patriotic War, he was First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol in the Soviet Karelo-Finnish Republic. His career was one of steady, patient grafting advancement rewarded in 1954 by his appointment as Soviet Ambassador to Hungary, where in 1956 he had been confronted by the first of several crises which might have been his downfall.

Andropov was nothing if not a survivor.

He was the man, panicked by the sight of members of the Hungarian *Allamvedelmi Osztaly* – the secret police – hanging from lampposts across the street from the Soviet Embassy who had, subsequently, persuaded Nikita Khrushchev to crush the Hungarian uprising; a task bloodily accomplished by the 8th Mechanised Army of the 'Butcher of Budapest', and latterly, the villain of the Iran-Iraq fiasco, Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian.

Never trust a soldier to do a Party man's work...

It had irked Andropov that at the time Babadzhanian had got all the

credit for snuffing out the Hungarian 'rising'. Left to his own devices Babadzhanian would never have hunted down the leaders of the uprising with the appropriate ruthlessness or vigour.

The Hungarian episode, which might have destroyed Andropov's career, had been the making of him. After the Cuban Missiles War Alexander Shelepin had brought him into the KGB as a 'safe pair of hands', and he had become so well regarded within the upper echelons of the Party that not even the Bucharest debacle when he had very nearly died at the hands of Nicolae Ceau ș escu's Securitate goons, had completely undermined his position.

Then had come his ill-starred time as Commissar General of Iraq...

It was best to brush over that particular episode.

The gusting wind from the south east which had forced the pilot of the Antonov to abort his first two attempts to land at the rain swept air base still carried spits of moisture and tugged at the First Deputy Secretary of the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti's* coat tails. He had hoped that it would be warmer in the South of France; ever since he had been the guest of Nicolae Ceau ș escu's Securitate goons in Bucharest last February he felt the cold in practically every bone in his still slowly mending body as he eyed the waiting reception committee with grim resignation.

The representatives of the Front Internationale's 'Commune of Provence' looked more like a crowd of brigands than the 'Soviet' that they claimed to be. Andropov half suspected all that was holding the ramshackle 'socialist revolutionary communes' of the 'Provisional Government of South France' together was its steely *Russian* 'Krasnaya Zarya' backbone. The sooner more men could be flown in the better; always assuming these clowns posing on the tarmac could be persuaded to accept the 'fraternal assistance of their Marxist-Leninist comrades' in arms. Thus far they had been infuriatingly reluctant to 'welcome' fresh blood from the east; in fact, they were almost without exception, wholly xenophobic, and positively Fascistic on the subject.

One of the few benefits of Andropov's unsteady, slow, limping progress was that it allowed him an extended opportunity to survey his surroundings. The two parallel runways of the air base merged with the rising ground south of the small town of Marigname in the east and terminated abruptly at the water's edge of the Étang de Berre, in the west. The Antonov had circled several times over Marseilles before being given permission to land; oddly,

although the seaward side of the great port had been burned out, only a few hundred metres inland buildings seemed untouched like nearby Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, and the wintery countryside around it over which the transport plane had made its first long, careful failed approach to Marignane.

Andropov had instructed the pilot to fly over Villefranche-sur-Mer, and to circle as if attempting to locate a navigation way point off Nice, keen to establish if the stories about the French Riviera having escaped the bombing were true and if any shepherding French fighters rose to curtail any possible snooping. There had been no 'interception', or any indication that French radars were even tracking the Antonov.

Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union, Defence Minister and Deputy Chairman of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Sergey Georgiyevich Gorshkov, the second ranking member of the post 'July Coup' *Troika* had demanded to know if the ports of the Riviera – Monaco, Nice, and the Rade de Villefranche-sur-Mer was where the French had 'mothballed what was left of their Mediterranean Fleet'. He had also wanted to know which harbours along the coast were intact, and if Cap Ferrat might offer a 'viable secure base of operations' for Red Army Spetsnaz and Red Navy 'special' Marines.

Andropov thought the Admiral was pissing in the wind if he thought the French were going to allow him to set up his own little 'foreign legion' on the Riviera. As for 'intelligence gathering'; that was a joke because the whole coast had been shrouded in cloud virtually down to sea level and the cameras mounted beneath the transport aircraft's belly would have recorded precisely nothing.

Not that Andropov blamed Gorshkov for occupying himself with his 'foreign projects'; the people and the 'politics of the Motherland were the sole preserve of the Chairman of the Party and the First Secretary of the KGB, Alexander Nikolayevich Shelepin, the absolute master of the post-Cuban Missiles War Soviet Union in much the manner of the 'Man of Steel', Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. Gorshkov clearly understood how things were going to be, rubber stamping Shelepin's order that from now onwards the third member of the Troika would be a three-monthly appointment, filled in succession by other members of the Politburo.

Presently, this post was filled by one of the few surviving Brezhnev 'protégés' forty-nine-year-old Nikolai Aleksandrovich Tikhonov, a grey

Party man who had been in hospital at the time of the July putsch, and somehow avoided the cull of his master's family, friends and practically anybody who had ever enjoyed the former Chairman's *favour*...

Tikhonov was a grey man with an unremarkable career, a man who blindly obeyed orders, who seemed to lack obvious ambition or imagination but even he was probably wondering when the midnight knock on his door would come...

Looked at another way, it might just be that Shelepin saw the intrinsic benefit of having nominated silent partners around the 'Troika table'; in this as in many other respects people easily forgot that Alexander Shelepin was *not* Stalin. Politburo members were not routinely forced to drink themselves so insensible in his presence that they could not help pissing and shitting themselves when they were ordered – on pain of a spell in the torture rooms of the Lubyanka, exile to the Siberian gulags, or just plain death – *to dance*...

No, Shelepin was more the sort of man who just sent a man – or a woman – who had earned his displeasure directly to the torture rooms of the Lubyanka, or into exile to the Siberian gulags, or just ordered his bodyguards to take an 'unfortunate' outside and put a bullet in the back of their neck.

That said there was never anything remotely random about 'the terror'; everybody knew where they stood. Failure and incompetence above a given threshold was not tolerated, any sign of disloyalty was a death sentence. There were no excuses...for anybody or *anything*.

Andropov had reconciled himself – insofar as one can ever be reconciled to such things – to be liquidated when he was recalled from Baghdad in September. The situation in Iraq was a nightmare. In the south the British and their allies had withdrawn into their fortresses on Abadan Island and their defences around the port of Umm Qasr, elsewhere the Marsh Arabs had risen against and largely exterminated the shocked and disorganised Red Army survivors who had escaped the bombing of Basra. The valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates above the wrecked city had become a lawless hinterland out of which new, murderous northward incursions could explode on any given day. Baghdad had become a besieged Soviet island, a trap for its eighty thousand-strong, infidel garrison.

Andropov had assumed that he would be held personally responsible for failing to quell the rebellion in the south and the uncontrollable, ever-worsening Islamist and sectarian insurgency in central Iraq. Had it not been

for the schizophrenic incoherence of the Iraqi resistance – split between warring jihadist and Nationalist factions – everything below Kirkuk, over two hundred kilometres to the north of the capital, would have already fallen into rebel hands.

'We were betrayed by the Red Army in Iraq,' Shelepin had told him when Andropov returned to Chelyabinsk. Officially, the capital of the new USSR was Sverdlovsk but, forever looking over his shoulder, the new 'Iron Man' had demanded that the great offices of state be spread around. Presumably to prevent any nascent opposition this early in his regime to obtain any 'critical mass'; longer term the plan was to rebuild Moscow but for the moment that was a pipe dream.

Shelepin had damned the 'Iraq adventure': 'The whole thing was the work of counter-revolutionary old men who had had the balance of their minds 'disturbed' by the war of October 1962.'

Andropov had listened mutely.

During the whole interview Shelepin had sat behind his desk, his hands clasped in his lap, unmoving, his pale face a mask of icy indifference.

'Those responsible have been *dealt* with. It remains for *us* to safeguard the revolution.'

The Red Army would hold the oilfields of Kurdistan. Kirkuk, Erbil and Mosul would be heavily garrisoned. Likewise, the mountains of northern Iran would be 'held' as the southern line of defence of the Motherland against 'Western inspired' aggrandisement in the region. And at some point, in the future to provide convenient 'jumping off' points for a future invasion of Iran; which, unlike most of Iraq, was 'actually worth fighting over'.

Andropov was to go to Istanbul as Shelepin's personal representative to the Krasnaya Zarya 'Council of Turkey'.

'Stiffen their resolve and remind them of the consequences of failing to obey the ordinances issued by the Supreme Soviet.'

Istanbul and Ankara had become twin centres of authority in the chaotic, war-torn Turkish littoral and Alexander Shelepin had chosen Andropov as his instrument of terror to re-establish 'revolutionary solidarity' across the eastern Balkans and Asia Minor. He did not care how he did it but he had wanted results in ninety days, and Andropov had given him – if not all – then most of what he had wanted. Only *terror* spoke to real Red Dawn zealots and he had let loose the dogs with a vengeance.

He had not wasted his time trying to root out foot soldiers; he had given the leadership in Istanbul two choices. Either it wiped out the Ankara 'cabal' or he would place the weight of the Red Army, Air Force and Navy behind the 'Ankara nexus'. He did not care which group ruled the Balkan-Turkish 'protectorate' but by the time he left there *would be* a unified regime obedient to the will of the Troika.

The fighting was still going on in Ankara but Istanbul, commanding the Dardanelles and the Aegean gateway to the Mediterranean, was a Soviet city now. Famine, disease and the desolation of practically every major centre of population within hundreds of kilometres of Ankara and across great swathes of the Turkish littoral would complete the work he had started. Better a wasteland than a rogue, potentially hostile state on the flank of the southern republics undermining the USSR's future Middle Eastern ambitions.

Now Alexander Shelepin, the dark prince of the Motherland had sent his trusted lieutenant to project a different, subtler kind of 'influence' in France. Back in the Soviet Union, safe behind the Ural Mountains Comrade Chairman Alexander Nikolayevich had grown impatient with progress in what had seemed to be the most naturally fertile ground in Western Europe in which to plant the seeds of a new revolution.

However, already – with his own eyes – Andropov had learned infinitely more than the much-vaunted French Department of the KGB back in Sverdlovsk had told him!

The man who stepped forward to greet Andropov smiled grim, very weary recognition.

"It is good to see you again Comrade Yuri Vladimirovich," Fifty-three-year-old Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin said sombrely. Like the newcomer he too presented a significantly less fleshy, prematurely aged and careworn figure than he had before the October War. And like Andropov, he too had arrived in Southern France via the most improbable of routes, having attended the first sessions of the 'Manhattan Peace Process', the bizarrely named *Multi-Lateral Peace Convocation between the United States of America, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and all parties interested thereof*," before receiving his latest 'marching orders'.

Zorin had been more than a little surprised that the man Sverdlovsk was sending to inject 'a little urgency into the situation' in Southern France was

Andropov. He had heard that the KGB man had been sent to Turkey to do ‘some dirty work’ as a punishment for his blunders in Iraq. Yet here he was on the tarmac in the south of France bearing the title of ‘Ambassador’.

Zorin was a mere ‘Commissar’, a mere ‘representative’, an advisor to his hosts; which was an oxymoron because nobody had paid anything other than lip-service to anything he had had to say since he arrived in this godforsaken country!

Andropov’s presence shouted to the world that he was still Alexander Nikolayevich Shelepin’s man, and well, everybody was terrified of the Chairman – ‘the Supreme Soviet’ himself, as many thought privately but would never, ever say, other than under the most egregious torture – so that made the man standing in front of him...untouchable.

After blabbing his guts out in Bucharest and screwing up so badly in Iraq it was all a bit baffling. In the old days Andropov would have been demoted to shuffling files in the back office of a tractor plant in Kazakhstan for the rest of his life or disappeared into the Gulag; it would have been as if he had never existed in the first place. That Andropov had turned up in Marseilles as the collective leadership’s representative to the South France Provisional Government, as Zorin’s boss, was going to take a lot of getting used to.

The wily diplomat reluctantly decided now would be a good time to start ‘getting used to it’.

“It is good to see you again, Comrade Commissar,” Andropov decided, unhurriedly viewing the rest of the reception committee over his comrade’s right shoulder. He doubted any of the witnesses spoke Russian but he was not about to say something indiscreet.

Once upon a time Zorin would have bitterly resented having to yield precedence to an upstart like Andropov. However, his own time had come and gone. His moment had been on Thursday 25th October 1962, two days before the Cuban Missiles War when as the USSR’s representative on the Security Council of the United Nations in New York – coincidentally a council meeting that he was chairing – he had clashed angrily with Adlai Stevenson, his American counterpart.

That day was etched on Zorin’s memory as if those events had been burned on his consciousness with a red-hot branding iron. In the aftermath of the holocaust he had asked himself time and again if there was anything he could have done to defuse the ticking thermonuclear time bomb that day in

New York.

'*...Let me ask you why your Government, your Foreign Minister, deliberately, cynically deceived us about the nuclear build-up in Cuba*,' Adlai Stevenson had demanded with the imperious haughtiness of a Tsarist overlord. '*Do you...deny that the USSR has placed and is placing medium and intermediate range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes or no?*'

The anger of Zorin's immediate rebuttal had been genuine.

'I am not in an American courtroom, sir, and therefore I do not wish to answer a question that is put to me in the fashion in which a prosecutor does. In due course, sir, you will have your reply. Do not worry.'

Adlai Stevenson had been the darling of the American bourgeoisie, a two-time failed Presidential candidate who was supposedly a figurehead of reason. Zorin had been anything but in the other man's thrall. Unlike Stevenson he was a man who understood that in international affairs one did what had to be done; not what one's conscience dictated. When in February 1948 Stalin had ordered him to organise a coup d'état to overthrow the Czechoslovakian regime and replace it with one more to the Soviet Union's liking he had done it, and his loyalty had been rewarded with an appointment as Ambassador to West Germany, and later as the permanent Soviet Representative to the United Nations Security Council.

Within days of his fiery exchange at the United Nations with Stevenson, Zorin and his co-representative at the United Nations in New York, Platon Dmitriejevitsj Morozov had been arrested and held incommunicado for several days before being transferred into the 'custody' of the Soviet Ambassador in Washington DC.

Zorin had been involved in the abortive talks with the Americans last summer before returning to New York with the Soviet delegation for the start of the Peace Conference. Within days he had been offered a new assignment; in such circumstances it did not pay to ask too many questions, one simply voiced one's automatic affirmation and waited to see what happened next.

However, if he had known then that his 'new mission' involved crossing the North Atlantic in winter in a leaky old steamer, three weeks festering in a safe house in Lisbon teaching himself French, and then a perilous journey across Spain – knowing that capture meant almost certain torture and death at the hands of Franco's secret police – to the Basque country of southern France, he would almost certainly have opted to remain in New York. A

low-level, nonetheless savage civil war between communist, nationalist and various local factions still simmered along the French-Spanish border, aided and abetted by the authorities in Madrid. South of the border there was guaranteed sanctuary for all but communists; commissars of the Provisional Government were shot on sight in Catalonia, in exactly the same way the first refugee Americans or British survivors coming over the old borders from Germany and Austria were routinely executed by the militiamen of the Front Internationale Government to which Zorin had been sent as an emissary to prepare the ground for a 'High Representative of the Supreme Soviet'.

A man in crisp Red Army fatigues with a major general's single star on his shoulder patches had marched from the Antonov transport aircraft to stand stiffly by Andropov's shoulder.

"This is Comrade General Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev," Andropov remarked. "He is my personal military assistant."

From his tone Zorin inferred that the First Deputy Secretary of the KGB had already decided that if their hosts were not to become a liability they were badly in need of expert 'military' advice and guidance.

Given the cack-handed actions of the 'Ajaccio Squadron' – the rump of the French Navy nominally aligned with 'the Front' in Corsica - last summer, and the ongoing inability or unwillingness, of what remained of the French Mediterranean Fleet, and Air Force to attempt to break, or even meaningfully inconvenience, the blockade of its southern coastline by a handful of British submarines, somebody somewhere was *not* trying hard enough.

For their part the French were now complaining that their 'initiative' in attacking the British destroyer HMS Hampshire off the North African coast, had been in response to a direct request from the Troika to 'apply pressure' in the Western Mediterranean. Additionally, had 'the Russians' supplied the modern surface-to-air missiles to the 'defenders of Ajaccio' – as 'they' had promised - then the RAF would not have been able to destroy both the port and the city, and sink so many ships at their moorings, with such impunity.

At the time nobody in Sverdlovsk had had the remotest idea what the French were 'up to' starting a full-scale war with the British. The only documented requests made of the Front Internationale during that period had been from the Red Navy, requesting ship movement data, and the Red Air Force seeking to map British aircraft over-flights of the territory it controlled. Back in Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk the Troika had assumed 'the

idiots in France had had a quote: ‘Brainstorm!’

Andropov’s analysis was more cynical; it was much more likely that the ‘idiots’ had been in the Soviet Union not France or Corsica. The whole debacle smacked of some lunatic Krasnaya Zarya ‘provocation’, or something dreamed up by one of the late Vasily Chuikov’s ‘young Turks’ in the Defence Ministry. The return to patient, cautious ‘Cold War’ engagement with Western Europe and the United States under Alexander Shelepin’s leadership, had forced the last of those ‘idiots’ underground, thank goodness!

Top of Andropov’s agenda was making sure that nothing like the ‘Ajaccio madness’ happened again. But first he, and the Troika needed to know exactly what the true situation was on the ground here in France. What he had been ‘briefed’ was that large areas of pre-war France below the line Nantes-Tours-Dijon were wholly intact, while elsewhere in the north although viable unbombed or only partially destroyed areas survived, industry and normal economic activity had shut down, and what remained was a scattering of largely agrarian communities existing at a subsistence level living under essentially feudalistic regimes.

The last thing the Troika wanted at this time was for this invaluable bridgehead in the south, land potential long-term ally in the West to become embroiled in a premature war with the British, or to do anything that invited large scale infiltration by survivors from the German wastelands in the east, let alone to do anything likely to encourage the territorial acquisitiveness of the Spanish in the south.

Underlining Andropov’s ‘brief’ was an acknowledgement that France might already be too far down the road to complete disintegration. In that case there was nothing the Soviet Union could do other than to observe its collapse. In many ways a failed state across the Channel from England in the north and Franco’s Spain south of the Pyrenees, served the Motherland’s purpose as well, or better than a rogue, nominally aligned ally in control of part or parts of the country.

For the moment it suited the Soviet Union for the new Cold War to be fought in Korea and Asia, or Sub-Saharan Africa by proxies and guerrilla armies far from the Motherland. The object was to threaten, to worry, to cause pain to the enemies of the Soviet Union, not to drive them to reach again for the thermonuclear trigger, or worse still, to seek to kill off the wounded Russian bear by a death of a thousand cuts.

Back in Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk this latter fear was taken very seriously. This was why it had been so vital to regain mastery of the Anatolian littoral of Turkey, and to hold the mountains of Iran. Turkey and the Balkans had been open flanks through which enemies might strike at any time, now the Bosphorus was closed to the West, the wastelands of Central Europe, the Baltic States, White Russia and the Ukraine blocked the 'European' axis of danger, China was still too badly damaged to be a threat and until the Americans had resolved the Korean imbroglio the Russian Far East was safe. This was one of those generational 'sweet spots' in the history of the World when, apart from the threat of Curtis LeMay's missiles and bombers flying across the Arctic roof of the globe, the Motherland was *not* surrounded by enemies. Now was the time for retrenchment, reconstruction, and for digging deep impregnable foundations for the renewal of the Revolution...

Andropov glanced at the soldier by his shoulder.

He and Akhromeyev had gone through the Baghdad nightmare and the bloodletting of the 'Turkish Exercise' together. They were not friends but had worked well together. The soldier shrugged imperceptibly, as if he too was already asking himself the same unspoken questions.

They might have been sent to France too late; on a fool's errand.

Sergey Akhromeyev had first made his mark fighting as a subaltern in a Red Navy infantry battalion during the siege of Leningrad. Attached to the planning staff for *Operation Nakazyvat* – Operation Chastise, the invasion of Iran and Iraq – he had hoped for a promotion and a field command, only to discover that he was to be one of the first casualties of Army Group South's failure to run, not like clockwork but like a Swiss watch. Ironically, given that he was a man who loathed politicians he was now working for one of the slipperiest political operators in the whole Motherland!

Zorin perfunctorily introduced the First Secretary of the Commune of Provence, René Leguay, and his deputy, Jean Bosquet to Andropov and Akhromeyev in his halting French.

Leguay was wearing the uniform of a French naval officer with all badges of rank removed. He was a tall, hawk-browed man with unblinking eyes with a pistol holstered at his waist. He looked to be in early middle age; but he could actually have been thirty or fifty.

Bosquet wore a Gendarmerie jacket over grey flannels. He was

moderately rotund, a head shorter than his compatriot and there was genuine, florid colour in his face.

There were a dozen other men in the reception committee; none of whom, it seemed, warranted introduction.

René Leguay eyed the detachment of Soviet troopers forming up in a parade line behind the Russians.

“Are we so frightening that you brought you own personal army, Comrade Andropov?” He inquired, his eyes inscrutable despite the smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

“The whole World is a frightening place, comrade,” Zorin observed.

Leguay glanced to the sky.

“My people will show your pilots where to park your aircraft,” he went on, suddenly very business-like. “The sooner you get that thing under camouflage netting the happier we’ll all be!”

Chapter 9

Sunday 27th January 1965
Parliament Square, Westminster

The first time forty-five-year-old Brigadier David Willison had met the woman he had honestly believed it would be impossible to work with her. And as for *her* people, well, he had never encountered such a rabble before in his whole life! Moreover, he had taken an instant, unreasoning visceral dislike to her partner in crime, the top-hatted, former trade union agitator who had – he thought at the time, wrongly it turned out – in all seriousness proclaimed himself the 'King of London'.

In retrospect that day in September last year had been a wholly revelatory day for the hard-bitten Royal Engineer who had just been appointed Chief Reconstruction Surveyor of the Greater London Area.

The 'King' – a gentle, decent man who commanded the unswerving loyalty and affection of his motley tribe of survivors – had adopted the title with the whimsicality he brought to practically every topic of conversation.

'I am an anarcho-syndicalist,' the 'King', real name Harold Strettle, a decorated war hero who had returned from a POW camp in Germany in 1945 and become a driver for London Underground in the seventeen years leading up to the October War, had told the stiff, irascible-looking army officer who had marched into his 'court' at Eton College, 'but I'll explain all that to you later.'

Willison had been somewhat 'sharp' with him, and unforgivably patronising towards 'King Harold's' Queen, the extraordinary woman at whose side he now stood, protectively, next to the open grave of the man whose ragged kingdom she had so recently, and tragically, inherited.

"In the midst of life, we are close to death," Miriam Prior said, pushing the mane of red hair out of her face to look up from the grave and to face the ranks of her people.

A couple of years ago David Willison would have characterised most of the men, women and children gathered on Parliament Square in the shadows of the ruins of Parliament and Westminster Abbey, as wasters, loafers and beatniks but now he had well and truly recognised the error of his ways.

He had not initially believed *them* when they intimated that in this part of London many of the ‘really big’ buildings around Westminster looked badly damaged but ‘actually, structurally a lot of them are still sound’, it was ‘just that the wind and the rain and frost had got into them since the war’. Behind him parts of the former Treasury Building on the corner of Parliament Street and Great George Street looked like a gutted shell from without, yet inside it was mostly structurally sound; it needed cleaning out, and the windows boarded up, but if generators were brought in at least fifty percent of the complex would be usable again in weeks. Parliament of course, was gutted; and Westminster Abbey tragically windowless and its roof ripped off...

“Harold knew that. It changes nothing. He taught us to turn the other cheek, to talk not fight, to give, to share and not to steal. We will be true to the better angels of our natures. We will not seek revenge. We will forgive those who trespass against us.”

The woman’s voice grew in strength and conviction.

“Look around at the city. Look at what the violence of the World has done to London and know that we must find another way forward. We shall not take up arms against those who would rob us, kill us, carry away our women and young people. There will be law and order in this city and we must trust Brigadier Willison and his men to keep the peace!”

Both men and women were weeping inconsolably in the crowd filling the square. The killings had united the tribe; there had to be ten thousand, perhaps many more people present in the watery late morning wintery sunshine, more were arriving all the time, dwarfing the military presence of some three hundred men.

Willison’s Royal Engineers, a support company of infantrymen from the Royal Hampshire Regiment, and details from the minesweepers HMS Dufton and HMS Kellington, moored between Westminster and Waterloo bridges as floating canteens, billets and mobile command and communications stations, were swamped by the ever-increasing throng.

Willison’s men had strung cables to several small speakers anticipating that perhaps, a thousand or possibly two thousand mourners would come to pay their respects to their ‘King’. The woman’s voice echoed distantly around the square.

“No Violence!” She declared.

No violence...

At first it was a whisper.

"We are strong together!" She called above the rising murmuring. "Together we are safe! Together we can do anything!"

NO VIOLENCE...

Three days ago, Harold Strettle had attempted to intercede between scavenging gangs that were raiding 'communes' attempting to re-colonise the nearby Embankment. He and several companions had been gunned down in cold blood, and the murderers had dumped the bodies a hundred yards from Willison's perimeter.

That 'perimeter' was notional – he did not have the men to hold any kind of normal defensive line around Westminster and Whitehall – but the killers had wanted to send a message and the soldier had heard it loud and clear.

The perpetrators had not bothered to hide their identity.

That evening six fast patrol boats carrying 20-millimetre cannons and 50-caliber machine guns would be coming up river from his main base in the docks to bring, or to exact – he was beyond worrying about 'words' – justice upon the animals controlling large tracts of the riverbank to the west in the districts in the bend of the river that used to include parts of Chelsea, Fulham, Waltham Green, Sands End and Hurlingham. It was a search and destroy operation and would be supported by several RAF Canberra bombers with 'incendiary only', mainly napalm, bomb loads.

A message had to be sent.

NO VIOLENCE!

NO VIOLENCE!

Willison had not, nor would tell Miriam Prior, or any of these people what was about to happen up river. It was a military matter. Unless the gangs and marauding clans were driven out of the city there would never be any reconstruction, the city would become a cesspit, a giant, obscene cancer on the face of the nation. The Americans had ignored the threat lawless, 'no-go' areas posed to their civil society in Washington State, and later, disastrously in Chicago. The British Government was not going to make the same mistake. The rule of law – the Government's writ – would be enforced *everywhere*. By peaceful means if possible; if not, then 'rebels', because that was what the numerous armed 'tribes of London' were, would be crushed without mercy.

The soldier realised the woman was looking at him.

“No violence, David,” she said sniffing back a sob.

He tried to remain impassive. It was impossible and, in that moment, he knew that she knew, that something even more terrible than the sudden loss of the good man she had regarded as her life partner was about to happen.

In a moment she had fallen sobbing into the arms of the women around her, wailing inconsolably.

NO VIOLENCE!

The mantra was now a great roaring chant in the throats of thousands of men, women and children. The air itself seemed to be trembling with the angst of the masses.

NO VIOLENCE!

Walking back towards Westminster Bridge the chant followed the soldier like an accusation. He felt like he had betrayed something special, sacrificed, a trust that might never be regained but what was the alternative?

Nothing mattered more than the rebuilding of the city which had once been the beating heart of the greatest Empire on Earth. He did not know how he would look his friend in the eye tomorrow morning but he did know that what was about to be done – on the strength of his recommendation to the Chief of the Defence Staff – *had to be done*. He might console himself that a demonstration of ruthless brutality now *might* save many, many more lives later, and send an unambiguous signal to the small wandering armies of malcontents that ranged the land that terror would be fought with utmost terror...

But at the end of the day he had lied to...*her*.

Miriam Prior would probably never forgive him.

The four-hundred-ton coastal minesweeper HMS Dufton was moored out in the main channel below Westminster Bridge roughly opposite New Scotland Yard. That castle keep of a building still stood, from a distance seemingly more or less intact, as did County Hall on the South Bank, although Willison knew that edifice was burned out from end to end.

Once reconstruction got under way the survival of most of the capital’s bridges – Westminster, Waterloo and Tower Bridge included (the latter somewhat knocked about) – was going to be a huge boon. However, first, a comprehensive survey needed to be undertaken of the most heavily damaged areas of the city, and thus far only the districts on the outer edges of the 2 to 3 pounds per square inch blast overpressure shock waves of the October War

‘strikes’ had been in any way ‘mapped’. Another problem was that basic infrastructure like drains and sewers, and waterways within ‘inner’ London had been blocked or destroyed, raising the water table and making previously ‘high and dry’ areas of Central London into virtual swamps. Given the present ‘tactical situation’ it was impossible to start work to begin to remedy even this most basic drainage ‘problem’.

He shook his head as he trotted down the steps to the Embankment to where HMS Kellington was moored alongside the pre-war pier.

Every time the soldier looked at the two minesweepers he marvelled at the efforts the Royal Navy had made – removing masts and upper works to negotiate Hungerford and Waterloo bridges – to get such large ships this far up river. The bridges of both ships looked oddly asymmetrical, cut down, and although each vessel’s funnels had been restored to carry engine room fumes away, and tall radio masts erected, both looked ‘odd’ even to a land-lubber’s untrained eye.

Willison was an engineer and once the Army regained control of the city he was the man charged with the great work of laying the foundations for reconstruction.

It was the elevated water table which had flooded the London Underground and the vaults of most of the ‘treasure house’ banks and jewellers in the city which had so comprehensively denied the freebooters and looters the opportunity to ransack the nation’s last store of wealth. Supposedly there were tens of thousands of tons of precious metals, diamonds and jewels beyond the imagination of Croesus still buried in the ruins. More than enough treasure to bankroll the start of a national recovery program, according to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in a recent election speech.

David Willison did not know if that was true.

In one sense it did not matter how much – or how little - ‘treasure’ remained buried beneath the streets of the devastated city; either way, posterity would record that there was sufficient to justify Her Majesty’s Government – in the person of Brigadier David Willison - resorting to napalming and machine gunning its own people...

He glanced towards the ship lying in the main stream; HMS Dufton’s original single 40-millimetre Bofors gun had been replaced with twin 20-millimetre Oerlikon cannons and light and heavy machine guns were bolted

to her bridge rails and populated her main deck, with long trains of belted ammunition snaking out of metal gun boxes.

HMS Kellington was similarly ‘ready for action’.

Willison went to the Captain’s Cabin, his ‘operations room’.

A steward brought him a cup of tea and departed, leaving him alone with his thoughts. For the umpteenth time that day he thanked his lucky stars that his wife Betty, and his son and daughters were safe in Kidderminster, far away from the madness of any of the bombed cities.

There were several telegrams from Oxford in his in tray.

Why the dickens are there so many bloody sub-departments at the Home Office who all think they have to put their oar into every single damned thing?

Every time he submitted a report to the Home Secretary a score of exiled Whitehall chinless wonders felt moved to give him their ‘comments’ and ‘remarks’, or wanted to add this or that, or change something else. It was absurd, none of the useless beggars had been within miles of the areas ‘under report’ since before the war!

What on earth they imagined they could usefully contribute to the ongoing survey, let alone the ‘ground operations’ which were clearly going to be necessary before anything else was achieved was beyond him!

Nevertheless, he read diligently, scrawling impatient ‘comments’ of his own on documents that merited a reply. His mug of tea was cold by the time he remembered its existence. Never mind, there were worse things in life than a cold cup of tea...

There was a muted commotion in the passageway.

“I’m sorry, sir,” a harassed rating blurted. “Miss Prior...”

Miriam Prior stepped into the cabin and looked around.

Willison nodded for the bulkhead door to be closed as he rose to greet his visitor.

The woman’s eyes were red and her complexion blotchy with tears. Notwithstanding, she was calm, collected and in control, *and* very angry.

“I promised my people, David,” she began softly.

The man tried and failed to control his own anger.

“You may promise *your* people what you may, Miriam!” He retorted. “That’s your decision. I am a soldier and I obey orders.”

The woman was several years his junior, slender, sparsely-made beneath

her customary flowing kaftan. Today's attire was faded purple beneath her worn Army-issue Second War-vintage greatcoat and black scarf wrapped thrice around her throat against the cold.

Around them the Kellington hummed, the ship's engine room blowers whirred rather than rumbled. The minesweeper's skipper, a fresh-faced boy who looked like he ought to still be at school had warned him that on a 'small ship' you 'sometimes feel you are living inside the belly of a machine'.

"We need to talk?" Willison suggested, more in hope than expectation.

"Do we?"

"Perhaps." The man pulled up a chair, the only other one in the claustrophobic borrowed cabin. "A couple of stiff drinks would probably do us more good."

"You know I don't drink."

The woman settled into the proffered chair with a weary sigh, momentarily shutting her eyes tight.

"*They*," she groaned, "want revenge. I know that what *you* have in mind is something, more," she sighed a second time, fighting back new tears, "extreme. But I can't tell *them* that. So, you and I have to *talk* even though there's nothing for us to talk about. Harry would have played this differently, *his* way, but I'm not him. That's why we got on so well together, chalk and cheese, opposites attract and all that...stuff."

The soldier had not resumed his seat.

He nodded sympathetically, went to the bulkhead door, opened it and called: "Somebody fetch Miss Prior a strong cup of tea with two spoonful's of sugar in it!"

He perched on the edge of his cluttered, ledge of a desk against the port side of the hull beneath the compartment's single porthole.

"What shall we talk about?"

The woman took a couple of deep breaths.

"You could finally tell me how you got that horrible scar on your neck, *Brigadier*?"

Involuntarily Willison raised a hand to his throat.

"I passed out of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich in thirty-nine..."

Miriam Prior recognised this was a falsely modest preamble so she diverted it, so as to elongate the explanation. If she emerged from the

minesweeper too soon her people would be as restive as if she had been detained onboard for hours.

"Your father was in the Army, too?"

"Yes, I was born in Camberley but as a child I grew up in Egypt. I was sent home to Wellington College, going on to Woolwich seemed the natural thing to do. I was fortunate to pass out high enough to get a commission in the Royal Engineers..."

"How high?"

The man shifted uncomfortably, felt his face redden.

"Top of my class, actually," he muttered, uncomfortably. "Anyway, I was posted to the School of Military Engineering. My speciality was Bailey bridges, you know, things you can put on the back of a big lorry or a tank chassis and use to get the rest of the Army across rivers and other obstacles."

Again, he inadvertently touched his neck.

"I collected this at Bénouville on D-Day," he chuckled ruefully. "Thus, ended my first day in action as the commanding officer of the 17th Field Company of the 3rd Division!"

The woman viewed him thoughtfully for several second and was about to say something when a steward appeared bearing a mug of tea.

"Thank you," she smiled.

The seaman grinned self-consciously and departed.

Her scrutiny returned to David Willison.

"It hurts sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he replied flatly. In fact, it hurt most of the time some days; although he was not about to admit as much.

"Was that what they gave you your medal for, David?"

He guffawed. "No. That was later," he confessed, horribly self-conscious. "At Venray in Holland; that was quite near the end of that war, during the advance on Bremen. The Germans had – rather unsportingly - opened the sluice gates of the River Weser and the last remaining route across the inundated area in our sector was mined. We needed to get across to the other side pronto and there wasn't time to muck about. The Wehrmacht demolition charges on the causeway were a rush job, wires all over the shop. Nobody knew which ones to cut so I told my chaps to shove off, shut my eyes and cut the ones nearest to me."

"That was very courageous."

Willison grimaced at the memory.

"I was very tired at the time. Pretty damned fed up with the war by then and this," again his hand moved inadvertently towards his throat, "was tweaking somewhat. Besides, I reckoned I'd had all my bad luck back in Normandy. I felt an awful fraud when they pinned a Military Cross on my chest. A lot of the chaps under my command had been in the front line ever since they came ashore on Sword Beach on D-Day; whereas I'd missed most of the party..."

The woman sipped her drink, wrinkled her nose.

"Urgh... They've spike this," she protested without conviction.

"Brandy or rum probably," the man agreed. "They're trying to help, they all admire you greatly."

The woman was uncomfortable with this knowledge.

"Harry and I aren't, weren't fools," Miriam Prior decided, taking a second suspicious sip at the contents of the steaming mug. "We knew that helping *you*, the Government, would put our people in danger. And us, obviously. Not that we weren't in danger all the time before. And that you'd be more interested in opening up the docks, clearing roads and getting into all those bank vaults in the City around the Bank of England than helping us."

"Then why did you agree to help *us?* Why did you agree to act as guides to the first survey parties and to work so closely with *me*?"

"*You'd* have come sooner or later, anyway."

He nodded guiltily.

By some fluke a narrow – mile to a mile-and-a-half – wide north-south corridor of relatively undamaged territory extended from the Isle of Dogs, beyond Walthamstow to lightly damaged Woodford and Epping Forest. The problem was that the 'corridor' was bandit country, fought over and wasted by several the rebel tribes in the last year. Thus, despite the fact the A11 main road – serendipitously, running through this area - once cleared and made safe for civilian traffic was, theoretically, going to enable the Ministry of Supply to quickly begin re-opening the least damaged docks; at present those docks might have been on the dark side of the Moon for all the good they were doing.

Willison had already established his primary base and depot at Poplar, where munitions and equipment were being brought up river ahead of an imminent 'push' to broaden and make safe the Epping Forest-Thames

Corridor so as to start the full-scale reactivation of the London docks. His mission in Central London was therefore, both exploratory and preparatory in support of the coming military action in East London.

Intelligence needed to be gathered, the left-hand flank of the forthcoming spring 'push' needed to be secured, and the strength of the potential 'rebel' opposition 'tested'. Before scarce troops, and equally scarce materiel was committed by the people in Oxford – specifically, General Sir Michael Carver, the architect of Operation Aspidistra, the 'securing of the East London corridor' – wanted a good 'feel' for 'how bloody this is going to get'.

Against Willison's advice Harold Strettle had tried to play the role of peacemaker with barbarians and paid the price.

"Don't you think we don't all know that the war is coming to the city?" Miriam Prior asked. Her question was rhetorical, resigned. "Or that Harry saw that from the start. I know the only way to protect *my* people is to make sure we're on the winning side, and then pray that *you* don't forget us when it is all over?"

The soldier stood up, wanted to pace except there was no room. He sat down in his chair.

"After the war – the forty-five war – I was in Malaya, then Egypt. Then Berlin, we got up to a lot of, well," he smiled, "tricks there, just to keep the Russians on their toes. I had some time in Oman and Aden before the October War, dealing with rebellions for HMG's friends in the region. In October sixty-two I was coming to the end of my time as CO of 38 Engineer Regiment, working closely with 'special forces'. The reason I'm here is that dealing with insurgencies and fighting dirty wars is my, *specialization*."

"You're telling me we're already fighting that sort of war here in London?"

Willison nodded.

"My boys are already in position up river. They'll 'spot' for the bombers when they go in. Taking on a rabble is pointless; killing any number of thugs is pointless unless you 'take out' the leadership. The mantra is 'all or nothing'. That was what saved us at Malta last April, what stopped the Red Army in its tracks in Iraq, what stopped the Americans pushing us around in the Persian Gulf. Tonight, I plan to kill a lot of bad people. I hope that others of their ilk take heed. But make no mistake the decision has been made that *we will take London back from the barbarians*."

Chapter 10

Monday 28th January 1965
HMS Cavendish, 4 Miles West of Boulogne-Sur-Mer

Forty-two-year-old Lieutenant-Commander Dermot O'Reilly, DSO, was a tall, bearded, vaguely piratical looking man with a lived-in face and of late, a glint in his green eyes. Even on a grey, wintery day like this in the English Channel standing on the open bridge of the old war-built C class destroyer as the icy wind gusted frigidly, bitingly through several layers of cold weather gear, his heart remained indefatigably sunny. Life was good, so good that sometimes he felt a little guilty that there had had to be so much misery in the World for him to finally find his place in it.

O'Reilly had been commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy back in January 1944 and served on a corvette at the tail end of the Battle of the Atlantic. By that stage of the war all the 'fun' was over. After that war he drifted; he was a mate on a factory ship in the South Atlantic whale fishery for several years, onshore before the October War he was a carpenter and an odd job man in his native Montreal. He had never married – never met the right girl and besides, a woman worth her salt had no need for a man like him, rootless, footloose, no direction home - and but for the catastrophe of the October War he might easily have slid towards lonely, failed middle age and the bottle. Drinking ran in his family; his father had drunk himself to death at fifty, bereft of purpose in his life.

In November 1962 – still listed in the Reserve - he had applied for service in his own Navy in Canada but his own country had scrapped most of its Navy, or as good as, shamelessly sheltering behind the American military shield ever since 1945. Thwarted, he had gone to the British consulate, offered his 'extensive combat experience' to the Royal Navy. The people in Montreal had not known what to do with him and referred him to the British Embassy in Ottawa. The 'call' had finally arrived in June 1963, then he had had to wait two months to hitch a ride across the North Atlantic in one of the old Liberty ships the Canadian Government had loaned from the Americans to carry desperately needed grain, strategic metals and oil to the old country even though the British pound was worthless on a North American continent

in which the dollar was king. He had been horrified by what he found in England but the Brits had converted his wavy – Volunteer reserve – sub-lieutenant's one ring to two solid ones and after a couple of months 'acclimatising' teaching navigation to pale-faced kids, teenage sub-lieutenants straight out of school, he had boarded the RMS Sylvania for the passage to Malta, whereupon, within weeks of his arrival he was posted as a watch keeper and Navigation Officer to HMS Talavera.

The rest, as they say, was history.

The Talavera had had all her state of the art electronic wizardry bombed, shot and variously knocked out of her by then. Her big radar masts apart she was the old-fashioned gunship fleet destroyer she had been the day she commissioned eighteen years before. Dermot O'Reilly might have missed Talavera's 'adventures' off Santander, Cape Finisterre, Lampedusa and her epic part in the saving of the giant US nuclear carrier the Enterprise; but unknowingly, within days he had found himself one of the 'living' heroes of the Battle of Malta.

He had been on the bridge of the Talavera, standing beside Peter Christopher every minute of that day until the ship sank beneath their feet. Looking back it was like a fever dream; Talavera charging through the exploding shells down the barrels of the 11-inch rifles of the Great War-vintage dreadnought Yuvuz, and the twelve 6-inch guns of the fifteen thousand ton Soviet cruiser Admiral Kutuzov, the deck under his feet juddering, ringing with repeated hits, her main battery belching defiance with the Captain standing at the rail with such cheerful, well, *insouciance* as if he was steering Talavera down the line at a fleet review rather than conning her on a high speed death charge...

Every survivor had been promoted, even the dead for the purposes of the payment of widow's pensions. The Navy was not usually that sentimental; but what had happened that day off Sliema was different. So different that even the Admiralty recognised the fact; death or glory. Talavera's suicidal torpedo run had probably saved Malta and because Malta had not fallen, British and American ships still ruled the Mediterranean and against all the odds, the Red Army had been thrown back in Iraq. Or so people were saying.

O'Reilly was proud to wear the ribbon of the Distinguished Service Order. He did not feel he particularly deserved it, told himself it was for all the good men he had hardly known who had died that day nearly ten months

ago. It was not until he returned to England that he had discovered that Peter Christopher had singled him out for particular praise for his 'steadiness under fire' and 'flawless performance of his duties when the going was toughest' and recommended him 'for command at the earliest date'.

However, first, he and several other mostly walking wounded Talaveras had been required to tour the United Kingdom recounting their stories to packed meeting halls. That had been a salutary, humbling experience, to be welcomed into so many places, and homes as heroes across a landscape so wracked and damaged by war. The Navy had been delighted with his 'public persona' as the rough diamond 'Navigator' who had been at Peter Christopher's right hand during the dashing exit from the Grand Harbour under heavy shell fire...

Sometimes, he felt like a fraud.

They had only done what any other Navy men would have done in their place. It irritated him that HMS Yarmouth's equally brave, sacrificial role in drawing the enemy's fire was often under-played, virtually ignored. Yes, Peter Christopher's father had, strictly speaking ordered him to '*cut your lines and get out to sea*' but everybody in the service knew that was a thinly veiled invitation to any captain of one of Her Majesty's ships to '*get stuck in*'. People forgot that Yarmouth's captain was actually the senior man; if he had wanted to he could have ordered Talavera to stand out to sea, declined to engage and lived to fight another day when the odds were less than insanely stacked against him. So, who was the braver man? The man who could have saved so many of his men from inevitable death, or the man who declined his opportunity for life and drove his frigate at the foe just so that Talavera, with her old-fashioned guns and torpedoes could get in close enough to hurt their much more powerful, immensely thicker-skinned enemies?

In any event, command of HMS Cavendish had been Dermot O'Reilly's reward for his part in last year's battle. Two years ago, he had been drinking himself into a hole; now he was captain of one of Her Majesty's destroyers.

The Cavendish was in the first 'Ca' flotilla – Caprice, Cassandra, Caesar, Cavendish, Cambrian, Carron, Cavalier and Carysfort - of eight C-class vessels laid down in 1943 and 1944. Commissioned in late 1944 she had served with the Home Fleet in the North Atlantic at the same time O'Reilly had been a green sub-lieutenant on an unglamorous Flower class corvette rolling its guts out on convoy escort work. Many times, he had trawled his

memory to remember if by chance, he had ever laid eyes on Cavendish's long, low, menacing silhouette back then but to no avail.

Cavendish, even after her mid-1950s modernisation, retained the lines and the look of all the mid to late war-built Royal Navy fleet destroyers and from the deck of a pitching corvette one C-class ship was virtually indistinguishable from any other earlier Z-class, or any of her sisters.

Cavendish had been sent out to the Pacific at the end of the war in Europe, and post-modernisation, had been sent back to those distant waters in 1960. Her home port had been Singapore at the time of the October War. The board in her Wardroom proudly proclaimed 'Operation Manna' and 'Trafalgar' – the latter signifying her involvement in the Second Battle of Cape Trafalgar' in late 1963 as her most recent battle honours.

And now she was *his*.

Cavendish's original design – as one of the first 'Ca' flotilla ships of the class – was a straight 'repeat' of that of the preceding Z-class ships, albeit with one or two wartime modifications incorporated during construction. She was equipped with the mechanical Fuse Keeping Clock High Angle Fire Control Computer, a main battery of four quick firing 4.5-inch Mark IV guns on single Mark V mounts, capable of elevation to 55 degrees; and a variety of 40- and 20-millimetre anti-aircraft cannons; as well as two quadruple 21-inch torpedo tube mounts, and capacity for the storage of up to seventy old fashioned barrel depth charges.

Cavendish's modernisation in the 1950s was to convert her into a fast anti-submarine escort and involved constructing a new open bridge, removing one of her quadruple torpedo mounts, and one of her two after 4.5-inch guns to allow the installation of two Squid triple-barrelled anti-submarine mortars. At the same time a modern Mark 6M gun director had replaced her obsolete wartime Mk I Type K aerial, and her anti-aircraft defence was standardised to a single calibre; four 40-millimetre Bofors guns.

The marvellous thing was that despite all that 'monkeying around' the ship still felt like a greyhound fleet destroyer from another age. In high speed trials the previous month she had topped thirty-four knots and had it not been for Channel Fleet's stern strictures about fuel economy, she might have topped thirty-five or thirty-six knots if O'Reilly had asked the engine room to really 'pile it on'.

Presently, Cavendish was patrolling at a sedentary seven or eight knots,

little more than required to hold her position in the millrace of the Channel when the tide was running fast, gradually moving nearer to the cloud-shrouded lee shore. O'Reilly had brought the ship to Air Defence Stations 1 in mid-Channel before closing with the shore; all the destroyer's guns were manned, watertight doors dogged shut and extra lookouts were posted around the ship.

Flag Officer, Channel Fleet, needed to know if the 'brigands and bandits' terrorising the hinterland between the coastal towns, 'were hostile to' to his ships. No decision had been taken but it seemed axiomatic to the Navy that sooner or later it was going to have to start lifting refugees off the beaches, or ideally, carrying them away from the ports of Boulogne, Calais and perhaps, Dunkirk, directly or escorting commercial ferries; therefore it was a matter of no little import to ascertain whether any of this was going to have to happen 'under fire'.

Three miles farther out into the Channel the big County class destroyer Devonshire prowled, just in case Cavendish ran into the sort of trouble the thin-skinned destroyer did not need close inshore.

"CIC to Bridge. We're being painted by several microwave radars, sir!" Came a report from the cramped Command Information Centre two decks beneath O'Reilly's feet.

"Come up to one-two-zero revs," he ordered.

The boiler room blowers worked harder, rushing, roaring lowly in the near distance and the destroyer began to slide faster through the chop, her knife-like bow cleaving through the white horses.

Somewhere to the east the whistling thunder of jet engines tumbled down from high; probably a Canberra on a reconnaissance sortie tracking up and down the coastal margins before penetrating deeper inland. Thankfully, it seemed the 'bandits' did not have any kind of air force worth the name.

Modern aircraft, especially fast jets were marvels of technology, very labour intensive. Every hour in the air equated to tens or hundreds of ground crew hours on terra firma and if something broke, there was no 'bodging it together again', everything was precision engineered. When industrial society broke down technology became progressively less usable in direct correlation to its sophistication because the only people who understood it became scattered, or starved, or died, or simply stopped working in the teams and groups whose continued co-operation was essential to make modern

civilization carry on functioning. So, when things went to Hell the first indication was that complexity failed; therefore, aircraft stopped flying, communication systems faltered, nothing got repaired when it malfunctioned, the trains stopped running, ships stopped sailing, fuel and food ran out, hospitals became morgues; welcome back to the Dark Ages!

"Depth under the keel please?" O'Reilly demanded; his voice coolly level. Although he had only served under Peter Christopher for a matter of weeks; he wanted for no other role model. He was the luckiest man in the World to be in command of this ship, his was the best crew in the Navy and it behoved him to be the captain his men deserved.

"Four fathoms, sir!"

"Very good." The waters hereabouts shoaled fast, erratically as the sand banks moved around with the tides, or more dramatically, after each big storm surged up the Channel. "Sound the manoeuvring bell, if you please."

He waited to hear the double ring of the bell echoing through the ship.

"Put the wheel over to starboard!"

The Cavendish had been cruising south, now her bow began to swing to the west. Even at low speed the ship heeled appreciably.

O'Reilly planned to run a little farther north on this next leg before he reconnoitred the approaches to the harbour at Boulogne. If somebody wanted a fight he was going to make it easy for them. In the event channel steamers needed to get into Boulogne or any other port along this coast the Navy needed to know what was awaiting them, and nobody was under any illusions about how best to find out.

"INCOMING!"

That was from the CIC, plotting trajectories on the Mark 6M repeater down below. Cavendish was still turning, her forward main battery guns swinging smoothly to starboard towards the projected origin of the incoming rounds.

There was a distant whistling.

Brief, spine-chilling screams and the grey waters of the Channel erupted a quarter of a mile to the left, more or less where the destroyer would have been had not he ordered the wheel to be put over.

"Guns!" O'Reilly announced. "You may commence shooting at your convenience!"

The salvo bell rang moments later.

Cavendish's three 4.5-inch Mark IVs belched with ear-splitting blasts, empty shell casings clanked and clunked across the foredeck.

O'Reilly ordered revolutions for twenty knots as four shells burst astern of his ship. This time he had not heard their whistling approach.

There was the sound of express trains racing over his head.

Two big waterspouts, sixty or seventy feet high climbed out of the swell less than a hundred yards off the Cavendish's port side.

"Wheel amidships!"

He picked his moment.

"Come to three-five-zero true!"

The destroyer's rudder went over again and she settled on her new, northerly course. Every few seconds Cavendish's guns barked.

New screaming, whistling death.

The ship shuddered, faltered a split second before driving on as her quickening screws bit deep.

Dermot O'Reilly did not fight the helping hands that steadied him as he struggled to his feet.

"I think that one carried one of our whalers over the side before it went off, sir," a yeoman reported apologetically, as if it was his fault.

There was splinter and blast damage around O'Reilly, a man was down at the back of the bridge next to a wrecked Aldis signalling lamp.

A clutch of explosions tore the Channel several hundred yards astern.

O'Reilly decided he was unhurt.

"My, my, I'd hazard a guess that we've upset somebody," he observed, grinning.

Chapter 11

Monday 28th January 1965
Carmen's Bar, Strait Street, Valletta

Paul Boffa had not expected to find his friend half-way down his third – or fourth, or possibly his fifth – pint of his favourite tipple, Farsons India Pale Ale, when he arrived in the half-full bar at a little after eight o'clock that evening. Outside there was the normal cosmopolitan, milling Strait Street crowd; servicemen, local girls, and a few old-timers who resented the antics and the rowdiness of the foreign interlopers. Tonight, was warm, almost balmy for the time of year and men and women had spilled out into the narrow street. If he shut his eyes and let his mind wander it was almost like before the war when as a diffident teenager he had first ventured into what had then, and still did, pass for Valletta's 'red light district'.

It was something of a miracle of human resilience that after everything the city and the Maltese Archipelago had gone through in the last two years that this long, claustrophobic street – nicknamed 'the Gut' by the British, 'La Sada' by the Italians and commonly referred to as 'Strada Stretta' by the Maltese-Italian-Sicilian community – should have revived so quickly.

Brought up in a well to do Maltese family in Mdina, walking down 'the Gut' as an impressionable, wide-eyed seventeen-year-old had been the youthful Editor of *The Times of Malta's* first real introduction to the melting pot of nations, classes and cultures that was, and remained, Valletta. In the years since he had come to understand that to those who frequented its rooms of 'disrepute', bars and tiny stages, and for those who lived in the street and its nearby environs it was a small island apart from everything and everywhere else on Malta. In fact, it was so 'separate' that strangers sometimes struggled to comprehend the patois of the 'locals'.

Elsewhere on the Archipelago casual prostitution and the regular street commotions of 'the Gut' were rigorously suppressed. Elsewhere on Malta drag artists were 'beyond the pale' and 'lewd' behaviour in public of any sort was liable to result in one's arrest; but here in this corner of the capital practically anything – within reason – went on and other than in cases of communal violent disorder, the authorities more or less turned a blind eye to

the goings on.

Captain Lionel Faulkes, RN, the Military Secretary of the Governor of Malta and the Commander-in-Chief of all Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean, Air Marshal Sir Daniel French, a grey-haired, wise and patiently charming man, had once told Paul that Strait Street was Malta's 'pressure release valve'. He had said it with a paternal smile at the end of one of their periodic 'off the record' briefings at the Governor's residence, the Verdala Palace.

'Obviously, one deplores the drunken shenanigans of a small minority of our boys, but,' he had shrugged, very much with the resignation of an uncle who fondly despairs of unruly nephews, 'life for servicemen in the Mediterranean is not exactly a bed of roses these days.'

In the near distance somebody was playing honky tonk piano...*badly*. In the street there was a continual buzz of conversation, gouts of raucous laughter, occasional shouts, incoherent in the general hubbub. As always pairs of military policemen waited for trouble, hefting long night sticks.

Every time Paul saw the distinctive red caps of the Royal Military Police, or the blue of the Royal Navy shore patrol duty men he thought about his friend Jim Siddall. He had only known the redcap for a short time before his untimely death, blown up by a Red Dawn booby trap as he searched for the missing Samuel Calleja. Of course, they discovered later that the eldest Calleja sibling was already dead by then, his body trapped in the sunken wreckage of HMS Torquay in the cold depths of the Grand Harbour. At the time Paul had never actually met a member of the Calleja family; fate had decreed that his part in the tragedy of the age should be to try to save *The Times of Malta*, and in his innocence and hubris he had honestly believed that the British were good Samaritans.

Which, oddly, they had been in one way; but for the support of the then C-in-C, the late Sir Julian Christopher, the *Times* would have died on its feet and his editorial career might have been still born. Jim Siddall, the big, pragmatic military policeman turned Intelligence officer on the C-in-C's staff at Mdina, had pulled strings, released scarce stocks of newsprint and found men to repair the paper's damaged presses, and *The Times of Malta* had risen from the ashes like a veritable Phoenix...

The problem was – looking back on those early days last spring - he had no idea how much propaganda and misinformation the British had seduced

him into printing, word for word, before he belatedly began to ‘get wise’. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts; beware also of the apparent humility of Imperial overlords...

He hoped he was older and wiser now!

Joe Calleja looked up at his friend with bleary eyes.

“I only just got your message,” Paul apologised, trying not to frown. The other man, seated – or more correctly, half-slumped - over a rickety table in the corner of the bar, was having trouble focussing on him. He turned away, waved to the plump, dark-haired woman in her twenties behind the bar.

‘Carmen’s Girls’ were hostesses – they could be ‘friendly’ with clients if they wished, although this was not obligatory – and absolutely no more. All ‘Carmen’s regulars’ knew this and newcomers were quickly ‘put right’ if they assumed that the same unseemly ‘rules of engagement’ which applied in other nearby hostelries applied at Carmen’s Bar.

Paul always felt more comfortable in *this* sort of ‘joint’. The mores of ‘the Gut’ still genuinely offended his Catholic sensibilities; and, moreover in this present antibiotic-rationed brave new post-October War world there was absolutely nothing remotely romantic about the thought of catching a dose of the clap from a tart who would probably rather be painting her nails than ‘entertaining’ her fourth, or fifth, or sixth, or for all he knew, her sixteenth, ‘mark’ of the day.

Joe Calleja’s black eye was new.

“Mintoff’s boys have been following me around the last few days,” the other man said as Paul dropped onto the stool opposite him cradling his still full glass of beer in his right hand.

The Editor of *The Times of Malta* was a cautious drinker – in fact he was cautious in most things – and when he drank it was, as now, not the India Pale Ale so favoured by many of his compatriots and the majority of the British servicemen on Malta, but the continental styled Cisk beer.

Over ninety percent of the alcoholic beverages consumed on the Archipelago were home produced, a small source of pride for patriots.

A real journalist was always learning new things.

A fortnight ago Paul had published a feature about Simons Farsons Limited, the company that, as Farsons, had opened in rivalry to the Malta Export Brewery in 1928. This latter company had been owned by John Scicluna, a member of a banking family, and while Farsons was only licensed

to brew ‘ales’, it had acquired the exclusive right to brew Bavarian-style lagers under the trade names *Cisk Pilsner* and *Cisk Munchener*. The two concerns had merged in 1948 and in the years since ‘Cisk’ had become the lager of Malta. So, when he sipped his amber – as opposed to his friends muddy, opaque – beer he did so with an element of nationalistic pride.

“Yes, I heard about that,” he commiserated with his friend. “I thought you were *the Dom’s* right-hand man in the dockyards?”

“Ha!” Joe Calleja scoffed bitterly. At this he seemed to sober up. He became a little more erect, less hunched and his eyes cleared. “Have you *heard* the new lies about Sam yet?”

“That’s just bad people trying to score points, Joe,” Paul assured his companion. “Nobody takes that sort of stuff seriously.”

“I do!”

Of the two men Joe Calleja was broadly constructed, around average height at five feet and six inches tall, his features rounded, darkly, almost swarthily Sicilian, quite unlike his dead elder brother. Samuel Calleja had been leaner, a couple of inches taller, a handsome man with a certain haughty distance in his eyes even in the faded old photographs which had appeared in the *Times* last spring. Paul was of the dead brother’s build, his frame unencumbered by spare flesh, his nose vaguely Roman. The men were products of the melting pot of the Maltese Archipelago with the blood of countless conquerors, slaves, brigands, knights, nations and religions running through their veins like liquid history.

“That’s wrong, Joe.”

“The bastards defiled my brother’s grave!”

It was all Paul could do to stop himself becoming a newspaperman, hungry for a scoop. With an effort he reminded himself that he valued the friendship of the only Maltese citizen ever to have been personally awarded the George Cross above practically all else. No Maltese had done more to save his homeland than Joe on that dreadful day in April last year; and besides, Marija had asked him – most particularly - to ‘keep an eye’ on Joe.

“*They did what?*”

Joe Calleja leaned across the table.

Although neither man smoked the air around them seemed thick with the fog of Lucky Stripes, Camels and Senior Service, which cleared momentarily whenever somebody entered the bar before the door banged shut again.

"***Samuel Calleja, TRAITOR, shot by the British at Paola, 6th April 1964!***"

Paul Boffa stared at his friend.

"It took me two visits to wash off all the fucking paint!"

It had been said in a barely audible hissing whisper but the Editor of *The Times of Malta* could not have been more shaken if the other man had yelled it in his face.

The old rumours speculating that Sam Calleja might have been in some way involved in the sabotage of HMS Torquay – he had been foreman of No. 1 Dry Dock where she had been hastily patched up so that she could be moved to a safe anchorage – still surfaced, now and then. Nobody took that nonsense seriously.

The British had sold Paul a lot of 'lines' in those early days while he was still feeling his feet at the paper; however, Sir Julian Christopher's account of the likely course of events surrounding the loss of the Torquay still rang truest. Sam had been duped, possibly blackmailed by the Red Dawn terrorists responsible for the sabotage of the frigate and he had died onboard her, chained to piping in her engine room. Clearance divers had recovered human remains from the wreck, and the evidence of dental records was incontrovertible; Sam Calleja had died that day – 16th January 1964 – when demolition charges had broken the ship's back.

"I'm sorry," Paul muttered. "Shot by the British?"

He could not stop himself asking it from pure, spontaneous incredulity. The journalist part of him could simply not conceive of how the authorities could possibly have kept a thing like that secret for a day, let alone most of the last year.

"Have you spoken to the Governor's office?"

Joe Calleja looked at him as if he had just said something unbelievably stupid.

"Sorry," Paul muttered, knowing he had said something if not 'unbelievably' stupid, then not in any way helpful. "They'd just issue the same statements they've already put out, I suppose."

Politics in Malta had always been a murky, twisted business. Very much, he had been informed by colleagues who visited the Archipelago from the old country, on a par with the politics of a big – or not so big city – back in Britain. National Maltese politics were, of necessity, small town politics.

Everybody knew everybody else, and political parties were often families, extensions of century-old fiefdoms and the ‘political climate’ was invariably poisonous. Now and then a man – it was always a man in Maltese politics – would attempt to rise above the graft, back-stabbing and sectarian in-fighting but inevitably, he would soon be dragged under by the malign undertow. What made it worse was that the British made all the important, big decisions – especially since the October War – and what was left of the Nationalist Party, a mere rump after the murder of its whole leadership cadre during the Battle of Malta, and the Labour Party fought over the scraps.

‘Like dogs over the dry bones that fall from the table of foreign princes,’ according to Dom Mintoff.

Within the slowly recovering Nationalist fraternity questions were constantly asked about how the Soviets had known where to find, and thereafter assassinate, so many of their ‘great men’ while Mintoff and his henchmen had escaped the Battle of Malta with no more than a ‘couple of scratches’?

The honky tonk piano had given way to, of all things, some kind of brass band; mercifully, some way down Strait Street. The night was still young and peace seemed to prevail outside. ‘The Gut’ was where most of the crime on the Archipelago happened; probably because nobody had ever tried to compile statistics on the routine corruption among poorly paid junior officials, or the activities of the ‘families’ who took their cut from the illicit activities in Valletta and elsewhere. There was public and there was private crime and never shall the twain meet. Nobody spoke of the mafia on the Archipelago but it was there, albeit in a particularly Maltese, happy go lucky, easy going way. Premeditated violence was a thing that occurred and was managed between the ‘families’ so as to never actually get out of hand. Thus, the myth was propagated that all the disorder and bad behaviour on the islands was the fault of the British and that it was their responsibility to clear up the mess.

Legend had it that the well-known crooner Frankie Vaughan had begun his career in a bar on Strait Street while he was still in the Navy. There was a coterie of drag queens, each vamping outrageously to outdo all the others, many with their own residencies at tiny, hole in the wall bars and clubs. Respectable people avoided the area after dark, locals had long ago become inured to the rambunctious, drunken ‘foreigners’ who sang, shouted, argued

and fought on Strada Stretta's ancient flagstones. Once, nearly fifteen years ago the local citizenry, calling themselves the 'Valletta Troop' - led by a giant of a man known as Pawlu t-Tork (Paul The Turk) – had attempted to reclaim their district from the invaders. After three nights of mayhem, rioting basically, the authorities had confined all servicemen to their ships and bases, waiting for sanity to prevail again which, eventually it did.

For years before and after the 'uprising' Paul the Turk, a bread-seller plying his trade pushing a wooden barrow piled high with fresh bread calling 'Pawlu hawn' - Paul is here – became a Valletta legend. Once the unpleasantness was over and done with he was, people said, the gentlest of giants.

Paul Boffa groaned, drank deep of his Cisk while he collected his thoughts.

"Tal-Palestina," he offered dryly. "Hadd ma jista' ghalina."

We are invincible and nobody can match us.

That had been the cry of the Valletta Troop back in 1950; the self-same cry that the Women of Malta had employed to shame the British for interning so many innocent Maltese men after the October War.

Joe Calleja drained his glass and sat back.

"You should go home," Paul told him.

"Sammy's Bar," his friend grunted.

Sammy's Bar was next to Pieta Creek – the smallest inlet off Marsamxett Anchorage – was a Royal Navy haunt that wise Maltese avoided. However, Joe was an honorary 'Talavera' and 'torpedo man' and indisputably the dive's most famous patron.

"That's a really bad idea, Joe. Particularly, if the Dom's looking for ways to twist your arm..."

Joe opened his mouth to argue, shut it without saying a word.

"I don't know what to do," he confessed. "What if that filth had been on the grave when I went there with my Mama?"

Paul had not attempt to reply to that.

"What would Marija think," the other man continued, despairing.

"Perhaps," the Editor of *The Times of Malta* suggested gently, "you ought to ask her advice..."

"No!"

Paul looked at his watch.

“If we leave now we can catch the ferry to Sliema.”

“No, I...”

“You need to go home and sleep this off, Joe,” the battered, drunken hero’s friend said firmly. Even as he said it he was thinking; *that’s what Marija would be saying now*.

The two men stumbled into the night.

To an observer they were anonymous, two more drunks.

Paul Boffa’s life had been a wild rollercoaster ride ever since the offices of *The Times of Malta* had been hit during the December 1963 bombing and its senior editorial staff wiped out in a split second. The Yankee bombers had not been aiming for the paper’s building – war was messy, the Maltese knew that – but afterwards he had been the one who had stood up and declared that ‘something must be done’, not thinking for a moment he would become, within days, the editor of the most prestigious newspaper on the Archipelago. That said his ‘ride’ had been as nothing compared to that of his friend.

Joe Calleja had been arrested and interrogated by one of the American Joint Army Intelligence and CIA investigation units operating on Malta in the aftermath of the October War. In those dark days the old Empire Stadium in Gzira had been taken over by the Americans, and shamefully, in the beginning the British authorities had turned a blind eye to their allies’ crimes.

Two years ago, Joe had virtually been beaten to death before he and others were rescued by Jim Siddall’s Redcaps; then he had been interned on Manoel Island for nearly a year. Even after he was released there had been no return to any kind of normality; the Admiralty Dockyards had sacked him on account of his disruptive trade union activism in the yards a few days before the Battle of Malta, when, purely by chance, he had found himself working as a casual, ‘day rate loader’ in the victualling crew preparing HMS Talavera for sea on the quay beneath Corradino Heights. Unlike his fellows on the deck of the destroyer, he had stepped *onto* the ship, not off, as she cut her lines and raced out to sea. After the battle, suffering miscellaneous cracked and broken ribs and a dozen bloody splinter wounds he had been flown to England, awarded the George Cross and become a hero like no other in modern Maltese history, a thing he had not yet begun to get used to in the last year.

But right now, Paul Boffa knew that his friend needed to be carried home

to his parent's house in Sliema. There were only two people in the World who could heal any part of what he was going through tonight; one of them was in Philadelphia thousands of miles away in America, and the other, his Mama, was in the family's apartment in Tower Street, Sliema on the other side of Marsamxett Anchorage.

Personally, Paul badly needed to be back in his office working on the morning edition of tomorrow's paper. Although he trusted his colleagues to do what was necessary; still he was guilty. That was life, after all. In any event, some things were more important. The man with whom he was stumbling – as opposed to falling down the steep road to the ferry landing – was his friend. He was also the beloved brother of the woman, who by speaking exclusively to him two days after the Battle of Malta, had ensured his previously shaky position at *The Times of Malta* was impregnable, and earned his undying loyalty and...*love*.

The very least he could do was see that Joe came to no further harm tonight.

Chapter 12

Monday 28th January 1965
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

The Director General had been politely unenthusiastic about his scheme to be the first ‘newshound’ to ‘get the lowdown’ on the Prime Minister’s trip to the ‘Lost Colonies’. However, forty-seven-year-old Colonel Francis ‘Frank’ St John Waters, VC, had not felt obliged to take offence; the DG, a pleasant fellow called David Attenborough had been some kind of zoologist before the unpleasantness of October 1962, and everybody knew he was pining to get back to making documentaries about monkeys and Hyenas and suchlike as soon as possible. So, in a funny sort of way they actually had a great deal in common.

Frank Waters was aching to get back into the thick of things. Hanging around telling ‘the folks back home’ what was going on abroad was a bit of a let-down after a lifetime spent smiting Her Majesty’s enemies, and honestly and truly, a bit boring most of the time. True, he had had a marvellous adventure in the Gulf; although going to ground in the desert for several days after the Red Air Force nuked Basra until the fallout cloud had dispersed had not been much fun. Notwithstanding, otherwise it had been hugely enjoyable being in the company of so many heroic chaps from the good old days. But that was then and this was now; he had been back in England ten days and the one person he most wanted to bump into in Christendom had been so thoroughly tied up with official business – not least with flying off to the United States to have a pow-wow with the new American big chief - that he had as yet had had virtually no opportunity to renew face to face contact.

He planned to put that right tonight and to his delight he had discovered that Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Information – the Government’s chief propagandist – Nicholas Ridley had organised a bank of microphones on the tarmac adjacent to where the Prime Minister’s aircraft was expected to park.

Presently, Frank Waters’s own people were haggling with the men from the ministry over setting up lights to illuminate the historic scene so that the people – *her* people - might both hear and *see* what uplifting sentiments its

leader had prepared for the nation. This was doubly important because it seemed to the old soldier that Margaret Thatcher was the one politico in England who was both stunningly photogenic and profoundly worth listening to...but then he was unashamedly and unrepentantly biased.

"The Prime Minister will probably be very tired, Colonel Waters," Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, still looking a little pale and drawn from her brush with that winter's influenza not so long ago reminded him as the sound of the Prime Ministerial BOAC Boeing-707's jets thundered distantly.

The old soldier was aware that the wife of the Foreign Secretary did not entirely approve of him, this much was obvious. A graceful, attractive woman who would have had a string of admirers wrapped around her little finger twenty years ago she looked at the former SAS man as if he was an unscrupulous cad bent on seducing her teenage niece for her fortune.

Frank Waters thought that was a little unfair. However, the woman was Mrs Thatcher's gatekeeper and confidante – everybody in Oxford knew that – and in an odd way it was an unlikely compliment to be viewed as something of a threat to her protégé. Given his reputation – basically, he had always been a womanising scoundrel of the worst sort, not that many of his conquests had ever complained, quite the reverse in fact – he could hardly expect people to take his apparent 'Damascene' reformation with anything other than a pinch of salt without first having seen at least a smidgeon of evidence that he was, indeed, a changed man. Dash it all; he was a little bit surprised himself, and for all he knew it was just a passing phase he was going through. Some manner of mid-life existential crisis triggered by his first encounter with...*the lady*.

In retrospect the turning point had been that dinner party at the Neave's rooms at Christchurch College last summer. It had had the most peculiar effect on him. Or rather, *she* had. *She* had suggested he throw in his lot with the BBC and busy himself in the Persian Gulf; and like an obedient gun dog he had meekly obeyed, powerless to resist. And that was that; he was under her spell, enchanted and infatuated like a pubescent boy all over again.

It had rained on and off that day, more April showers than wintery sleet. The weather had been by turns frigid and spring-like ever since the turn of the year; as if the gods could not make up their minds. Today, for example, it had been unseasonably warm – not quite shirt-sleeves temperate but everybody had left their scarves and gloves in their lodgings – and even now

after darkness had fallen, the ambient temperature had only fallen a degree or two. Mercifully, there had been no sign of the great killer storms afflicting the north and the Atlantic seaboard of the US 'hopping' across the Atlantic. The latest of these 'freak' weather 'events', was presently manifesting itself all the way from the Carolinas down to the Florida Keys causing untold flooding, economic dislocation and the loss of hundreds of lives.

Frank Waters began to fidget and fret – a thing he never usually did even under the heaviest fire – as the Prime Minister's blue and white liveried jetliner swooped down to terra firma in the near distance and in a blur of spray and blinking landing lights, slowed and turned to taxi back towards the reception committee.

In common with all BOAC aircraft the Boeing 707 had a Union Jack painted on its nose beneath the cockpit windows and on its tail. Presently, it lurched to a halt and the timbre of its four Pratt & Whitney JT3D turbofans spooled down to a roaring whisper.

It seemed to take an age to wheel the disembarkation stairways to the forward and aft exit doors and then there was the normal delay when the hatches were cracked. Suddenly there were Royal Marines everywhere, tough-looking members of the Prime Minister's famous AWP – the so-called *Angry Widow's Protection* detail – to which, it was said, every man in the corps aspired to belong. Fourteen members of the AWP had been killed near this very spot in April last year, several having just bundled their precious charge to safety in the Queen's armoured Rolls Royce.

Major Sir Steuart Pringle, since the death of the 'Detail's' first leader in that 'incident' back in April of last year, the commander of the AWP was first out of the aircraft. He stood on the top step surveying the waiting crowd and the surrounding tarmac for about a minute before detailing a runner to take a message to the Inspector in charge of the local Police currently forming a line holding back the relatively small press pack, and the usual scruffy contingent of airport workers and supernumeraries.

The crowd was moved back twenty yards while hard-eyed Royal Marines fingering their Sten guns eyed Frank Waters, his small BBC crew and Nicholas Ridley's welcoming party with purposeful suspicion and barely masked disdain.

Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson had stepped forward and walked straight up the stairs into the Boeing 707 the moment the forward door opened. The

AWP cordon had opened and closed and one or two of the tough guys had returned the Foreign Secretary's wife's tight-lipped smile as she moved among them.

Now she emerged again one step behind her protégé.

Margaret Thatcher halted, said a word to Steuart Pringle – a man Frank Waters had heard very good things about for many years and with whom he had always enjoyed very convivial relations whenever their paths accidentally crossed – and marched down the steps to where Nicholas Ridley headed a reception line of political flunkies.

The AWP crashed to the 'present' as the lady's leading foot touched home soil. In the past the tendency of her 'protectors' to indulge in such 'theatre' had apparently, somewhat disconcerted the Prime Minister. Nowadays, she was accustomed to the eccentric ways of her military guardians and hardly batted an eyelid.

Margaret Thatcher shook her Information Minister's hand.

"You must be very tired, Prime Minister," the man offered sympathetically. When ten months ago Nicholas Ridley had been suddenly co-opted into the Cabinet he had been a little out of his depth, and at first, struggled although not for long. Throughout he had enjoyed the unwavering, complete confidence of the remarkable woman at whose pleasure he served, and whom he had come to regard as a close personal friend. Ridley entertained none of the ambitions of several of his senior colleagues, he was Margaret Thatcher's liege man and that was that. Literally, the weight of the World had been on her shoulders the last thirteen months of her unexpected premiership and notwithstanding her superbly brave face, Ridley knew she must be exhausted. Not that she would allow anybody to know it, of course. "I've primed the BBC," he explained, "and the rest of the newsmen to expect 'short remarks'."

Margaret Thatcher smiled beatifically at her friend.

"That's very considerate of you, Nick," she gushed, belying his concern. "I actually managed to catch forty winks on the aeroplane. I think tonight is as good a time as any to begin our election campaign."

Ridley accepted this without demur.

Others in what remained of the shrinking 'Thatcher Wing' of the Conservative Party had been fretting in the traps for weeks awaiting the formal firing of the starter's gun. Margaret Thatcher had insisted on

‘business first’ and because none of her ‘colleagues’ had the courage to stand up to her, the Labour Party had had a month-long head start in the race towards the forthcoming general election finish line in March.

“Whatever you say, Prime Minister,” he concurred with quietly ecstatic relief.

Margaret Thatcher patted his arm and preceded the man and Patricia Harding-Grayson towards the waiting microphones in a pool of bright lights half-way between the aircraft and the crowd.

Blinking in the harsh illumination she glimpsed Frank Waters and it was all she could do to stop herself smiling a most un-Prime Ministerial smile at the rascally old soldier. The man had become a positive national treasure reporting from the battlefields of the Persian Gulf, and for courageously carrying on regardless under heavy fire and wounded to boot! His toothy, moustachioed face was always in the papers, his voice – cultured, insouciant; so marvellously old-fashioned and quintessentially *British* in its wryly self-deprecatory tone – had won hearts and minds across every continent where a part of the map had once been painted pink. That everybody knew he was something of a rogue merely added to the lustre of his growing reputation and unsolicited celebrity.

“I will say a few words,” she warned her Minister for Information, “then I will speak to Colonel Waters *at length*, Nick.”

There had been a time when Ridley would have queried: “is that wise, Prime Minister?” But he had not known the lady very well then; now he accepted her edict as if it was carved in a stone she had just carried down from the mountain top.

The lady knew best.

“Whatever you say, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher stood before the microphone. Out of the loom of the lights her faithful AWPs circled, and just beyond the dazzle of the arc lamps Ridley, Pat Harding-Grayson and several Ministry of Information civil servants stood listening respectfully.

“My talks with President Nixon and Secretary of State Cabot Lodge were most productive.”

In one way this was true; in another her words fundamentally misconstrued what had actually happened in her somewhat fraught ‘talks’ with members of the Nixon Administration.

Richard Nixon had obviously been pre-occupied; with the states of emergency declared on account of the brutal winter afflicting parts of the US, with the ongoing border ‘incidents’ with the ‘Kingdom of the Great Lakes’ in Wisconsin and northern Illinois, and, among other military and political quagmires, fresh setbacks in the war in Korea.

“We discussed a wide range of confidence building measures and how best to put in place arrangements to ensure that tragic events such as those which have blighted our dealings since the October War can never happen again.”

The trouble was that Richard Nixon honestly believed that was all history, nothing to do with him. So, while he was happy to transfer a few – well, now it seemed as many as thirty-four ships of various descriptions to the Royal Navy, its Australasian and New Zealand counterparts, and to provide limited ongoing economic aid to the United Kingdom in return for a promise of an ‘early’ return to transatlantic ‘business as usual’ for American banks and industry, everything else would have to wait for the outcome of the broader ‘peace process’. In the meantime, it might be possible to develop greater ‘security co-operation’ in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and pre-war US-UK inter-service relationships would be allowed to tentatively pick up ‘where they were in pre-October War days in the mutual interests of both parties’.

“I am confident that *we* can do business with the new Administration in Philadelphia in future.”

Problematically, if and when the massive American military re-mobilisation bore fruit, the Korean ‘conflict’ was resolved, and the insurgents in the Midwest were successfully caged by the might of the rebuilding US military machine, the UK and its allies would find themselves again sandwiched between the American behemoth and – possibly – a resurgent Stalinist Soviet Union irredeemably embittered by the October War and its defeat in Iraq. As for the ‘peace process’ in Manhattan, well, that was just a talking shop.

Margaret Thatcher had departed Philadelphia with two other nagging ‘concerns’.

The draft ‘Commonwealth Mutual Assistance and Free Trade Agreement’ – CMAFTA – which had been initialled by representatives of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and

Rhodesia, and now eight other African and Caribbean newly independent former British colonies, was clearly viewed by the incoming Administration in Philadelphia as an 'irritant'. It seemed to her that if the putative 'Commonwealth Treaty' was ever ratified – not a given even in Britain where the official Labour Party 'position' remained ambivalent towards it, 'Empire-building by another name' – the United States would regard it as an existential threat, presumably to be thwarted at every turn.

Of more immediate 'concern' had been her impression that Nixon had not previously been aware of – or if he had, not cared about, it was hard to tell – much of what she had told him about the deteriorating situation in the Western Mediterranean. Nor did he seem overly exercised by the developing 'complexities' of the Middle Eastern imbroglio, let alone the unquantifiable nightmare presented by the turmoil across the Anatolian Littoral of Turkey, the whole Black Sea region and the Aegean, which seemed to have fallen under the malign rule of the 'Red Dawn Movement'.

The one 'European' issue which had, albeit as an afterthought attracted Richard Nixon's interest was the possibility of an 'unfriendly socialist government sympathetic to the Soviet Union and its allies' coming to power in Great Britain. She thought this was a bit rich coming from the lips of a man whose country had – in the last two years - done more than any country in the history of the English-speaking people to undermine the prosperity and political stability of the British Isles!

"Moreover," she went on, "I am confident that whatever the outcome of our general election in March that the new government will continue to repair transatlantic relations."

Her mission to Philadelphia had been speculative, an attempt to seize the initiative and she had been fully prepared to be unceremoniously rebuffed by her hosts. Instead, she had got an audience with the new Administration and the American media had been generally lukewarm, as opposed to vitriolic about her visit. Much of that was down to the everlasting honeymoon of the British 'first couple' in the temporary US capital. Sir Peter and Lady Marija Christopher enjoyed virtual movie star status in America...

Margaret Thatcher tried very hard not to smile.

She was to be Elisabetta Margo's godmother...

It was Lady Marija who had shyly sounded her out.

'Forgive me, but I know that but for his sad death you would have

married Peter's father. We would be daughter and mother-in-law, family...'

The Prime Minister had been so surprised she had been shocked into silence.

'We are *connected*," the Ambassadress had declared. "All our lives have crossed. Some things are meant to be. We would be honoured if you...'

Elisabetta would be baptised into the Catholic Church sometime in early April at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Philadelphia...

Margaret Thatcher forced herself to focus on the here and now.

"Notwithstanding our many differences with the United States I believe that the time has come to put the past behind us and to work to build a new future..."

Unseen, in the darkness outside the glare of the television lights Rachel Piotrowska stepped out of the rear passenger door of the Boeing 707.

She hesitated a moment.

"While I was in Philadelphia," the Prime Minister was saying, "I made it clear to President Nixon that the priority for us all must be reconstruction. That we all have to devote our efforts to rebuilding anew from the ashes of the old World."

Rachel quirked a sardonic grimace in the night, shook her head ruefully.

"And that we owe it to our children and to their children, to all the generations to come to avoid the mistakes of the past..."

Rachel walked down the darkened steps to where a nondescript car, a drably painted Rover waited, its engine rumbling in the night.

Perhaps, she reflected, both her life and that of the woman who had fought so hard to ensure the survival of the British people, were likewise, about to take new, totally unexpected turns.

She hoped the change would be for the better.

Even though she knew in her heart that what one hoped for and what one got in this traumatised brave new World were hardly ever one and the same thing.

Chapter 13

Tuesday 29th January 1965
The United Nations Building, Manhattan

Whilst it would have be untrue to maintain that Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson was in an end of term mood, his situation was such that he was, for the first time in his life, able to look back at things and to review current developments, with a certain air of detachment.

Her Majesty's Secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs had decided to step down after the coming election; although he was by nature and inclination a socialist – albeit of the champagne kind, as he and his wife joked privately – he had no inclination to accept a peerage from an incoming Labour Party Prime Minister, or to serve in what was bound to be a tormented and unhappy Callaghan Cabinet. It seemed to him that it was as inevitable that Labour would win a landslide victory in the forthcoming election, and it was axiomatic that the divided Party would make it virtually impossible for any leader to actually govern successfully in its aftermath.

Democracy was such a profoundly messy business...

In any event he preferred retirement to being a senior member of a Government when one knew that a sizable section of that 'governing' party's Members of Parliament would be sticking pins in his effigy every time he opened his mouth.

In less than six weeks he would be on the side lines and that gave him the emotional and intellectual breathing space to contemplate the 'bigger picture' that so many of those participating in the bizarrely styled '*Multi-lateral Peace Convocation between the United States of America, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and all parties interested thereof*', Manhattan Peace Process conference, had thus far ignored.

It was as if there was an Elephant in the room and nobody dared to mention its name in case the Elephant in question heard his name and decided it was high time he had a good, old-fashioned rampage.

He still chuckled wickedly over the ridiculous title the US State Department had put forward for the whole 'peace process'; it had initially

been proposed by one of his own officials, a lowly assistant principal officer, as a marginal note; as a joke, except nobody in Philadelphia had got 'it'. Now they were saddled with the 'convocation' for all time!

"Forgive me," he smiled, trying to ignore his voice reverberating around the old Security Council chamber, "the problem is that this is like Bretton Woods and the San Francisco Conference of 1945 all over again," he shook his head sagely, "except everybody is determined to forget everything that has happened in between then and now."

The conference had sat in cloistered secrecy since it had re-opened in the New Year. A number of Special Representatives had been discomfited by the American press 'caricaturing them unfairly' and 'misrepresenting their views', thus the press, radio and TV cameras were locked out of the most important 'peace conference' in the history of the World. It was hardly surprising the Russians had come to the conclusion the exercise was not worth the candle!

The British Foreign Secretary had minimal sympathy for the injured feelings of other 'esteemed representatives'; it was up to them to make their views so crystal clear that misinterpretation was well-nigh impossible, and had they been fortified with sufficient innate moral fortitude no manner of sniping from the side-lines ought to be 'wounding'. If you came to a forum such as this with a weak, or worse, flawed case you ought to expect to be ridiculed!

"One is bound to ask the question what is the point of this 'convocation' if at the end of the day there is still no international body to which disputes may be lawfully submitted. People keep claiming that the United Nations failed us; yes, it did. So, what? Winston Churchill once remarked that democracy is the worst form of government," he remarked, "*except for all the others*. I will not be lectured on the faults of democracy or the benefits of other models of government by anybody around this conference table. Likewise, I will not demur from my rejection of the view expressed by the United States that in the matter of the future settlement of international disputes it should in effect, be the final arbiter. Since when have American Presidents ever exhibited the wisdom of Solomon?"

The US Special Representative to the convocation, forty-seven-year-old Harlan Cleveland, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organisation, a relatively junior position in the State Department, was another hangover

from the Kennedy-Johnson days. That Richard Nixon had not seen fit to put his own, more senior man in post, spoke volumes to how seriously the incoming Administration took the 'peace process'. On no less than nine occasions last year Cleveland had got to his feet and walked out when a delegate had had the temerity to say something uncomplimentary about him, or his country. Today he was rooted to his seat, his face devoid of emotion.

Henry Cabot Lodge junior, Cleveland's boss was seated beside him listening impassively, like a poker player.

"I was at Bretton Woods and at the San Francisco Conference," Tom Harding-Grayson went on. "We had won, or more correctly *we* – the Western Allies - were about to win the war back then. That dictated the terms of reference. Surely, nobody in this room is claiming that *we*, any of us, won the October War?"

Tom Harding-Grayson did not think that gathering everybody around a huge table with up to a score of aides and surrogates crowded at their backs in any way helped communication. There was little direct eye contact, hardly any face to face confrontation. Nobody was really talking to anybody in this room.

"Since the United Kingdom will not hold the Chairmanship of the 'convocation' for another thirty-eight sessions," was a stupid procedural obstacle – there were only a handful of countries whose opinion really counted on this stage, rather like in the formation of the old United Nations! – that meant most of the available time was wasted on meaningless platitudes, the airing of irrelevant minor grievances, and in the discussion of ephemera when they ought to have been mending the ills of the World, "this will probably be my last opportunity to tell you what I think you need to hear."

He had told the Prime Minister that somebody needed to plant a 'bomb under the Manhattan Peace Process' and she had taken to the idea, giving him licence to 'shake things up'.

Now that Margaret Thatcher was safely back in England the time to light the blue touch paper, stand back, and wait for the explosion was now...

"Many of my countrymen and women hold the United States as culpable as the Soviet Union for the catastrophe that befell the United Kingdom in October 1962. As in 1918 and 1945 the United States has come out of a World War as the undisputed victor both militarily and industrially. War as a mathematician would say is a zero-sum game. Somebody wins, somebody

loses. It is not enough for American Presidents, three of them now – Woodrow Wilson in 1918, Harry Truman in 1945, and Jack Kennedy in 1962 - to turn around and tell the rest of the World 'that's just the way it is', because frankly, that is both morally and, pragmatically, wrong."

Harlan Cleveland shifted uneasily in his chair; Henry Cabot Lodge gave every appearance of carefully, stoically weighing every word with immense and respectful gravitas.

"My country seeks good relations, constructive relations with the United States," Tom Harding-Grayson went on, "but not at any price. Whenever I visit New York or Philadelphia I hear about the rebuilding of Seattle, that Boston is 'back in its feet again', or that the Buffalo-Niagara National Park initiative is close to gaining funding. I used to hear a lot about Chicago, but not so much these days because what's gone on lately in the Midwest is some kind of guilty secret. Let me assure you that we in Britain grieve for your loss," he sighed, "notwithstanding that it is as nothing in comparison to what we have suffered, and pales into insignificance in comparison to the wreckage and misery that afflicts huge swathes of the Northern Hemisphere of the planet."

The trouble was that the US had already bought off the South and Central American delegations and many of the other countries represented around the table, and the Commonwealth block was in the minority, marginalised at least for the time being.

Never mind, posterity matters.

He swapped looks with the United Kingdom's Special Representative, Sir Hugh Foot, the elder, diplomat brother of Labour's firebrand unilateral disarmer, Michael.

Hugh Foot had refused to be discouraged by the absence of progress in Manhattan, believing in the truth of another Churchillian saying: 'You can depend on Americans to do the right thing when they have exhausted every other possibility.'

Although the Foreign Secretary and the United Kingdom's man in Manhattan had not always sung from the same hymnal over the years, they had always remained on friendly terms.

"Sir Hugh and I were both at the San Francisco Conference in 1945; that said, from my best recollection we never went to, or got invited to 1144 Pine Street, where allegedly, the deal was settled."

This drew grimaces and a couple of involuntary smiles; he guessed that many of the representatives had no idea what he was talking about. 1144 Pine Street was the address of the most notorious bordello in San Francisco, between 1940 and 1949 it had been Sally Stanford's whorehouse where legend had it that the United Nations was founded.

So many of the delegates to the conference were Sally's clients that the famous *Madame's* front room had become the venue for a slew of crucial meetings...

They ought to have put up a statue to commemorate the address; instead the house had been knocked down and replaced with condominiums just before the October War.

Tom Harding-Grayson made a show of searching out Anatoly Fyodorovich Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador to the United States who had attended the Manhattan conference – now and then – strictly as an observer since his country's delegation had walked out of the 'convocation' in the autumn.

The Russian had ignored all blandishments, overt and covert, to explore the possibilities of a dialogue with the British delegation. However, when he attended the conference he was invariably attentive and his aides took copious shorthand notes.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary collected his thoughts.

"The Johnson Administration made a series of 'gestures' to the United Kingdom signalling a desire to 'normalise' relations between our countries. President Nixon, even in the short time he has been in office, has undertaken to support those, and several new initiatives. Though, in the scale of things, these 'initiatives' are relatively small in impact my Government welcomes the thaw in transatlantic relations, but," Tom Harding-Grayson fixed his gaze on Henry Cabot Lodge's poker face, "these are early days. We in the United Kingdom have learned to our cost the folly of trusting our *former* ally. During the Cuban Missiles War and subsequently we have paid a high price in blood and treasure for our cupidity in this respect. Frankly, words will not suffice. The United States will in future be judged solely by its deeds."

This drew stolid silence from the representatives of the Americas, nods and muttered agreement by Commonwealth delegates and a raised eyebrow from Indira Gandhi, the daughter of the late Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who had flown in without fanfare for the re-opening of the conference

the previous week. She had not as yet spoken in public but was known to have been circulating behind the scenes, entertaining delegates at the Indian Mission on East 64th Street.

The Indian Government had held itself aloof from the 'white' Commonwealth countries – Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia – which had coalesced and taken part in, or supported logistically, war fighting operations in the South Atlantic and the Persian Gulf, without at any time condemning their actions.

Having emerged from the October War unscathed India had adopted a policy of passive non-alignment under which it had 'talked' to US, British and Soviet emissaries without making commitments of any description. In the meantime, it had continued to trade with, and to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, to all parties.

Within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Oxford there had been much discussion about how long India would 'sit on the fence'. The sub-continent faced huge difficulties and some part of its population of over four hundred million people was perennially threatened with famine or pestilence. The country badly needed whatever 'Western' technology and medicine was available to it; and in a World where the old certainties had been overturned, it was beginning to get used to the idea that *it* might be now, or potentially would soon be not just a regional super power but a player on the global stage. That the Indian Government had sent the formidable daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru to New York as an 'observer' was proof positive that India was rousing itself from its long slumber and looking forward to a day when its glory would outshine that of any of its former colonial masters.

Problematically, Tom Harding-Grayson accepted that around this table he was probably in a minority of one in thinking that that day could not come soon enough. He was convinced that India's ascent to the top table of World affairs would be a profoundly good thing for humanity in this otherwise blighted age.

"I welcome the presence in the Indian delegation of such a high profile, esteemed observer," he said. "For too long the councils in this building have been dominated by white Euro-centric perspectives more relevant to the first than the second half of this century."

Henry Cabot Lodge was frowning.

US-Indian relations had cooled dramatically after the two Battles of

Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf. Prime Minister Nehru had summoned the US Ambassador in New Delhi in July and indicated that he felt ‘let down’ by a supposedly ‘friendly’ power. It seemed that had the Indians known the purpose of the US Navy’s visit to ‘Indian Waters’ last summer – basically, most of the Indian Ocean’s – dockyard and other facilities would not have been extended to it. Although the Johnson Administration had increased aid shipments and extended credit lines to the Indians in an undignified attempt to patch things up; sensibilities in New Delhi had remained...*raw*.

And now that cunning old fox Tom Harding-Grayson was making eyes at, of all people, Indira Gandhi!

Chapter 14

Wednesday 30th January 1965
Fort Ricasoli, Malta

Major Denzil Williams, following the roughhouse root and branch re-organisation of the ‘intelligence community’ on the Maltese Archipelago last autumn, re-appointed Head of Station of MI6 in the Central Mediterranean rather liked having his own castle; or rather, in the jargon of these things, his own ‘bastioned fort’.

When a fellow got to be the master of his own fortress, he tended to take a healthy interest in such matters of ‘fortress nomenclature’ and because he was by nature, a curious soul – invariably, but oddly, not always in his experience a good thing in a senior intelligence officer - he had taken great pains to unravel the provenance of his feudal demesne.

Forti Rikażli – ‘Ricasoli’ was the English name – had been built on the foundations of several layers of previous defence works by the Order of Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem, otherwise commonly known as the Knights of Malta or just the ‘knights hospitaller’, between 1670 and 1698, occupying a promontory known as Rinella Point (but in olden days as Gallows’ Point) guarding the southern side of the entrance to the Grand Harbour opposite an even more intimidating bastion, Fort St Elmo on the northern, Valletta side of the anchorage.

Ostensibly, the fort was built in response to the threat posed by the Ottoman Empire, which in 1669 had conquered Crete. Thus energized the then Grand Master, Nicolas Cotoner had called in Antonio Valperga, the chief military engineer of the House of Savoy to beef up Malta’s defences, and a Florentine Knight called Giovanni Francesco Ricasoli had stumped up the princely ransom of 20,000 scudi – Italian coinage properly known as *scudo d'argento* (silver shield) first issued in 1551 by Charles V in Milan – so that construction could get under way. First occupied by a token garrison in 1674, after several design changes a barracks, a chapel, food stores and powder batteries were added over the years until eventually, after some twenty-eight years, the fort finally got some cannons and was officially inaugurated.

A century later it was the most heavily armed fort on the island, equipped with as many as eighty guns of various calibres. By then the ‘bastions’ had been enlarged – the eighteenth-century arms race between ever more powerful cannon and thicker castle walls meant no ‘fort’ was ever complete – to such good effect that it successfully repelled three French assaults while Napoleon was conquering the rest of the Archipelago in 1798.

Fort Ricasoli’s other footnote in the history of the Napoleonic Wars was less glorious. In 1807 it had witnessed the ‘Froberg Mutiny’. The Froberg Regiment had been raised in 1803 by Gustave de Montjoie, a French royalist, in Albania and Christian regions of the Ottoman Empire. Recruited with a mixture of bribes, false promises of booty and press-gang methods, manned with Germans, Poles, Swiss, Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks and Russians the regiment had mutinied in April 1807 in what was to be the worst revolt of its kind in the British Army in the whole twenty years of the war. At one stage the mutineers had blown up the fort’s magazine; and a new magazine had not been constructed until 1829.

The present-day fort had been transformed out of recognition since then. In the mid-1850s it was considered ‘impregnable’ as decade after decade new works were built and the latest ordnance installed. By the early 1900s wholly new gun emplacements, searchlights and a torpedo station had been added, and during the 1930s massive concrete fire control towers had been mounted on top of three of the bastions surrounded by a battery of searchlights.

All the guns had been carted away in 1947 when the place had become a humble barracks, and in 1958 the fort had been practically abandoned bar the odd maintenance inspection.

However, for Denzil William’s needs the old bastion was perfect.

It was private; very private, separated from the rest of Rinella Point by high fences and dry ditches.

Hardly anybody knew he and his people were there.

And it had dungeons!

Well, strictly speaking not so much ‘dungeons’, as a lot of very sturdily constructed underground rooms... Oh, and when the weather was not filthy – as it was today – he quite enjoyed sitting outside in a deckchair watching the boats steaming in and out of the Grand Harbour breakwaters while he smoked a relaxing cigarette.

This small vice aside mostly, he liked Fort Ricasoli because it was the

one place on Malta he could be fairly confident that he was going to be left alone to get on with his job in relative peace and quiet.

"Okay, what's the little twerp gone and done now?" He inquired wearily looking up from his desk in what was once the Fort Commandant's office. Down here in the bowels of the ancient bastion the temperature was always constant – give or take a few degrees – on the hottest summer or the chilliest winter day. It never snowed on Malta and nobody knew what a frost was but it still got cold sometimes at this time of year and when a gale was blowing it could be distinctly 'nippy' out and about above ground.

Denzil William's face had a slightly lopsided look, as if it had been smashed up and not quite put back together properly. This was pretty much what had actually happened to him a year ago; when Arkady Rykov had beaten him half to death. Only 'half' because being dead did not hurt and the bastard had wanted his pound of flesh. Tit-for-tat, really, William's boys had given the Red Dawn assassin a thorough going over when he and Rachel Piotrowska – also known as Clara Pullman – had turned up at Gibraltar around the time of that little spat with the Spanish.

He had honestly believed 'Clara Pullman' was another Red agent until Dick White – Sir Richard Goldsmith 'Dick' White – his boss, and to Williams's chagrin the undisputed all-powerful 'el supremo' now in charge of the Combined Intelligence Services, had informed him that 'Clara' worked for him and that he had been 'running' that mad dog Rykov for 'years'.

That day anybody with a very small feather could have knocked him down!

Clara Pullman, Rachel Piotrowska...

Now it looked like he was going to have to clear up another fine mess the bloody woman had left behind on Malta; wasting his valuable time trying to keep a dirty little secret that was only going to get hideously dirtier as time went by.

"He's trying to get Joe Calleja sent to Coventry, Boss," the young man standing in front of William's desk explained, correctly divining that his Chief was asking him about the latest machinations of the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party, the ringmaster of the General Workers Union; *il-Perit*, 'the Architect', presently Chief Minister of the Civilian Authority of the Maltese Archipelago – effectively the Prime Minister of Malta - and the problems those 'machinations' were about to dump in his lap.

“Again?”

“Yes, Boss. Various important people have received anonymous letters about Sam Calleja; nothing very specific, just the normal ‘traitor’ stuff. One of the poison pen jobs was received by the Governor’s Military Secretary yesterday...”

Denzil Williams rolled his eyes.

While it would be true to say that a man in his position could probably work for worse task masters that Air Marshal Sir Daniel French, DFC, OBE, the Governor of Malta and the C-in-C of all Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean, it was a constant trial having to answer to such a ‘moral’ master. The very thing that made the bloody man so popular with the Maltese – his unpretentious, straightforward, excruciatingly ‘fair’ and ‘reasonable’ approach to his duties – was a constant nightmare for the Intelligence Services on the Archipelago.

Forty-seven-year-old Williams had learned his trade the hard way, working for the Special Operations Executive in occupied France in 1944. His first wife had been a Parisian émigré who had left him for an insurance salesman in 1953. His second wife, Juliette, the widow of a French diplomat assassinated in Algeria, had loved living in London much more than she had ever loved him; their cramped little penthouse flat in Mayfair had become her nest and – all things being equal - they would have remained more or less happily married for ever and a day if the fucking World had not gone mad at the end of October 1962.

On the night of the October War he was in Lebanon talking to the sort of people the bigwigs back in London eschewed because they did not like getting their hands dirty. The last thing the people back in London had wanted was him poking around the back streets of Beirut trying to find out how his ‘colleagues’ had so royally fucked up in letting that complete bastard Philby get away scot free. Fortunately, most of the men culpable for that particular debacle had been vaporised otherwise his career would probably have come to a sticky end when he returned to England. In any event, he had been in Beirut and Juliette had been sleeping in her bed in Mayfair when the bombs went off over London. Like untold hundreds of thousands, ultimately millions of other Britons she had, he hoped, died without ever knowing a thing...

“Tell me about Joe Calleja?” He demanded resignedly.

“He got legless again last night at that dive in ‘the Gut’,” the younger man reported. The kid was new in Malta, strangely prissy and unworldly even for a boy just out of Cambridge, so his family must have connections back home. These days anybody with any clout, or money, seemed to be sending their ‘little darlings’ off to the colonies, or failing that to the ‘whiter’ bits of the Commonwealth!

‘The Gut’, more prosaically shown on maps of Valletta as ‘Strait Street’ was what passed for the Maltese Red Light zone. It was pretty tame in comparison to comparable districts in Hong Kong, Macau, Manila or a hundred other places, or even Soho in the old days but kids like the boy standing in front of his desk did not know that.

“Carmen’s Bar?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Signorina Carmen Franceschini, the feisty owner of the establishment, was one of Williams’s ‘contacts’. He loathed the word ‘informer’, it carried distasteful undertones. Maltese citizens who assisted the authorities were not ‘collaborators’, they were patriots; particularly, at a time like this.

The kid did not need to know about Carmen.

“Alone?”

“Sorry, sir?”

“Was Mr Calleja alone?”

“Er, no, sir. He met several other men. He very nearly came to blows with one...”

“Name?”

“Don’t know, sir...” The younger man stammered, unable to cope with even the gentlest of intimidation. “He was approached by a man who was, well, effeminate, if you know what I mean?”

“A rent boy?” Denzil Williams growled impatiently.

“Er, I wouldn’t know, sir...”

“You bloody well should. Then what happened?”

“Mr Calleja told him to, er, sling his hook, I think...”

“You think?” Williams pinned the boy to the spot with a glare. “I don’t want ‘think’, I want ‘know’. I want names. I want addresses. I want full descriptions. I want you to get close enough to smell a subject’s sweat, or after shave, or perfume. I don’t want conjecture, guesswork. I want facts. Who said what, verbatim, word for bloody word! Do you understand me?”

The boy would have stood out like a sore thumb wandering around the Gut like a wide-eyed tourist.

“Remember that,” he cautioned, “the next time you get told to follow somebody.”

“Bugger,” he muttered under his breath when he was alone again. It was bad enough that Control back in England was sending him snotty-nosed schoolboys; now he had no option but to explain to Dick White, and in due course, the Governor that *they* had a *little problem* that – no matter how much wishful thinking was applied to it – was not about to go away of its own accord. Moreover, it was the sort of ‘little problem’ that could very easily blow up in their faces if they made a misstep,

He really, really did not need to be wasting his time on this!

The fighting in Libya – courtesy of the Egyptian invasion in November – had led to a trickle, then a steady flow of refugees washing up on the shores of the islands of Lampedusa, Linosa and Pantelleria, and increasingly, on Malta. The majority of the first ‘boat people’ had been Italian nationals, or persons of Italian descent and their families fleeing in terror of reprisals as the Egyptian invaders drove along the coastal strip and the uneasy peace in post-colonial Cyrenaica broke down, and the panic quickly infected the cities to the west. Once Benghazi had fallen, anarchy had quickly set Tripoli on fire and the exodus had begun in earnest.

It was a bad time of year to attempt a crossing from North Africa to Malta, Sicily and the heel of Italy, even had there been any welcoming committee awaiting any of the newcomers. Vicious squalls and storms chased across the two hundred and twenty miles of sea separating Malta from the Libyan coast and the men, women and children escaping from the chaos and bloodletting in North Africa were coming, in the main, in small fishing vessels, sometimes in boats no bigger than skiffs.

The Royal Navy and lately, ships of the US Sixth Fleet had begun to patrol a line twenty miles north of the Libyan coast; just far enough out to be invisible from the shore so as to discourage people from making for them.

Of those who reached Malta or the three westerly islands close to the Tunisian coast, refugees claiming Italian origin were now being ferried to ports in Sicily and Southern Italy. As to the rest, increasingly the majority of the bedraggled, desperate boat people being picked out of the sea – or having their leaky boats towed to safety – were native Libyans who had found

themselves on the wrong side of tribal or religious boundaries and had lost everything.

Thus far the transit camps on Malta and its island 'territories' to the west held nearly five thousand people, of whom over two-thirds were women and children under the age of fourteen years. All the indications were that unless something was done to stabilise the situation on the ground in Libya the drip, drip, drip of new arrivals was going to become a flood.

Worse, there were worrying signs that Red Dawn agents and several different flavours of religious fanatics were using the collapse of civil administration along the North African coast as cover to infiltrate the Maltese Archipelago. Denzil Williams hardly like to think about what was going to happen if the contagion in Libya spread to neighbouring Tunisia.

Tunisia had gained its independence from France six years before the Cuban Missiles disaster without the bloodbath of Algeria's long war; and been under the iron thumb of Habib Bourguiba ever since. Thus far Bourguiba's repressive one-party regime had kept the lid on the country but the fact it had sat back in late 1962 and early 1963, allowing Red Dawn to take over Lampedusa, Linosa and Pantelleria and not lifted a finger to help the Royal Navy re-take the islands augured – in Denzil Williams's book - badly for the future. One of the reasons so many people were drowning attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean in the middle of winter was that the Tunisians had closed their border with Libya, and were shooting anybody who tried to come ashore on their territory from the sea...

That is not my problem, he told himself.

His problem was weeding out the Krasnaya Zarya 'plants' among the refugees being landed, daily, on Malta; a job not made any easier by having to work with a Governor who did not actually think there was a 'problem'.

Chapter 15

Thursday 31st January 1965
Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations
2nd Avenue, New York

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson had followed the career of the extraordinary woman standing before him with immense interest for many years. He had met her once, albeit briefly, at a reception in New Delhi ten years ago, an encounter which had merely whetted his appetite to learn more about her. If people in England still struggled to get used to the idea of a female Prime Minister; in India the very notion would have been laughable when Indira Nehru was growing up, and yet now it really did not take a great leap of faith, intuition, or imagination, to suspect that he was in the presence of a future World leader.

What with one thing and another after the unmitigated shambles 'great men' had made of the conduct of human affairs in recent years, perhaps, it was high time for womankind to be properly represented in the highest global councils?

This was not a subject upon which he had always been such an enlightened, renaissance man. To the contrary, his wife Patricia had been the first woman he had met whom he regarded as his intellectual match. Up until then he had entertained what now, seemed rather antediluvian views on the female of the species. Moreover, until he worked with Margaret Thatcher he had not, in retrospect, had the first idea what it was like to work for a politician who not only talked about strong leadership, but actually practiced it.

Having been a member of a Cabinet in which three of, if not *the* three strongest characters – the Prime Minister, Alison Munro, the Secretary of State for Supply, Energy and Transportation, and Barbara Castle, the Education Secretary – were women, he no longer had any excuse to cling to the ridiculous prejudices drummed into him as a boy and as a young man.

"Welcome to our humble legation, Mrs Gandhi," the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary smiled, trying very hard not to gush like a schoolboy meeting a movie star.

Forty-seven-year-old Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi had first been elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1959, a post that traditionally swapped between members of the hierarchy of the Congress from year to year. However, the remarkable woman who had been her late father Jawaharklal Nehru's personal assistant and official hostess for most of the last seventeen years, had wisely, and steadfastly refused to allow her name to be put forward for the contest to replace him as Prime Minister, after his recent death.

She had known that although she was the heir apparent; that this was not her time. Instead she had stepped aside and allowed sixty-year-old Lal Bahadur Shastri, a veteran of the independence struggle, and a loyal follower of Mahatma Gandhi – to whom she was not in any way related – a former Indian Railways Minister and Home Secretary, to assume the mantle of Prime Minister as the dangerous tensions with neighbouring Pakistan reached boiling point over the 'Kashmir question'. Presently, war seemed inevitable; the only thing nobody could understand in Manhattan was why it had not broken out yet.

Now as she placidly took the measure of the British Foreign Secretary the coming conflict was never far from her thoughts. Nobody doubted that there would be war because it was the one ineluctable legacy of the Raj, the result of the arbitrary partition of British India which had drawn the infamous Radcliffe Line through the provinces of Bengal in the east and the Punjab in the west demarcating post-independence India and the new state of Pakistan on the basis of religion; respectively Hindu and Muslim. It had been the price of independence, a terrible down payment in blood and grief to buy a better future for the sub-continent.

Indira Gandhi shook the Englishman's hand.

Had she joined the contest to succeed her father she would have found herself caught between, and possibly, marginalised by Shastri and another hero of the independence movement, sixty-eight-year-old Morarji Desai, a man whose pacifism struck a deep chord in the Indian soul. She could fight one disciple of *Gandhiji* at a time but not two; and besides, she had time on her side and she understood that when the day came she would probably only get one chance to stake her claim.

When the day came...

Indira Nehru was an only child, her brother having died in infancy, in

Allahabad, in modern day Uttar Pradesh. Her girlhood was unhappy; her father was away for long periods on political business or locked up by the British, and her mother, a consumptive, was often ill and had sadly died in February 1936 in Lausanne, Switzerland at the young age of only thirty-six.

During her childhood her father had been a distant figure, a stranger other than for the letters they exchanged. She had been taught almost exclusively at home up until 1934, thereafter she attended the Modern School in Delhi, and St Cecilia's and St Mary's Christian convent schools in Allahabad, before being sent abroad to study at the International School of Geneva, the Ecole Nouvelle in Bex, and back in India the Pupils' Own School in Poona and Bombay. As her mother's illness worsened she moved to the Belur Math headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission where Swami Ranganathananda became her guardian. Although she had started studying at the Viswa Bharati University in Shantiniketan in Bengal; within a year she had had to join her dying mother in Europe. Thus, it was that she enrolled at Somerville College in 1937 to study history, albeit only passing the entrance at the second attempt due to her poor command of Latin.

At Oxford, she was plagued by illness and travelled repeatedly to Switzerland to convalesce on the advice of her doctors. Nevertheless, she was active in student life, and as befitted the daughter of a leading figure in the Indian independence movement she was a member of the Oxford Majlis Asian Society, an organisation set up in 1896 to debate and promote exactly that cause. It happened that she was in Switzerland when France fell to the Nazis and did not manage to get back to England – via Portugal – until the spring of 1941, subsequently returning to India without completing her degree.

All this Tom Harding-Grayson knew; the loneliness, the travels, the illness and the loss of her mother tragically young would have damaged another woman; not Indira Nehru, in her case it had slowly tempered, case-hardened her for the struggles to come. Moreover, it was in England that she had met her future husband Feroze Gandhi, who was a student at the London School of Economics. Fascinatingly, the couple had married in Allahabad according to the Adi Dharm rituals of the original organised *casteless movement*, even though Indira's husband, Feroze belonged to a Zorastrian Parsi family.

A high caste woman of the people who cared not for caste...

There was satin in Indira Gandhi's elegant sari, her hair was demurely contained, hidden although a close observer might have glimpsed the flecks of grey in the roots of her dark hair at her right brow. It was the eyes that gave away the lie that she was just a well to do Indian wife and mother, those eyes saw everything that was to be seen and uncannily, much of what was below the surface.

"I spoke to Secretary of State Lodge earlier today about the problems of mediating tensions in a World in which international forums have been superseded by naked nationalistic self-interest," Indira Gandhi explained as she and her small entourage settled in chairs with a view towards East 48th Street. "He said that was what the Manhattan Process was set up to address."

"Yes, it is strange how short people's memories can be, these days," Tom Harding-Grayson smiled. "We all thought the 'Manhattan Process' was set up because Sir Peter Christopher suggested it on the steps of the Philadelphia White House and President Johnson inadvertently agreed with him on national television."

The lady shrugged genteelly.

"President Johnson did what he had to do to avoid another war, Sir Thomas."

"Quite so. I meant what I said the other day about the crying need to re-invent the United Nations."

"Yes," Indira Gandhi nodded. "But not perhaps here in New York, or at least not permanently; India will never again be placed in the role of supplicant, Sir Thomas."

The Foreign Secretary raised an eyebrow.

"There is no equivalent of the old 'security council' in the proposed Commonwealth Mutual Assistance and Free Trade Agreement," he responded, testing to ascertain if he was pushing at an open door. "Likewise, there is no question of the United Kingdom having any kind of 'veto' voting right in its deliberations..."

"Yet you seek to re-invent the Commonwealth?"

"The World is not as it was, Mrs Gandhi," the man re-joined.

"Nor is Great Britain as it was," Indira Gandhi observed, settled in a comfortable chair next to Tom Harding-Grayson. "Talk of a 'Commonwealth Treaty' is premature, do you not think?"

"Because the British Labour Party has failed to endorse it, you mean?"

The woman nodded.

He thought about it.

“Elections are all well and good but the ‘facts on the ground’ remain the same. I choose to believe that whichever government emerges in March it will be confronted by the same geopolitical realities as the present Administration. A Labour Government would seek to unravel some things but not others. At the end of the day Britain sees itself as a great manufacturing and trading nation with intimate, enduring links to its former dominions. There is no clause in the draft Commonwealth Mutual Assistance and Free Trade Agreement which would in any way disadvantage the interests of the Indian sub-continent, to the contrary, its principles of democratic participation, free trade unfettered by tariff barriers and the free movement of citizens within the CMAFTA ‘zone’ would theoretically restore the many educational, technological exchange and trade opportunities lost in 1947 with the end of ‘Empire’ available again to the Indian people as truly equal partners.”

“Ah, the legacy of Empire, the Raj and all that evaporates in a puff of smoke?”

The Foreign Secretary smiled.

“Surely,” he replied, “our people have a right to expect us to magically pull a rabbit out of the hat from time to time?”

“Touché,” Indira Gandhi murmured. “I shall remember this conversation in the years to come. But first my country must fight a war against Pakistan. Sometimes,” she sighed resignedly, “bad blood must be cleansed by war. What, I wonder, will be the response of the former colonial power to a clash of arms between two of its ‘native children’?”

Tom Harding-Grayson had known the discussion would turn to ‘substantive matters’ sooner or later.

“We stand ready to assist the parties in finding a peaceful resolution to the present crisis.” He shrugged. “Is war inevitable?”

“I fear so, yes.”

Diplomacy, like politics is the art of the possible.

A war over Kashmir would drive Pakistan towards the camp of the surviving southern republics of the Soviet Union; and India possibly into isolation if what remained of the old Commonwealth allowed its adversary, Pakistan, to linger overlong in its ranks.

Everything had a price.

“It is no business of Her Majesty’s Government to interfere in the internal affairs of a signatory to the CMAFTA,” Tom Harding-Grayson said smoothly. “Although the draft wording of the proposed ‘Commonwealth Treaty’ does not, nor will it explicitly state it, implicit in the terms of the memorandum of understanding under-pinning it, is an assumption that in adversity any member may request support short of armed intervention of any other member, or from all the other members in combination. At this point the ‘Treaty’ exists in draft form only; therefore, any applicant is automatically accepted into the ‘club’ providing they subscribe to the general objects agreed by the rest of the ‘group’. If and when the ‘treaty’ is ratified by member legislatures, from that point new members will only be admitted by unanimous vote.”

Indira Gandhi asked the only question she could ask in the circumstances.

“Has Pakistan been invited to join the ‘club’?”

“Not at this time.”

“The racist policies of South Africa and Rhodesia offend decency,” the woman commented, moving the debate onto new fields.

“Her Majesty’s Government has no view on the internal affairs of its allies,” the man retorted mildly. “I imagine there will be forums within the ‘Treaty’ community where such bilateral matters might be discussed. That would be for the ‘community’ to decided, not HMG.”

“You don’t find Pretoria’s filthy Apartheid regime reprehensible, Sir Thomas?”

“No more so than I find the caste system or religious bigotry offensive, Mrs Gandhi,” the man said dryly. “We all live in glass houses. In the years to come we may, if we stop ourselves blowing each other up again, address the many things which set us apart like civilised people. For the moment we must survive, we must earn the right to be ‘righteous’ in the future.”

“The Indian Foreign Ministry has many questions about the ‘Commonwealth Treaty’,” Indira Gandhi announced quietly. “However, I have been authorised to initial it on behalf of my Government, so that my country may influence its re-drafting.”

The British Foreign Secretary momentarily felt light-headed.

This was the great coup of his career; a moment when the World actually

changed for the better.

Chapter 16

Wednesday 10th February 1965
Ferranti Research Establishment, Crewe Toll, Edinburgh

Ferranti had come to Edinburgh in 1943, opening the Crewe Toll Works to manufacture fuses and valves, gyroscopic gun sights for Spitfire fighters, and components for radar installations. After the war, in co-operation with Ferranti in Manchester, radar and avionics research had been concentrated in Edinburgh. The company, which had been the first producer of germanium semiconductors, and later silicon diodes in Europe in 1955, had previously manufactured the first 'British' computer – the Ferranti Mark 1 – of which nine were delivered to customers between 1951 and 1957. It was Ferranti engineers who had, in 1956, developed the Cluff-Foster-Idelson coding of characters on a paper tape for British Standard Institute certification while building the Pegasus, and subsequently the Atlas series of vacuum valve computers. However, although Ferranti had been at the cutting edge of both avionics and computing technology in the 1950s by the time of the October War, it was lagging behind its American competitors, all of whom were the beneficiaries of massive US Defense Department subsidies, the victim of the laissez fair – actually, complacent, penny-pinching – criminally short-sighted economic policies of the MacMillan Government in those last years before the fall.

Rear Admiral Simon Collingwood knew the sorry tale only too well. Ferranti had been in competition with Marconi, several universities and a resurgent European post-World War Two technical and scientific community which was, in many other countries, actively promoted and encouraged rather than resentfully tolerated by governments across the Channel significantly less padded out with scientific ignoramuses - classics men and well to do landowners - than the British Tory regimes of the post-1945 era.

That said, both Ferranti and Marconi – who had operated a state of the art research facility in Essex before the cataclysm - had still been at the top of their game in several discrete fields. For example, Ferranti was a world-leader in airborne radar, emergent digital technologies and Marconi – although diversified widely from its original core business – remained the

biggest player domestically and in many parts of the globe in advanced communications technologies.

In October 1962 Ferranti had employed several thousand people in Scotland, and its Edinburgh research laboratories were renowned world-wide. Everything, of course, had come to a grinding halt after the Cuban Missiles War and part of the Crewe Toll Works had been destroyed by a fire last spring. Many key scientists and technicians had literally gone missing in the last two years, and its skilled workforce had slowly withered away before, a little over a year ago, the Ministry of Defence had finally taken over the site and put a stop to the rot.

More recently, as of 1st February Crewe Toll had become a division of Project Nemesis, the Royal Navy's 'Nuclear Undersea Fleet Deterrent Programme'. Maddeningly, from Simon Collingwood's perspective, even after receiving representations from 'members in the House', the Secretary of State for Defence had unaccountably failed to include the nearby post-October War Marconi research station in the 'project estate' but then only a fool confidently expected to get everything he asked for especially from Ministers looking for a quiet life this close to a General Election.

'We're skating on very thin ice, Simon,' Lord Carington, the Minister for the Navy, had warned him, attempting to explain away his boss, William Whitelaw's decision. He had glossed over the fact that several Tory backbenchers had objected to the 'Marconi nationalisation' on grounds that the company's shareholders' interests had not been sufficiently taken into account. 'The election could change everything. If there is a new Government we might find the pacifists and disarmers in Parliament calling the tune. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament hasn't gone away!'

Oddly, the prospect of what looked – to most observers – like a fragmented Labour Party sweeping into Government, much as Clement Atlee's socialists had in 1945, raised neither Collingwood's hackles, nor anything remotely akin to the visceral panic he now discerned elsewhere in the Navy's higher echelons. He was a practical man. He would deal with whoever was Secretary of State for Defence the day after the election in March; he was a servant of the Crown and if the result of the election was acceptable to her Majesty the Queen, he would serve the new administration as loyally as he had the last.

This was what he had told Denis Healey, the beetle-browed forty-seven-

year-old Member of Parliament for Leeds East who was touted to be given either the Foreign or Defence portfolios in any future Labour Government. Given the tired, lack-lustre recent public appearances of James Callaghan, the Leader of his fractious party, many speculated that Healey, a rambunctious, energetic man now seemingly fully recovered from his encounters with ‘war plague’, was actually the heir apparent or ‘leader in waiting’ of his quarrelsome tribe.

Strictly speaking, Healey was still only a ‘special advisor’ to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson who had recently avowed that he had no intention of standing for Parliament, and that therefore he would be retiring from politics at the forthcoming election.

Simon Collingwood’s visitor had seemed genuinely enthused by everything he had seen at Crewe Toll, talking animatedly with senior scientists and lowly lab technicians alike. Now as he ushered the politician into the cloistered privacy of the works boardroom and the two men viewed each other over the rims of their tea cups, he took stock.

Collingwood had not been appointed to his present post because he was any kind of bluff old sea dog. No, he had come to the attention of his superiors, and the Prime Minister, because of what he had achieved in command of HMS Dreadnought – a command he had never expected, and for which he had considered many of his peers significantly more qualified to hold – in action, and because he was the man who had laid out a singular vision for the future of the Submarine Service. It was this latter vision which had caught the imagination of the then First Sea Lord, Margaret Thatcher, and presumably her senior ministers, and a year ago he had been given the job of designing, building and delivering a fleet of nuclear submarines – improved versions of the Dreadnought – to the Navy by the end of the decade.

Last month, he had been handed the additional mission of creating a second undersea fleet of submarines capable of carrying missiles which could strike any part of the Soviet Union from deep beneath the oceans of the World.

Presently, two hunter-killer boats, the Valiant and the Warspite were completing at Barrow-in-Furness, both scheduled to join the Fleet next year, and the keels of the first of five new hulls would be laid down at Rosyth in June or July. However, the ‘undersea fleet’ still only existed in his mind’s

eye; it would not exist otherwise for many years, and no element of the ‘deterrent fleet’ would exist even as a ‘trial’ blueprint for at least another eight months.

It was entirely conceivable that the man sitting in front of him could kill the whole project without so much as a by your leave in mid-March. This was why Collingwood had made enquiries about him; no submariner tackled his target without first having a look at it through his periscope.

“Why did you bring me here rather than to your little empire across the other side of the river, Admiral?” Denis Healey inquired, feigning mild vexation.

Collingwood raised an eyebrow, holding his peace a moment longer than he actually needed to, hesitating just long enough to consider again if his ‘inquiries’ into the man who might, quite easily, be the arbiter of what had become his life’s great project, told him what he *thought* he knew about him.

Born at Mottingham just within the boundaries of the county of Kent in 1917, Healey’s family had moved to Keighley in the West Riding of Yorkshire when he was five. After attending Bradford Grammar School, he had earned an exhibition – a bursary rather than a full scholarship – to Balliol College in 1936. Fascinatingly, in 1937 he had become a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Perhaps, more revealing, was the fact that it was at Oxford that he had met another grammar school boy, Edward Heath, whom he had succeeded as President of the Balliol College Junior Common Room. The two men had become close personal friends and allegedly, during Healey’s post-October War illnesses, notwithstanding the intolerable burden of his duties, *Ted* Heath had regularly written to Healey, repeating an open-ended invitation to him to join his government ‘as soon as your health and constitution permit’.

It seemed few who encountered Denis Healey ever made the mistake of underestimating his intellect, or his ambition. In the wilderness years following Labour’s defeat in 1951 he had been for many years one of the Party’s few rising stars and it was generally assumed in Parliamentary circles, that at some time during the decade of the nineteen-sixties it was inevitable he would challenge for the leadership.

The man’s military record was spotless. After resigning his membership of the CPGB in 1940, Healey had enlisted as a private soldier, a gunner in the Royal Artillery before being commissioned in the Royal Engineers, with

whom he saw wide and varied war service in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. In 1944 he was brigade landing officer for the British assault at Anzio. Declining a permanent commission at the rank of lieutenant colonel, Major Healey had demobbed in 1945 and plunged straight into political life. Ironically, it was his fervent espousal of left-wing views in his early career that had served to amplify his voice when it was raised in moderation, during the left-right schisms of the Party's long years out of power in the 1950s. Embedded in the fabric of Atlee's and then Gaitskell's leadership circle as a key foreign policy advisor, as Secretary of the International Department of the Labour Party, and a long-time councillor at the Royal Institute for International Affairs and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, he was - presumably just for the sake of variety - also a member of the Executive of the Fabian Society, and a main mover behind the Königswinter Conferences initiated in 1950 to promote European post-World War II reconciliation.

In other words, he was no ordinary party ideologue likely to allow dogma to determine his intellectual horizons. If he was also a little arrogant and tended to be overly dismissive of fools then that was a price worth paying. If one could convince a man like Denis Healey of the worth of one's case whatever happened in March, not all would be lost.

"Much of what goes on at the Rosyth Naval Base is classified, Mr Healey," Simon Collingwood said, without apology. "This side of the Firth my security people have not been in charge long enough to decide what is, and what should not be 'secret'. I am reliably informed that your Foreign and Commonwealth Office Security Accreditation does not include the necessary security clearance to permit you to see what is going on at the base."

Denis Healey's eyes narrowed below his bushy brows.

"In any event," Collingwood continued, "there is very little to see on the North Bank, a magnificent view of the uncompleted bridge works apart that is. Whereas, here at Crewe Toll, we have a facility which – under the provisional planning assumptions for the undersea fleet deterrent concept – will when the complex is expanded eventually employ over ten thousand skilled workers. Currently, there are less than three thousand on site and, or detached elsewhere. General Electric, Rolls-Royce, and of course, Marconi will all be setting up, or enlarging research and production establishments in and around Edinburgh. Obviously, the pace of the build-up of the necessary

industrial facilities will accelerate after the opening of the Forth Road Bridge and the associated motorway links with the rest of the United Kingdom. In the meantime, the scientific and research projects underpinning the undersea fleet enterprise will begin to meaningfully gear up later this year."

"Why should all the jobs be here in Scotland?" Healey inquired.

"They won't be, sir." Collingwood put down his tea cup. It clinked in its saucer. "Other centres of activity will be in Dumbartonshire, at Faslane on the Gare Loch, the yards of contractors on the Clyde, and at the Barrow-in-Furness yards will need to be upgraded, and facilities there will be reconfigured as it becomes Project Nemesis's principal support and training base. Current thinking is that hunter-killer boats will be built here in Rosyth, while the 'missile' boat construction programme will be concentrated at Barrow. In the South West, at Plymouth where at least one nuclear boat squadron will be permanently based by the latter years of this decade there will need to be a massive investment in the appropriate maintenance and logistical arrangements; new covered, secure dry dock and all-weather 'hardened' sheds, existing workers will need to be re-skilled and new workers brought in. Given that the existing diesel-electric fleet of submarines will be retained to the end of their useful life cycles, extra berths will have to be made available at Portsmouth. In its totality we are looking at a project that is equivalent in size to an undertaking such as the Manhattan Project, albeit over a twenty, rather than a two to three-year timescale."

"It will bankrupt us," Denis Healey retorted bluntly.

"If we don't do this we can forget about the 'Great' in Great Britain, sir. We'll also be turning our backs on a unique national technical and scientific project which will explore and develop cutting edge technologies in a score of fields all of which will have commercial applications we cannot even guess at now. Yes, it will be expensive but all the money will be spent in this country educating, training and employing *our* people. If we sit back and do nothing, allow our technological expertise and world-beating design skills to atrophy, the Americans will eventually own, licence and sell everything we buy in twenty years' time and we will be the poorer in more than just national wealth!"

"We've had to go cap in hand to the Yanks to keep the surface navy afloat!"

Collingwood shrugged.

"No, sir," he differed respectfully. "That's a choice we might yet make in order to free up shipyard space and resources for other projects. By the time we actually start building our own frigates and destroyers again we might have developed modern guided weapons 'suites' to put on them."

"What's wrong with the guided weapons we've already got?"

Collingwood grimaced.

"Seaslug Mark I is obsolete. It's too big, anyway, to safely operate on even a County class destroyer. The Seacat system is a short-range, sub-sonic, beam-riding, stop-gap, borderline useless lash-up, sir. The Navy would not have procured either system but for MOD parsimony and pressure from the manufacturers on pre-war ministers and civil servants who obviously did not have the interests of the Navy at heart."

This had piqued Denis Healey's interest.

"The Navy seems to have done all right so far?"

"Yes, sir. But at a ruinously high cost in ships and men. We have been fighting a war with missiles designed in the late forties and early fifties which were obsolete before they were introduced to service. What we need to do is invest in systems which will still be viable ten or fifteen years after they first go to sea with the fleet."

The politician was still interested; but not convinced.

"For example," Collingwood informed him. "There is a Sea Slug Mark II on the drawing boards. It is a supersonic beam-riding weapon capable of twice the intercept speed of the original model. It *might* actually be worth installing the Mark II on the big American cruisers we *might* be acquiring later this year. The long-term replacement for Sea Cat may be a system called Sea Dart, currently in the early stages of development by Hawker Siddeley; admittedly, it's pretty much at the drawing board stage but it would give our ships a ninety-five percent kill probability against incoming air attacks thirty miles out. One design that came across my desk only the last week, from the British Aircraft Corporation, is for a dual purpose short range – less than two or three miles, say – anti-aircraft and missile defence system; I think they call it 'Sea Wolf'. Another project that a consortium of manufacturers has canvassed me about is for a sea-skimming anti-ship missile with a fire and forget range of fifty miles. That incidentally, might result in a long-range cruise missile – something like a World War Two V1 - which could theoretically be launched from the torpedo tube of one of our

nuclear submarines..."

"How far could a weapon like that fly?" Healey demanded sceptically.

"Several hundred, possibly two or three thousand miles with a Polaris-type nuclear payload, sir," Collingwood told him, poker faced.

Healey pushed back his chair, rose to his feet and stepped across to the nearest window to gaze, deep in contemplation, across the sprawl of the still half-dormant Crewe Toll Works.

The Navy man got up and moved around the board room table to join him.

Healey turned to him.

"There were five thousand fatal casualties in my constituency, Leeds East, on the night of the war. On that Sunday morning after the war over half of all the buildings within its boundaries were uninhabitable and anybody who ventured outside to help the dying, the injured and the trapped, or to fight the numerous large fires was unknowingly, or perhaps, courageously knowingly, exposing themselves to the fallout cloud from the York and Humber Estuary strikes. My constituents want," he paused, "*need* new hospitals, housing, schools for their children." He shook his head. "And a guarantee of regular meals, of course."

"With respect, sir," Collingwood objected mildly, "the reason we're in our current *situation* is that we allowed ourselves to become so enfeebled that we found ourselves caught between the Americans and the Russians. Pragmatically, we should never allow that to happen again."

Healey sighed.

"The days of Empire are gone, Admiral."

"At the risk of being impertinent, sir," the Navy man observed dryly, "that is not the question. The question is whether or not we have the will to stand on our own two feet in the World. I take your point that much of the country is a mess but I would argue that it is precisely because we are in such a mess that effectively, we have a once in a century clean slate. Do we rebuild properly, embracing all the advantages of modern science, or do we muddle along having all the old political arguments about which particular ideology holds the moral high ground? What we've begun at Barrow, up here at the Gare Loch, across the river in Rosyth and around us, where we are standing now, is a great project that ought to be just one element of a huge ten, twenty, thirty year-long programme of national regeneration."

The other man grimaced.

“Have you ever considered a career in politics, Admiral?”

“No, sir!”

“The funny thing,” Denis Healey confessed, resignedly, “is that I don’t disagree with you. Well, other than in the margins of your thesis. The Devil is always in the detail. No... But if my Party is to form the next Government expensive defence projects will be very low down its priority list. It may even be that some face-saving accommodation will have to be made with the disarmers. It may even be necessary to renounce nuclear weapons to shore up Party unity.”

“To shore up Party unity! What about the defence of the realm, sir?”

“What indeed?”

“So, what happens the next time there is a crisis in the Persian Gulf, or an insurgency in Aden or Borneo gets out of hand? What happens if some tin pot dictatorship decides to follow the Argentine example in the South Atlantic and appropriate British Sovereign territory, sir?”

Healey shifted on his feet.

His old friend and mentor, Tom Harding-Grayson, had refused to stand as a Labour candidate despite his life-long affiliation to the Party because he was unwilling to make the ‘compromises’ required to be a member of what, almost certainly, was going to be a Labour Government with a large majority in the reformed House of Commons. Another sign of the times was that Tom Harding-Grayson understood that given the ‘tensions’ within the Party the knives would be out for him on day one; it was odd how pacifists and disarmers always seemed – as a breed - to be so preoccupied with getting their pound of flesh.

“If it happens East of Suez it will be somebody else’s problem, Admiral,” he observed, glumly. “The British Government is no longer the World’s policeman. Its focus must be on its own people and the security of its own shores. We no longer live in the World of the United Nations, NATO and the post-1945 reconstruction of Western Europe. Hopefully, it will be many years before we are again menaced by the threat of Soviet militarism. True, there might already be a new Cold War but Soviet territorial ambitions have probably been caged for a generation. The sooner we bring all our troops back home, get the Irish imbroglio under control, and relieve the country of the intolerable burden of maintaining our armed forces on a wartime footing,

the sooner we can start making the lives of *all* our people better."

Simon Collingwood respected the man's honesty; but not so much that he did not think he was an arrogant, self-serving fool.

When he said 'all our people' what he was really saying was that in the new socialist paradise his Party foresaw after the election that the modest protections – and yes, privileges – enjoyed by service personnel and their immediate dependents would be the first casualties of the new broom.

The former commanding officer of the Royal Navy's first operational nuclear submarine was not about to be intimidated so easily.

"A Government's first responsibility is to defend its people, sir."

"Yes," Denis Healey agreed, belatedly recognising that he had been unintentionally tactless, not to say a little crass in his previous comments. He sought to strike a more collegiate note. "I think my way is best. We shall have to agree to differ. I'm sure we will discuss this and other matters again, after the election."

The politician read the naval officer's tight-lipped civility.

He sympathised with Collingwood more than the other man could imagine but they were looking at the World, the future no less, from wholly different angles.

"I believe you have a young family, Admiral?" He asked, quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"You and I agree that we are at a crossroads of sorts, that what we do now will determine the futures, certainly the safety and the prosperity of generations to come."

Collingwood nodded, despite his infuriation he realised the other man was not his enemy, and that he was attempting to reach out to him.

"I'm no kind of unilateral disarmer," Denis Healey groaned, turning away from the window to meet the Navy man's eye. "My wife and three children survived the war. They are in Sussex presently, mercifully well, and as safe as anybody can be these days. I don't trust the Soviets, or frankly, the Americans. But there is a fundamental decision to be made. Do we want our sons to carry guns all their days? Do we really want our daughters to live in a World in which there is always a bomber above them?"

Simon Collingwood did not want this for Yannis, Yelda and Meryem; it was just that he could not see any alternative. He did not reply to the politician's questions; knowing them to have been largely rhetorical.

“In retrospect we lived for many years with a crow looking over the cradles of all our children, Admiral,” Healey concluded. “Little good did it do us.”

Simon Collingwood set his face.

“Forgive me, sir,” he pointed out. “One in three of we English died, but over twenty-five million of us still live. In the United Kingdom over thirty million of us survive. We survive. Against the odds we survive.”

Denis Healey mulled this unhurriedly.

“I think that probably goes to prove that we are both, in our own ways, right,” he declared, smiling wanly. “Thank you for inviting me to Edinburgh, Admiral. The Labour Party will always defend the United Kingdom. We might be the party of Michael Foot and his CND-minded friends but we are also the party of Bevin and Atlee, the men who ensured that Britain had a seat at the nuclear bomb table after the Americans did their level best to shut us out after the forty-five war. For what it is worth I still believe *we* are that party. I honestly don’t know which way the ‘deterrent debate’ will go in the Party after the election but nobody in the leadership seriously contemplates disarmament. Not any more, not in the World in which we find ourselves.”

Collingwood absorbed this.

He realised how close he had come to making a complete ass of himself; charging in like a bull in a china shop. He was paid to think the worst of his enemies and to plan for the worst; Denis Healey’s horizons were broader, less hemmed in by threats and fear, it was his job to imagine better, brighter futures.

“If the time comes, I shall look forward to continuing this conversation with you, sir.”

Chapter 17

Thursday 11th February 1965
Clermont-Ferrand, Puy-de-Dôme Department, France

The inscription read: *J'ai pris les armes pour la liberté de tous*. Above the inscription on the plinth stood a great statue of Vercingetorix, the legendary chieftain of the Arveni Tribe who had briefly united the Gauls during the Gallic Wars preceding Julius Caesar's rise to power in Rome.

"What does it mean?"

In asking the question Major General Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev tried very hard not to sound angry; which was something of a challenge given the Soviet party's humiliating experience since its arrival in France.

They had all known they were parachuting into a disaster area. That was a given; this was Red Dawn territory so a return to medieval mindsets and wanton incoherence was inevitable but *these* people gave insanity a bad name!

Find out what the fuck is going on.
Establish the tactical situation on the ground!
Identify friends!
Form alliances!
Recommend policy options!

In other words, it had been the normal Central Committee 'brief' for every routine, 'normal' overseas legation except there was nothing remotely routine or 'normal' about this trip.

The French had confiscated all their communications and cipher equipment in Marseilles. There had almost been a shooting match between Akhromeyev's KGB troopers and the locals when they had attempted to disarm his men.

Andropov had ordered him to stand his men down but he had refused point blank to allow his men to be disarmed; if he had not already had a pretty low opinion of his master, the 'great man' who had tried to hide in a bunker when the going got tough in Baghdad who had left most of the 'dirty work' in Istanbul to men like him, then Andropov's panicky decision to allow a bunch of unwashed, unmilitary brigands to walk off with the mission's only

means of communicating with the Motherland might have surprised Akhromeyev.

True, there were worse ‘commissars’ one could be working for; the man was not in any way viciously mendacious and most of the time he treated Akhromeyev like he was a human being, sometimes even with a modicum of respect. The trouble was that like all bullies he was always liable to cut and run when the going got tough.

Andropov had a lot to answer for!

Tellingly, he had not had the courage to look Akhromeyev in the eye and order him to surrender his weapons; and after a five minute stand off their hosts – as the soldier had half-expected - had backed down.

Akhromeyev and his boys had been ready to start shooting; Andropov had known it and now, and forever more, he would blame the soldier for his own inability to get a grip. The leader of the ‘French expedition’, a morose and moody man at the best of times, would have treated that short stand-off as his cue to start plotting *his* own extrication from the consequences of his latest failure, and would now be so preoccupied – within minutes of stepping onto French soil - blaming everybody else that the mission itself had become a secondary consideration.

Akhromeyev had seen the psychopathy of the ‘ruling elite’ at close hand once too often and could have no illusions as to how this was going to end.

What made it so intolerable was that if Yuri Andropov had not been so badly undermined by his time in Iraq – and rightly feared imminent liquidation, or worse, banishment to the Siberian gulags – he would never have accepted such a poisoned chalice as this mission and his boss, Alexander Shelepin, the new ‘Supreme Soviet’ would never have given it to him in the first place. In Andropov’s shoes Akhromeyev would not have prolonged the agony. What with one thing and another it would have been better, certainly cleaner and quicker, just to put one’s head in the noose and get it over and done with sooner rather than later.

As it was Sergey Akhromeyev found his fortunes tied to those of Yuri Andropov in this shithole of a country rapidly running out of options. The only thing he had going for him was that after a career in the Red Army a man got used to being crapped on from a great height. Just not usually this badly...

Notwithstanding the terse and badly translated pseudo-emollient words

and endless explanations – from the delegation's troop of minders - of why nothing ever happened very quickly in the territories controlled by the Front Internationale, or just the 'FI' - everybody's patience was wearing thin.

Cigarette paper thin!

First Deputy Director of the KGB Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov – who was at best no more than icily civil in the company of their French hosts - was fit to burst a blood vessel. Only the nominated 'Head of Mission' to the French, Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin, formerly the Soviet Union's Representative on the Security Council of the United Nations, remained stoically, infuriatingly unperturbed by the fact that they were being given the mother and father of all 'run arounds' by the inmates in charge of this particular asylum.

The Troika in Sverdlovsk wanted to know if any part of the pre-Cuban Missiles War French Navy survived, what was the strength and fighting capability of forces on the ground loyal to the ruling regime, specifics on the economic and agricultural 'potential' of Southern France, the regime's relations with the Spanish across its common Pyrenean border, and ludicrously, as it turned out, how loyal the Red Dawn Movement in France remained to the Soviet Union!

Thus far the one thing that the 'Andropov Mission' had established – incontrovertibly established, in fact - in the four chilly, physically and psychologically uncomfortable days they had been in the post-war capital of southern France was that the people at the helm of the *Front Internationale* were certifiable lunatics.

The Russians scowled at the statue of Vercingetorix, the most 'noble' of all the 'savages' ever to be carried through Rome in a Triumph, before being strangled in his cell as was the custom of the Romans in those days.

"*I took up arms for the liberty of all*," said the hard-faced middle-aged woman in the grey-green dungarees of the party faithful. Her dark hair was cropped short like a man's. Unlike so many of the men and women the Russians had seen scurrying past, eyes down, on the streets of Clermont-Ferrand, their interpreter had that well-fed, 'Party' look they had grown accustomed to from their first day in France.

Given half-a-chance 'the people' would turn on these bastards and tear them to shreds...

Akhromeyev had gone to Baghdad last year anticipating working with

counter-revolutionary and Spetsnaz forces troops to restore order in central Iraq. Nothing had come of that in the chaos of the defeat in the south. Supposedly, Andropov had wanted him along for this 'mission' to do much the same thing when, that was, he was not acting as his personal military expert. However, one did not need to be any kind of military genius to know that the Provisional Government of the country through which they had travelled in the last few days, was struggling to hold down the territory it had won the previous autumn. Having encountered unexpected 'communes' and possibly, well-organised 'armed groups' all across the north and to the east, the majority of whom were clearly intent on settling the few remaining undamaged lands within the ramshackle *governorate* established by the Front Internationale it was probably already be too late to prop up Krasnaya Zarya in France.

Nominally, the Front Internationale with its capital in Clermont-Ferrand, ruled Southern France; assuming that was, one was naive enough to believe that anybody could 'rule' a country that was so obviously falling apart all around one.

The titular Leader of the FI was supposedly, still sixty-eight-year-old Jacques Duclos, a veteran resistance fighter and Communist who had been Moscow's man in France for thirty years. Unfortunately, Duclos had never been a Red Dawn apparatchik and reports indicated that the real power in the Auvergne was in the hands of Maxim Machenaud, a man of such violent political – and other proclivities – that at the time of the October War he had been under house arrest at a 'KGB facility' at Yegoryevsk, a town over a hundred kilometres south east of Moscow.

Even Machenaud's Krasnaya Zarya handlers had regarded the man as being criminally insane; nevertheless, he had been flown back to France in mid-1963, joined Duclos's 'southern enclave' and become the Troika's man in Clermont-Ferrand.

Nobody had forewarned – or considered it important to pass on Valerian Zorin's cautionary observations about the 'situation on the ground' – to Yuri Andropov ahead of his arrival in Marseilles. To 'prepare the ground' for the trip the 'Machenaud faction' had been starved of support by the Red Air Force, largely because back in Russia it had been determined that it could not trust 'the madman' not to use the weapons it gave him 'against 'us'.

Maxim Machenaud was not a loose cannon, he was a rabid dog who

believed that the Troika – having ruthlessly suppressed Red Dawn in the east – had him in its sights!

Problematically, the first thing the Russians had learned when they got to the city was that while Jacques Duclos and his supporters held much of the countryside through which they had travelled, that Machenaud's supporters held Clermont-Ferrand.

It spoke volumes for the incompetence of Duclos's 'troops' that they had allowed their last best hope of re-asserting their command over the Auvergne – the Andropov Mission – to fall into the hands of their rivals.

Sergey Akhromeyev had heard that the English had an expression for screw ups like this: 'It never rains but it pours...'

Down in the south along the Mediterranean coast, where it was patently obvious that the local FI leadership paid only lip-service to the diktats of the Central Committee in Clermont-Ferrand, where there were no daily executions and there was no policy of political re-education, people were getting on with rebuilding small sections of the bombed cities. They were re-opening the smaller ports and harbours, there were signs that the agricultural cycle was being reinstituted and that inshore at least; fishing boats defiantly plied their trade in defiance of the British submarine blockade all along the coastal waters of the Gulf of Lions. In Marseilles the provincial Party leaders had been horrified by the actions of those 'idiots in Corsica' last summer which had left what was left of the French Navy bottled up in Villefranche-sur-Mer. There were no dockyard facilities in the bay of that pre-war resort but the locals were terrified of the presence of the warships attracting the attention of the RAF; or inviting the Royal Navy to bombard any of the slowly recovering major ports. Starting a war with the British had been literally, the last thing anybody wanted or needed last summer. Not least because it had, briefly, allowed *la Marine de la Révolution* – the Navy of the Revolution – to enforce a harsh martial law regime in Toulon, Marseilles and set up 'extreme' FI regimes in several other towns in the region under the banner of so-called 'Special War Measures Security Ordinances'.

It had taken several tortuous days to drive north over neglected, potholed roads from Marseilles via Avignon, Valence and Lyons to the Auvergne and the stronghold of the Front Internationale.

The old medieval city of Clermont-Ferrand lay on the plain of the Limagne in the Central Massif, its ancient heart surrounded by the

industrialisation of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. A chain of great dormant volcanoes, the Chaîne des Puys circled the city. Before the war the Auvergne had been one of the natural marvels of *La Belle France*, now it was a dreary, grey, hungry, frightened place.

Members of the delegation remarked on how few children they saw on the streets, or anywhere, in fact. Akhromeyev had rationalised this; either most of the kids had died, or their parents had sent them away into the countryside to escape the death cult of the FI regimes in the towns and cities. One or other of those two clauses was the most likely explanation for the apparent lack of children, or even young teenagers; and neither boded well for anything in particular. Common sense ought to dictate that whatever one's ideology the one thing every right-thinking person could, and should agree on, was that if the World was to be put back together again the human race needed to start procreating like there was no tomorrow. Without children there was no future. However, he had seen little or no indication that there was any meaningful 'right-thinking' going on in this corner of Western Europe.

The Place de Jaude, the city's famous medieval square was deserted, the cafes and shops around it shuttered and neglected. Any form of private enterprise was a crime against the state punishable by summary execution; and each day miscreants – profiteers, hoarders, ideological criminals, deserters, and other unfortunates deemed to be enemies of the revolution - were forced to kneel on the cold stone cobbles and to bow their heads while 'Revolutionary Guards', of both sexes and all dressed in the same ill-fitting dungarees as those worn by their guide, walked down the lines putting bullets in the back of the necks of the unfortunates.

One bullet, two bullets, three bullets...

Or how ever many it took before the body on the bloody cobbles stopped twitching...

The executions always took place on the northern side of the Place de Jaude; and nobody ever washed away the blood of the dead. Consequently, even on a cold winter day in the Auvergne the corrupt, iron stench of the slaughterhouse lingered in the still air.

The Soviet 'mission' had been invited to observe the 'punishment actions' of the last two mornings.

Even Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov had been disgusted by what he had

witnessed and he was a man who had consigned hundreds, more likely, thousands of his countrymen and women to the gulags and to the penal battalions, who had signed the death warrants of scores of *real* 'enemies of the state' without a qualm and signed off on an orgy of killing in Turkey in the weeks before boarding the aircraft for France; but even he recognised that terror for terror's sake was futile.

Even the dark prince of the post Iraq debacle coup d'état, Alexander Shelepin, understood that. Terror was a thing best exploited in cold blood. Like revenge it lost its sting, its purpose, its efficacy if it became too general, too indiscriminate. Here in the Auvergne the terror was random and the population was obviously so cowed, so petrified that everything had long since inexorably ground to a halt. Nobody outside the inner circle of the regime ever dared to take a decision, in inactivity, in anonymity there was a false safety. To be 'noticed', to stand out in any way from one's fellows could too easily be a death sentence.

A cough at his shoulder made Akhromeyev half-turn.

Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin's mask of perfect indifference had cracked momentarily.

"Do you not find it odd, Comrade Natasha," he queried tartly of their guide, guard and observer, "that a representative of the Front Internationale should go out of her way to bring foreign *friends* to visit the site of a statue sculpted by the notorious counter-revolutionary Frédéric Bartholdi, the man responsible for the Statue of Liberty in New York?"

The woman's face clouded with alarm.

"We didn't come here to look at fucking statues!" Yuri Andropov grunted, fixing the French woman with a well-practiced, unblinking stare. "Please escort us back to our 'hotel' and inform your superiors that I wish to communicate directly with the Collective Leadership in the Soviet Union. We have wasted far too much time here already. If you don't want our 'fraternal' help we will depart this *fetid* place."

Comrade Natasha's alarm had morphed into near panic.

The woman was trembling with fear.

"I cannot do that, Comrade...."

"Yes, you can," the second-in-command of the KGB growled. "Just remind your masters what happened to Bucharest!"

Chapter 18

Thursday 11th February 1965
Royal Naval Hospital, Bighi, Malta

The Flagship of the Mediterranean Fleet, the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle, lay anchored beneath the cliffs in the aquamarine blue waters of the Grand Harbour as high, spindrift clouds scudded across an otherwise perfectly azure sky.

Twenty-seven-year-old Squadron Leader Guy French leaned on the wall gazing at the great grey slab-sided carrier anchored across the entrance to Kalkara Creek several hundred yards to his left, lost in his thoughts.

He ought to have bought it that night in October over two years ago when he had flown his Avro Vulcan bomber to Eastern Europe and killed God alone knew how many people. The mission had been to 'suppress medium-range mobile ballistic missile batteries', which might otherwise have laid waste the entire United Kingdom; however, the fact of the matter was that his aircraft had dropped two city-killer size thermo-nuclear bombs close to places where he knew a lot of people – tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people - *had* lived...

That night was in his dreams, nightmares really, and probably always would be: jinking the kite this way and that to dodge the plumes of countless nuclear strikes across a landscape being consumed by huge firestorms, cities and forests burning while constant EMPs – Electro-Magnetic Pulses - trashed every piece of 'hardened' radio, radar, guidance and bomb aiming kit on his Avro Vulcan.

Dropping ten-ton Grand Slams and six-ton Tallboys on bridges in Iraq, and on that top secret Soviet command bunker complex outside Chelyabinsk had been a breeze in comparison to the night of the October War, a quiet trip all round over country that was eerily electronically dead, dark and silent. That had been weird; flying so far into Soviet airspace and discovering how much of the ground eight miles below was...*wasteland*.

As for his part in the Second Battle of the Persian Gulf; it was one thing for people to tell him he was a hero but actually, when all was said and done, he had lived and all his friends had died and there was no getting around the

shame of it.

That whole episode was a blur, some kind of surreal fever dream that never stopped looping around inside his head. He had ordered the ground crews to disconnect his ejector seat trigger and to disarm the seat's explosive charge; subsequent inquiries had ascertained that those orders had been carried out. He had seen the maintenance chits confirming it with his own eyes. Nevertheless, the only thing which explained his, against all the odds, survival, was that the seat had somehow 'fired', ejecting him in what passed for a 'controlled manner' from his aircraft. If he had simply been 'blown' out of the aircraft he would have been killed instantly, so whatever had happened he had still been in his 'seat' and protected by it when he and the bomber parted company. He recollected watching the deck of the USS Kitty Hawk growing larger and larger, filling the splintered windscreen of his Handley Page Victor B.2 *The Angry Widow*...and then nothing until he recovered consciousness in the crowded sick bay of the USS Dewey a day-and-a-half later.

He had lived and all the others had died; like his fiancée Greta, with her parents in their picturesque cottage in a village just outside York on the night of the October War. Greta had been a sensible girl, in time she would have got him to buck up his ideas. They would have been happy together, she a perfect Air Force wife and he a faithful, doting husband and father. But it was not to be.

Even though he knew she was dead, gone forever he had never really accepted the idea let alone the finality of it. In a funny way she had been with him through everything he had gone through. She had been – in some indefinable sense – with him when he was lying immobile, in pain, despairing in that cot onboard the Dewey last July; and with him as he slowly, hurtfully healed in body, if not in mind from his injuries.

When they had pinned the Victoria Cross on his chest he had closed his eyes and dedicated it to Greta, and to the ghosts of all the friends he had lost...

It was only when the USS Dewey had steamed slowly into the Grand Harbour for emergency repairs to her port shaft that his internal world had suddenly seemed to have come full circle.

And then his and Heidi's paths had crossed.

She had understood that he felt that there were debts to be repaid, of

honour, and for the kindnesses he had been shown by men, and women, who had every reason to hate him and the politics of it all had suddenly been irrelevant. In retrospect he now realised he would have made a complete fool of himself and sparked a new 'diplomatic incident' attempting to visit the Dewey unannounced; but fortunately, Heidi had saved him from that indignity.

He stared down at the buoys at which the modern, elegant, guided missile frigate had been moored this time yesterday afternoon. As evening fell she had slipped her lines and cruised out to sea, her radars turning slowly, a thin plume of grey smoke trailing from her raked aft stack and with her crew dressing her rails.

The Dewey's Wardroom had welcomed him with genuine warmth. There had been no talk of the battles in the Persian Gulf; it was as if remembrance of those dreadful events was still too personal, too immediate.

'Remember, you promised to show me the sights?' Heidi had called across the water as the Dewey's launch had carried him back to the shore in the night.

They had gone everywhere on groaning, smoking, asthmatically coughing buses – many of wartime or earlier vintage – that comprised what passed for the Maltese 'transport system'; she in her Navy whites, he in his RAF 'weeds' like two peas from the same pod, except he was half-a-foot taller and she seraphically exotic and funny, two things which he had never been.

They had walked the streets of Valletta for an afternoon, ventured down 'Strait Street' that evening so that she could say that she had 'been there', taken the ferry across Marsamxett Anchorage to Sliema, and visited the three old fortified cities: Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa-Birgu opposite Valletta and still ruined (from the 1945 war) Floriana. One day they had walked around the twin cities of Mdina-Rabat, situated on the highest point of the whole Archipelago, stood on the ramparts and viewed the island around them as if they were in a low flying aircraft. Another day they went south to the fishing villages of Marsaxlokk and Marsaskala and ambled around the ancient Neolithic ruins at Tarxien. Their last excursion had been a return to Mdina where Heidi had spent an afternoon at the St Catherine's Hospital for Women, paying unashamed homage to her girlhood hero, the Hospital's first Director, the legendary Margo Seiffert. On the rocks overlooking St Paul's

Bay they had watched the salvage teams working to dismantle the scorched hulk of the wreck of HMS Yarmouth, and then two nights ago they had dined with Guy's father at his official residence, the Verdala Palace.

To make things less 'intimidating', Guy's father had mandated 'no uniforms' to his other guests. It was the first time Guy had seen Heidi 'out of uniform' as 'just another all-American girl''

'Do I curtsey, or anything,' she had laughed, 'when I meet your Pa?'

'No, no,' he had replied hurriedly. 'I think he would die of embarrassment if you did...'

That was the night she had kissed him.

Properly, that was.

He had been entirely correct until that moment. They both had. They had held hands, especially during the show they had taken in at the Majestic Theatre in Sliema one evening when it had been too wet and windy outside to walk along the front. However, that apart, he had kept his hands to himself, his reserve sorely tried. He had had no illusions. She had seemed in no rush to go beyond being 'friends', 'good company', and sooner rather than later she was going to sail away and that, as they say, would be that. In the meantime, he had enjoyed absolutely every second of every minute of every hour he had spent with her.

He had told her about Greta on their third 'date'.

Heidi had asked him if he had lost anybody on the 'night of the war' and he had talked about the life Greta and he had planned – and but for the war would have been living together for most of the last two years - until a lump rose in his throat. He had not trusted himself to speak for several minutes and Heidi had understood, pressing him no farther.

When she had kissed him, his gentlemanly pretensions had evaporated. They had not come up for air for...*minutes*.

'You can put me down now,' she had gasped, giggling.

He had inadvertently embraced her so enthusiastically that her feet had hardly touched the ground whilst they were in their clinch.

Heidi had touched his moustache with the forefinger of her right hand.

'That tickles...'

'Sorry.'

"That's Ok, I could get used to it...'

Now the Dewey was gone and it was as if Heidi was some perverse

metaphor for the life he had lived these last two years. It was as if he had been trapped in a past that was lost, waiting for something that was never going to happen, a passenger on the tides of history until something had utterly unexpectedly fractured and reformed the pattern of his life.

His rehabilitation on Malta was coming to an end.

The Dewey had been patched up so she could make the long passage to her home port of Norfolk, Virginia.

Now the ship was gone, her moorings empty; and back in England an instructor's job awaited the returning hero.

What would be would be...

Thus, Guy French found himself staring down into the tranquil blue waters of the Grand Harbour oblivious to the approaching footsteps. Sometime in the last fortnight the darkness had lifted off his shoulders, it was as if the millstone he had carried ever since the night of the October War now lay at the bottom of Kalkara Creek.

He was free...

Heidi was always going to sail away as soon as the Dewey was ready for sea again. Thence the destroyer was bound for Naples to briefly join up with the main part of the Sixth Fleet, before steering for a refuelling stop at Gibraltar ahead of an Atlantic passage back to the United States.

Heidi had been away from home – Pasadena, California – for over a year and *needed* to visit her parents, to re-connect with her siblings and with two new nieces born since she had last been 'stateside'. She had six weeks overseas service leave owed to her and she intended to jump on the first flight to California when she got back to the East Coast. Thereafter, she was looking forward to a short-term posting to the San Francisco School of Medicine, a training assignment during which she would work several days a month with the local Veterans Administration, ahead of a two to three-year tour of duty with Seventh Fleet, probably based in either Hawaii or Kobe, Japan.

She had talked excitedly about the prospects.

For her the World was not a half-wrecked place; for her it was full of possibilities. The past was the past, even the disasters of the war in the Persian Gulf which had consumed so many of her comrades was, in the bigger picture, just a blip.

'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?'

Guy had not known how to react to this.

'Look at you,' she had chided him playfully, her dark eyes twinkling mischief, 'you're living proof!'

Heidi Takawa did not have the blood of thousands of men, women and children on her hands...

He stared out across the Grand Harbour to the ramparts of Valletta, his eye tracing the dimming silhouette of the King George V breakwater curving away from the tip of the peninsula. When the mole had been constructed in the early years of the century it had been linked to the headland below Fort St Elmo, whose 3.7-inch guns still jutted from its battlements, but in July 1941 during an attack on the Grand Harbour by the Italians employing human torpedoes, torpedo boats and fast launches stuffed with explosives, the bridge from the island to the breakwater had been destroyed and never been replaced. Its surviving rusting steel pillars stood like broken teeth between the land and the sea wall; a handy short cut for small boats seeking to avoid the long, rougher transit all the way out to sea and back into the Grand Harbour via its broad deep-water entrance. Those Italians had been brave men, running the gauntlet of the guns of Fort St Elmo blasting away at them over open sights at point blank range.

Before 100 Squadron had mounted the raid on that suspected command bunker complex at Chelyabinsk last June its Victors had flown long-range practice missions to Malta from its base in Cyprus. The results of our simulated bomb runs on the King George V breakwater had been used to establish who would have the honour of carrying the biggest bombs on the subsequent 'show'. His crew had come top of the table – albeit by a whisker – ahead of the CO's kite; in the end the 'old man' had pulled rank and carted a Grand Slam to the Urals...

Guy caught himself smiling in the gathering gloom.

The CO's kite had gone missing that night. Pity, he was a good sort...

"Would it be Squadron Leader French?"

The man was so deep in his reverie that he jolted upright with alarm.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to creep up on you," the woman apologised. She was middle-aged, wiry, dressed in the distinctive blue uniform of a Nursing Sister on the staff of Royal Naval Hospital Bighi. Her voice was very Home Counties, matronly in its authority and without any suggestion of hectoring, maternal. She was holding an envelope in her extended right hand. "Heidi

asked if I would see that you got this."

Guy French stared at the woman, then the envelope.

"I was going to post it to you but then I saw you," the woman explained sympathetically. "Oh, dear," she murmured, pursing her lips. "Service *partings* are such miserable things, aren't they?"

The man had taken the slim, Manila envelope without knowing it, and the woman had joined him at the parapet on the cliff top above the bay.

"I was in Malta in 1942," the woman said. "I was friendly with several boys. Nothing came of it, of course. It wasn't meant to be. Heidi struck me as a very sensible girl, Squadron Leader." She shrugged. "But even so I suspect that leaving Malta was very hard for her."

Guy opened his mouth to speak; no words came.

The woman patted his arm.

"Chin up," she whispered and was gone.

The man stared again at the unopened letter.

It was addressed to: *Squadron Leader G.W. French, BFPO MA 010, LUQA, MALTA.*

Heidi's handwriting was neat, organised, and confident like the woman herself.

They had not actually said goodbye.

Two nights ago, they had stood at this place as the sun went down trying to be adults, wearing their bravest faces. In the end she had cried and run back to her quarters and like an idiot, he had watched her retreating back and said and done...*nothing*.

Right now, he could not bear to open *her* letter.

Presently, the spell broken he stuffed it in an inside pocket, and with a sigh trudged towards the bus stop behind the hospital.

Chapter 19

Saturday 13th February 1965
The Guildhall, Portsmouth, England

Nothing he had seen or heard in his travels around the country in the last few weeks had altered fifty-two-year-old James Callaghan, MP, the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party's view that the result of the election in less than a month's time was in any sense, in doubt. Not a man to count his chickens ahead of time; the mood of the country seemed grimly settled. People were tired of living under the umbrella, and the bureaucracy, of the provisions of the War Emergency Act. Everybody just wanted to get back to some kind of normality. Moreover, when the subject of culpability for the cataclysm of October 1962 two names of John F. Kennedy and Harold MacMillan were the top of the list. While the voters could not directly express their opinion of JFK in the ballot box on Thursday 11th March they could, and almost certain would, certainly register their protest retrospectively against 'Supermac' and his Conservative Government by voting Labour.

Callaghan had little time for the jeremiads who pored over the canvassing returns, or agonised over every nuance of every syllable uttered by those they encountered on the doorstep or in the street, and constantly reminded him – wholly unnecessarily - and other candidates that this was not like 'any other election in history' and that therefore 'it would be wrong to make too many assumptions on the basis of information coming in from the hustings'.

That was all stuff and nonsense!

People had very short memories. Less than twenty years ago Winston Churchill had just won the bloody war against Hitler but Clem Atlee had led the Labour Party to its greatest electoral triumph in July 1945, and that was while the war in the Pacific was still going on! The electors were not stupid; they had understood that Neville Chamberlain and the Tories had got the country into a war it was not prepared for in 1939; and just as surely, they had to know that Supermac and his public school cronies had let down the British people again – even more disastrously, if that was possible - twenty-

three years later. As summer follows spring the electorate would deal out the same punishment to the Conservative party this time around; and to the best of his knowledge there was absolutely no evidence of *any* significant narrowing of the gap between the Labour and the Conservative Parties in any of the five polls conducted by the Gallup organisation between the beginning of the year and now.

The polls told the Parties what they already knew: crudely stated at least three Tory voters had been killed in the October war to every two Labour or Liberal Party supporters. This, and the associated demographic distortions in the age distribution in the general population attributable to the war, in effect guaranteed a swing of at least one hundred and as many as one hundred and fifty seats to the Labour Party across England, Scotland and Wales. The only place where the 'Unionist' part of the Conservative vote was likely to 'hold its own' was in Northern Ireland. Presently, the Labour Party was heading towards a landslide on a scale which might conceivably dwarf that of 1945.

And yet...he would not have been human if there was not a tiny canker of unease in his soul; if life had taught Jim Callaghan *anything* it was to never take *anything* for granted.

Getting off the train at the nearby Portsmouth and Southsea station earlier that afternoon he had been in an odd mood. He could not put his finger on why; it was simply a feeling of mild dissonance that would not go away. Now as he prepared himself to speak to his massed supporters he told himself that his mal-de-mer was quite natural. He was coming home, a son of Portsmouth made good in the World returning to deliver a speech to *his* people.

Callaghan had been born at No. 38 Funtington Road, Copnor, about a mile-and-a-half from where he now stood in the wings of the Guildhall, listening to the man who – although never elected MP, had been in effect his 'Parliamentary Chief of Staff' for the last year – 'warming up the hall'.

Thirty-nine-year-old Peter Shore, another 'son of the sea' like his chief had been a member of the Cambridge Apostles at King's College, and unsuccessfully stood for Parliament before becoming a full-time worker for the Party. A man with a natural stage presence and a gift for oratory, once he finally got into the House he would be the match for anybody in the Commons. Had he not dabbled briefly with CND in the late fifties his career might have taken off long before the October War; as it was, having

abandoned ‘all that disarmament nonsense’ he was shaping up to be a future leader of the centre-left of the movement.

There was laughter and applause in the hall.

Another five minutes and it would be Callaghan’s turn; by then Peter Shore would have the audience of the faithful in the palm of his hand.

The Leader of the Labour Party, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Wales had deliberately taken a step away from the local welcoming committee that had clung to his coat-tails for the last hour, readying himself to deliver his hour-long speech. It was more or less the same peroration he had voiced on every one of his recent rallies; albeit continually honed and improved by Peter Shore’s pen. Had the Labour Party been that well organised – it was not - Shore would by now have been acknowledged as its leader’s ‘campaign manager’. Peter had been vocal about the ‘sloppiness’ and the ‘complacency’ of the National Executive Committee – NEC - of the Party and its inability to co-ordinate campaigning activities other than locally in regions where the Party was already strong.

Callaghan guffawed privately.

He would not put it past Peter to employ the notes he constantly took to write a book about all the things they were doing wrong, and which would have to be put right for the *next* election; which hopefully would not be for another four or five years. The country needed stability and if all went well a decisive electoral result would be a good step in the right direction.

Callaghan’s father had been a Chief Petty Officer in the Royal Navy, and he and his elder sister Dorothy – who had survived the war and now lived in nearby Fareham – had attended Portsmouth Northern Secondary School. In 1929 he had gained his Senior Oxford Certificate but financial realities meant he could not afford to go to university. In lieu of Oxford he had sat the Civil Service Exam and at the age of seventeen, gone to work for the Inland Revenue, where he had been instrumental in forming the Association of Officers of Taxes as a trade union, sitting on its original executive committee. He had joined the Labour Party while working in Maidstone in 1931, and after a move to work in London in 1936 became the full-time Assistant Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Association at the still young age of only twenty-five. It had been this post which had first brought Callaghan into contact with Harold Laski, the well-known London School of Economics academic and at the time, Chairman of the NEC of the Labour

Party. It was Laski who had encouraged him to stand for Parliament but before anything came of it Hitler's War had upset the applecart.

Opting for the Royal Navy Volunteer reserve had seemed the *only* thing to do in 1939. However, whilst serving in the East Indies Fleet Lieutenant Jim Callaghan had been diagnosed with tuberculosis; sent home to recover at Haslar, the nearby naval hospital in Gosport he had subsequently been posted to the Admiralty and assigned to the Japanese section where he wrote a manual entitled 'The Enemy Japan' for the Navy.

Very little in his life had given him more pride than following in his father's footsteps serving in the Royal Navy. Nor had any period of his life been less beset with strife and 'complications'; often he yearned for those days when one's enemies had faces and one knew exactly what one was fighting for...

At the end of the war in Europe he had been on the battleship HMS Queen Elizabeth in the Indian Ocean, half-a-world away from South Wales where, while on leave in England, he had been selected to fight the Cardiff South seat in the first post-war General Election. In that strange, exhilarating summer of 1945 many were the servicemen candidates who like Callaghan, suddenly found themselves called back from the farthest corners of the globe to contest the first battles of the nascent peace.

Cardiff South had been held, relatively safely, by the Conservatives before the Second World War and Callaghan was up against an incumbent, Sir Arthur Evans who had represented the constituency – notwithstanding a brief interregnum between 1929 and 1931, for over twenty years. Campaigning on a platform of building houses for returning heroes and the swift demobilisation of the Armed Forces, Callaghan had ridden the Atlee landslide all the way to Westminster, winning a six thousand majority.

In those days he had been on the left of the Party and in retrospect, a little anti-American. The Yanks were the Johnny-come-lately boys who had arrived just in time to sweep up the victors' laurels while tired, grey, exhausted, bomb-damaged Britain was paying the price for having stood alone against the Axis for eighteen desperate months after the Fall of France.

Just after the war he had had the temerity to vote *against* relying on US largesse to prop up the bankrupt British economy! However, he had set aside his scruples in time to be appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Transport where his first contributions to the betterment of mankind had

been the promotion of cat's eyes in the road and the introduction of 'zebra crossings' to make life safer for pedestrians crossing Britain's roads. In those halcyon days road safety had actually seemed important...

Briefly, everything had seemed possible; before Atlee's Government began to implode in the wake of Indian Independence, the Palestine debacle, the faltering steps towards colonial retrenchment, the ruinously costly nationalisations of coal mines, railways and the steel industry, the creation of the National Health Service, and humiliatingly having to go cap in hand to the Americans to bail out the economy with all the excruciatingly painful ideological compromises this involved. Callaghan had ridden the rollercoaster; and the son of a Royal Navy Chief Petty Officer had risen to be Financial Secretary to the Admiralty, and in 1950, served as a delegate to the Council of Europe...

Of course, those heady days had soon come to an end.

In the 1950s the Party had been in the wilderness, mute witnesses to the Tories blundering attempt to pretend that the United Kingdom was going through some new and glorious 'Elizabethan Age'. The Suez scandal ought to have put an end to that; in the event MacMillan had ousted Anthony Eden and the people were assured that they had 'never had it so good'. The big lies were always the best, was that not one of Herr Goebel's' mantras?

During the long years in opposition – where in the wilderness the Party had done its best to tear itself to shreds – he had prospered. His avuncular, lugubrious good humour and 'soundness under pressure', allied to a knack of avoiding alienating all bar the most leftist of his colleagues had seen him elected year after year to the Shadow Cabinet, despite his position within the Party shifting gradually to the right. By the time of the Cuban Missiles disaster he was shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, and effectively fourth in the Party's pecking order behind its Leader, Hugh Gaitskell, Deputy Leader George Brown, and the ever-scheming Harold Wilson.

Callaghan's present deputy, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins honestly believed he was above practically everybody else in the Leadership stakes but actually, half the party had always regarded him as a Tory in disguise.

Hugh Gaitskell, Harold Wilson and George Brown had disappeared on the night of the October War, passing the baton to Callaghan and many times in the last two years he had wondered if he was worthy of the honour.

Very few things in political life were as they seemed. People imagined

Denis Healey was champing at the bit, snapping at his heels; but that was to misunderstand his friend. Denis had a mind like a vice; but none of the patience and cunning needed to hold the Labour Party together either in Government or in opposition. No, the future belonged to the next generation, to somebody like Peter Shore or one of the tranche of new Labour MPs who would surely flood into the House of Commons on the 11th of March.

James Callaghan had few illusions; he might only be fifty-two years old yet he was already an old man in this brave new World and the future needed men, and women, with youth, vitality and most importantly, optimism. He was the caretaker of the Party's immediate destiny, worn out, or was it sickened by the things he had had to be a part of to ensure that his country and his people survived? Before the cataclysm he would never have foreseen that he would have played such a pivotal part in the two Governments which had, in effect, saved the nation from the fate now afflicting, and destroying in detail, France and the Low Countries. Here in Britain those Governments – the UKIEA, the UAUK and the present administration - had held the country together, enforced its writ, made sure that the Queen's justice ruled the whole land and preserved the spirit of the greatness that was Great Britain for the next generation.

That dreadful day over two years ago when he had been summoned to Cheltenham by Edward Heath to attempt – what had then seemed an impossible task – to patch together an emergency administration in the aftermath of a disaster of unimaginably catastrophic proportions, he had believed they were living in the last days of...*everything*. For all they knew the war was still going on, that the next salvo of missiles could fall on their heads at any second.

He sighed, weary beyond measure.

The Guildhall in which he was about to address the faithful had been a landmark that was part of the backdrop of his youth. Already twenty-two years old when he was born it had been the Portsmouth Town Hall when he was a boy, a grand neo-classical monument to civic pride in the heart of the city that was the home of the Royal Navy. A few hundred yards away Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar was high and dry in her dock, her masts and rigging tall above the modern naval base.

Portsmouth had been repeatedly and heavily bombed in 1940 and 1941. The old Town Hall had been gutted by firebombs on the night of Friday 10th

January 1941, courtesy of Herman Goering and his Luftwaffe, and although it had eventually been rebuilt in the 1950s at a cost of some one-and-a-half million pounds from the City's war compensation fund, its post-war incarnation was completely different to the original. A great concert hall with numerous meeting rooms as opposed to the grand municipal offices of a historic port.

He forced himself to concentrate on the matter in hand.

The past was the past, dead and gone.

The election was about all their tomorrows.

Forget the Party infighting; focus on the big picture.

Callaghan braced himself, stood straight, put back his shoulders and took a series of deep, calming breaths.

"Ladies and gentlemen, comrades and friends," Peter Shore concluded, his voice booming and echoing back stage, "it is my pleasure and my honour to ask the Honourable Mr James Callaghan, MP, the Leader of the Party, and since the cataclysm of the October War Deputy Prime Minister of our islands, and," he paused, milking the moment, "THE NEXT LABOUR PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM!"

Chapter 20

Saturday 13th February 1965
The Manor House, Bisham Abbey, Berkshire

Fifty-eight-year-old Sir Richard ‘Dick’ Goldsmith White, since April last year the Director General of the British Intelligence Services – that is, both MI5 and MI6 – was, finally, beginning to feel and show his age. A tall, lean man who exuded unforced charm and was always dressed immaculately, there was, Rachel Piotrowska sensed, a slight stiffness, a stoop to his shoulders that was new. It was as if the intolerable pressure he must have been under since the October War might finally have started to catch up with that most perfect of all English spies.

Not that the United Kingdom’s premier spymaster had lost any of the effortless élan or winning joie de vivre of former times, for such things were written in his stars. Whatever the circumstances, no matter how dark the situation Dick White still had that indefinable ‘David Niven’ quality that nobody had ever quite managed to quantify, and that if anybody ever managed to bottle, would be a world-beater.

Rachel had actually met the movie star – Niven - several times; although never professionally and been a little disappointed when he had neglected to make a pass at her although like her Chief, Mr Niven had been a little bit past his prime by then. Still, a brief affair would have been...*interesting*.

The spymaster had greeted her in the reception hall of the old house with a wan smile and a pecking kiss, before ushering her with immense solicitude into his lair.

Rachel knew that she was under intense scrutiny, being assessed on several levels and also that today’s interview was not just ‘business’ to the all-powerful DG. While Dick White would not have got where he was if he was in any way a sentimental man he was no uncaring ogre; and besides, he and she had history of the sort that tied them together for all eternity.

The first time she had come across Ian Fleming’s books about an MI6 agent with a licence to kill she had been horrified; her Chief had laughed it off.

‘Everybody will know it’s just a bit of fun,’ he had assured her. ‘Too

ridiculous to possibly have any basis in fact...'

Nobody in British Intelligence had a 'licence to kill' but then, of course, she had never officially worked for either MI5 or MI6. Her posting to the Philadelphia Embassy had been the first time her name – or any of her 'legends' – had appeared on a British Government payroll. In fact, the man who guided her to a chair in his oak-panelled room had specifically revoked her 'licence' before sending her to the United States.

As things had turned out that 'revocation' had proved somewhat premature but then life – in her experience - was beset with unexpected twists and turns.

"Well, what do you think of the Service's little country retreat?" Dick White asked wryly as soon as his long-time spinster secretary had brought in a tea tray and with an uncomfortable smile, departed giving Rachel a discreet, but very wide berth.

Rachel would have been offended by the other woman's discomfiture in *her* presence had she not, years ago, got used to exactly that sort of reaction from *some* of the people 'in the know' about *her*. That 'in the know' circle was very small. Most of the people who worked for Dick White honestly believed that they were the 'good guys'; and the few among them who knew, or suspected, her real role within the sprawling Intelligence – spying – empire not unnaturally sometimes struggled to reconcile her existence with any notion of being the 'good guys'. That was okay; Joan of Arc had had her vocation and she had hers. Moreover, she had never, not for a minute, assumed that she was the only one of her kind within the apparatus of the British state. Rachel had avoided making eye contact with Dick White's secretary because, in the parlance of their American 'friends', it would probably have 'freaked out' the poor woman.

Rachel considered her boss's question as she sipped her tea.

The old Manor House in the middle of the village of hastily thrown up pre-fabricated shacks and Nissen huts in the muddy fields between it and the wintery woods obscuring the view of the River Thames, had reminded her of some of the camps in Germany after the forty-five war. Although, hereabouts there was no barbed wire perimeter, no ostentatiously patrolling armed guards, and no dogs; or if there were she had not seen them.

Dick White wanted to talk awhile before he decided what to do with her. He would have read the psychological evaluations, pored over everything that

had happened in Philadelphia; her reports before and after the Wister Park atrocity, the contacts she had investigated, established, discounted and developed, and inevitably, asked if her usefulness to the Service still justified her retention.

This latter was a problematic thing: how exactly did one retire an operative who had had a licence to kill for most of the last twenty years?

It was a dilemma complicated by the fact that officially, she did not exist and no British Government was ever going to own up to having issued any of its agents a 'licence to kill' in peacetime. Lawyers might convincingly argue that there had been no 'peace' since 1939; that the Cold War preceding the cataclysm of October 1962 had merely been war by other means; still, the conundrum remained, what rational organisation simply allowed its assassins to quietly fade away?

"I'd rather," Rachel half-smiled, "be having this conversation here than in one of the Service's homes for *incurables* in the Scottish Highlands, Dick," she said frankly.

"Now, now," the man guffawed softly, "you know I'd never do a thing like that to you, Rachel."

"No?"

Dick White shook his head.

"No. Never. You ought to know by now that if *we* go down, we go down together."

Fine words, no more.

Nevertheless, Rachel accepted them without comment.

The master of British Intelligence sat back in his chair and viewed her thoughtfully.

"Bisham Abbey," he prefaced, "takes its name from a 'Priory' which once stood on this site. It is the resting place of a host of quite famous people, actually."

Rachel nodded with polite interest.

Her Chief was feeling his way into this *encounter* with unusual caution. His circumlocution told her that as yet, he had come to no decision as to what to do with her. She had no idea if this was good or bad news, which was not a problem because she was beyond caring.

"This house," Dick White gestured to their surroundings, "was originally constructed sometime around 1260 as a so-called 'community house' for the

Knights Templar. After those chaps were purged in 1307 the King, Edward II, if my memory of such things is to be trusted, claimed manorial rights over the place and soon after that used it to lock up Elizabeth, Queen of Scots, Robert the Bruce's wife. That would have been around the year 1310. Obviously, as always happens in England, sooner or later the Crown runs out of money and places like this are the first to be sold. That was how the estate came into the hands of the Montacute family – better known to posterity as the Earls of Salisbury. The First Earl is buried, along with numerous of his successors hereabouts. Over the years the family changed and extended the old thirteenth century house..."

The spymaster put down his cup and saucer and clasped his hands in his lap, forcing himself to be still, unmoving as he watched Rachel, trying to read her silence.

"Yes, it's a fascinating place," he continued. "The actual Abbey was built for the Augustinians and not dissolved until 1537 by good old Henry VIII. The Benedictines attempted to revive it but Thomas Cromwell wasn't having any of that. He settled their hash in 1538. Dreadful business. John Cordey, the last abbot was reputed to have complained: '*As God is my witness, this property shall ne'er be inherited by two direct successors, for its sons will be hounded by misfortune*', as Cromwell's men dragged him, presumably kicking and cursing out of the door."

Rachel shook her head.

"The more things change the more they remain the same."

"Quite," the man concurred. "Henry VIII gave the house to Anne of Cleeves as part of her divorce settlement. Elizabeth I was supposedly a regular visitor her in the sixteenth century..."

"Who else is buried here?" Rachel asked abruptly.

Dick White took this in his stride.

"Richard Neville, 16th Earl of Warwick, the man all schoolboys in England know as 'Warwick the Kingmaker'. In the Middle Ages the Abbey allegedly held relics pertaining to St Osmos and St Damian, but that may just be fanciful..."

Rachel's patience was wearing thin.

"Look, why don't you just tell me what you and Airey have been cooking up, Dick?" She inquired with a sigh.

The spymaster appeared not to have heard her question.

“If I was ‘blown’ after Malta last year,” Rachel went on, “I’m doubly ‘blown’ now. So ever since the ‘Wister Park thing’ Airey’s been doing whatever he thinks he has to do to build a great big wall between me, you and all our dirty little secrets and the Prime Minister. Tell me I’m wrong?”

The Right Honourable Airey Middleton Sheffield Neave, MC, the sitting Member of Parliament for Abingdon who was Minister for National Security and therefore Dick White’s political chief was the man who stood, four-square behind Margaret Thatcher’s back. Anybody planning to stab his friend and protégé was going to have to get past him first, and, as importantly, knew that if they were plotting and intriguing against ‘the lady’, that Airey Neave was the one man in England they did not want to find out about it.

Rachel had known the former Army Officer, barrister and incorrigible one-time MI9 – the arm of the British Directorate of Military Intelligence responsible for supporting resistance organisations in wartime Europe between 1939 and 1945 - ‘spook’ almost as long as she had known Dick White. She suspected she knew Airey Neave better than the spymaster.

In one way he was an easier man to know, a man forever in the public eye; the first British officer to successfully escape from Colditz, the man who had read the indictments of the top Nazis at the Nuremburg Tribunals before diving headlong into post-war politics. In the United Kingdom it was almost impossible for a senior Cabinet Minister to pretend, after the event, that he or she had had no knowledge of a real or imagined Intelligence Service coup or fiasco; and people like Airey Neave were indispensable ‘back channels’ to the top of government, infallible ‘conduits’ through which the life blood of the secret state flowed uninterrupted.

Of course, there were occasions when mixed messages were both sent, and received; but invariably the problem was not with the Intelligence Services but with politicians misreading or reading something entirely erroneous into otherwise blameless reports. Or for example, a Prime Minister suffering a bout of temporary insanity such as that manifested in the person of Anthony Eden during the Suez Crisis of 1956, when he mistakenly got the impression that Nasser was Adolf Hitler reborn and began plotting with the French and the Israelis to ‘steal’ back the Suez Canal...

“Airey wasn’t happy I sent you to Philadelphia last year,” Dick White confessed. “In fact, he and I had words about the, er, whole Red Dawn

‘affair’.”

Rachel frowned.

Politicians hated it when they finally had to admit that they ought to have been listening to their spies all along. The Government had been in denial about the mountain of evidence accumulating to substantiate the global threat posed by Krasnaya Zarya throughout 1963 and early 1964, preferring to view it as a localised East European and Balkan ‘movement’ spawned by the post-cataclysm chaos and the downfall of the old Soviet system.

Dick White had been warning his principals from late 1963 onwards that the Soviet Union still existed and that Krasnaya Zarya – Red Dawn was its first ‘insurgent’ response, long planned in advance - to a nuclear war. Rachel suspected that there were still a lot of people in the government who had had never forgiven the spymaster for being right about Red Dawn; and there were a lot of people still occupying very senior posts who lived in fear of it becoming known that they had carried on sleepwalking right up until the first paratroopers started dropping on Malta and two thousand Red Army tanks crashed into Iran and Iraq last April.

Not even the fact that two hopelessly out-gunned Royal Navy warships – Peter Christopher’s HMS Talavera, and the frigate HMS Yarmouth – had scuppered the Soviet’s plans to seize the most strategically significant archipelago in the Mediterranean, and three months later General Michael Carver’s outnumbered Commonwealth and Arab legions had somehow enveloped and destroyed elements of two Soviet mechanised armies in the deserts of southern Iraq and Iran, could disguise the underlying reality that the Government had got practically everything wrong about the Soviet Union’s post-October War will and capacity to wage war.

In retrospect, Dick White had known the way the wind was blowing a year before the battle of Malta but *nobody* in either Edward Heath’s Interim Emergency Administration of the United Kingdom, or in the early days of the first incarnation of Margaret Thatcher’s Unity Administration of the UK, had believed him until it was very nearly too late.

Rachel doubted that Airey Neave had shared any of this with the Prime Minister. What was done was done; what mattered was that *her* hands were clean.

“I think that’s quite sweet,” she remarked.

Dick White inclined his handsome head, askance written in his grey eyes.

Rachel smiled.

"The way Airey would sell us all down the river to protect *her*."

The man refused to rise to the bait.

She had not expected him to say a word.

Not one single word.

"True love is like that," she added, "or so I've been told."

The spymaster relented: "We live to serve."

"Ah," Rachel breathed, understanding at last. "Is this about the election?"

"Yes and no."

Now it was the woman's turn to play the silent, waiting game.

"The Service is politically neutral," Dick White observed, a little more sardonically than he intended, "but the national interest trumps all other considerations and clearly I, as the professional head of our department, have a responsibility to ensure that potentially compromising disclosures do not 'leak' or 'permeate' into the public domain during the General Election campaign."

Rachel would have inquired whom exactly it was who needed to be 'silenced'; refrained for a moment, because to have actually asked the question would have been unforgivably crass. He and she were, after all, civilised people.

The man was reading her mind.

"No, no, it is nothing like that," he stated quickly. "Well, not yet. Airey and I feel a different, subtler approach to the, er, problem, may be more appropriate in the first instance."

Rachel raised an eyebrow.

"In any event, an unfortunate situation has arisen on Malta," Dick White informed her, having reached the point at which secrecy was redundant. "I told Airey that I would sound you out about it, and," he grimaced apologetically, "get back to him in due course."

"Malta?"

"Yes. I know the place must have painful memories, for you. I'd completely understand if you wanted to pass on this one..."

"I thought Denzil Williams was still Head of Station in Valletta?"

"He is. Good man, for all his..."

"Limitations?"

Dick White chuckled under his breath.

“Lack of imagination,” he corrected her.

“He’d rather have me shot on sight than work with me again?”

“Hopefully, Denzil’s reservations about,” Dick White hesitated, “*things* will have moderated somewhat with the passage of time. Malta? What do you think?”

Rachel mulled this unhurriedly.

“I think,” she decided, after some seconds of increasingly strained quietness elapsed, “that you should tell me more about *our* little problem out there, Dick.”

Chapter 21

Saturday 13th February 1965
Hertford College, Oxford

Frank Waters had still not fully grown back into his best ‘bib and tucker’ after his time in the Persian Gulf. His wounds had healed long before he got home but he had gone down with a dose of dysentery – with complications, according to the medicos - and had had to spend a month in quarantine on Malta. After the shooting stopped a lot of chaps had gone down with symptoms consistent with what some ‘experts’ speculated might be the result of exposure to ‘residual trace elements of battlefield biological and chemical toxins’. In other words, the enemy had not just employed nuclear weapons to create a temporary ‘cordon sanitaire’ between its beaten and demoralised forces in Southern Iraq and the victorious Allies; but there were fears that the bastards may have also used nerve agents among all the other filthy, underhand tactics they had employed in the Gulf.

Notwithstanding, the former SAS troubadour turned BBC war correspondent was feeling like a new man these days. Coming back to England had been a huge tonic, not least because being thousands of miles away from a certain lady had become increasingly onerous, not to say dispiriting, the longer his exile lasted.

He had taken the liberty of penning a couple of stilted missives to her, once before he left Dammam – the staging post for all transfers into and out of the theatre – and another during his enforced sojourn on Malta in response to her short, positively terse, ‘notes’ inquiring after his general welfare. Otherwise, there had been no communications and basically, for the first time in his life – in matters of the heart - he had been in a lather of indecision as to what to do next. For all he knew the lady was too busy to think about him, or even to remember his name and the evidence that she *might possibly* carry any kind of flame for him was entirely of the kind that no judge in the land would allow to be submitted in his court room.

In fact, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility, highly likely in fact, that in his fat-headed way he had completely got the wrong end of the stick...

His dream-like encounter with the lady at Brize Norton; and the whole

‘interview’ had further deepened his confusion.

‘Your meeting with President Nixon went well, Ma’am?’ He had inquired solicitously. He had prepared, mentally, a list of questions to put to the Prime Minister. Problematically, after that first bland interrogative his mind had gone blank, completely scrambled.

‘President Nixon and I had a most useful and wide-ranging discussion, Colonel. I am confident that he is a man with whom we can do business in future.’

Frank Waters recollected opening his mouth to parrot his next question.

‘I think a mistake we have made in the past in our dealings with US Administrations,’ *she* had continued imperiously, ‘is to mix up sentiment with what is in the vital interests of our two great countries. We have been too worried about some notional ‘special relationship’ and insufficiently attentive to the actual state of our ‘relations’. It is clear to me that while the United States regarded itself as the World’s policeman in the years following the 1945 war, it is no longer prepared to perform that role in areas it no longer considers to be important to its own national security, or in its economic interests; in war-damaged Western Europe, for example. This being the case we must pick up the burden and the assistance President Nixon is prepared to offer in this respect – the warships currently mothballed in US ports, and limited aid in respect of foodstuff, medicines and other facilities necessary to improve the day to day life of our people, in exchange for the involvement of American companies in our national reconstruction programme – and recognise what is and is not consistent with clearly stated US policy objectives.’

At that juncture *she* had paused for breath.

He had not dared to say a word; *she* was too magnificent and anything he had said would have been utterly superfluous.

‘So, in answer to your question, Colonel Waters,’ she had concluded, dazzling him with a smile, ‘my meeting with President Nixon went as well as could be expected in the circumstances. For the first time since the Cuban Missiles War *we*, *I* know, exactly where the United Kingdom stands with the United States.’

He could not have been more pole-axed – not by anything she had said, simply by being so close to her – if one of her ever-watchful AWPs had clubbed him with a pistol butt.

‘Where the vital interests of Britain and the United States coincide, there will be co-operation; where they do not we will agree to differ. Hopefully,’ she had sniffed, barely containing her scorn, ‘we will in future, avoid the tragic misunderstandings which have so dogged our transatlantic relations since October 1962.’

And then her entourage had swept her away into the night.

Like paradise lost...

Tonight’s invitation had come out of the blue.

An official-looking envelope from Hertford College: inside a hand-written note.

Would you be free to dine in my private rooms at Hertford College at seven o’clock on Monday?

Airey and Diana Neave greeted the old soldier in the low-beamed former Don’s study the Prime Minister had requisitioned the previous year.

“Margaret has been delayed. A call from Ambassador Brenckmann,” the Secretary of State for National Security explained, pressing a glass of Sherry into his friend’s hands.

Frank Waters had liked Walter Brenckmann on his only acquaintance with the man, he was that most Anglophile of Yanks. The Ambassador and his wife were popular figures in Oxford, well respected despite the antics of their principals back in Philadelphia and counted as personal friends by the Prime Minister and many of her senior ministers.

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“Very serious, actually,” Diana Neave teased the former SAS man. “Margaret is to be a godmother to Peter and Marija Christopher’s baby daughter. The baptism is not until April, after the election thank goodness, but it will be held in Philadelphia and Walter is very kindly *finessing* the arrangements which will have to be made *if* by then Margaret is no longer Prime Minister.”

Frank Waters could not for the life of him comprehend why anybody was going to the trouble of making *those* sorts of arrangements.

“That’s not very likely, surely?” He blurted.

Airey Neave smiled wanly, and with a knowing shake of the head met his wife’s eye.

“Because of where the bombing fell on the night of the October War twice as many Conservative constituencies as labour constituencies were

wiped off the electoral map, Frank," he explained patiently. "Our best guess is that *we*, the Conservative and Unionist Party, lost three votes for every one or two labour votes. Moreover, whereas previously *we* could have depended on the support of the Ulster Unionists in the next Parliament, this time – on account of direct rule and the state of virtual civil war in that sad province – there will be no bolstering block of Northern Ireland MPs in the new House of Commons."

"Oh," the other man said, slowly absorbing the dreadful import of what he had just heard. "Oh, dear..."

"Don't you read the papers at all, Frank?" Diana Neave scolded him gently.

"Not if I can help it," he retorted. "I used to follow the *Racing Times*, obviously. And the *Telegraph* during the cricket season, but well, these days, it's all doom and gloom so I steer well clear."

"You're hopeless, Frank," the woman commiserated fondly.

Frank Waters fixed his sights on her husband.

"Things don't look good then?"

Airey Neave shook his head.

"How can you be so calm about this?" The bemused ex SAS man demanded. "What do the Chiefs of Staff think about this? They must be appalled, surely?"

"Michael Carver has personally assured the leaders of *all* the major political parties, and the leaders of significant groupings within those parties, that the Armed Forces will respect the outcome of the forthcoming election. *To the letter*, Frank."

"Oh." Frank Waters felt like he had been kicked in the stomach by a mule. If the Army was going to sit on its hands, that was that! "So, it's hopeless?"

He stared morosely into his Sherry glass...

"I'm dreadfully sorry to keep you all waiting!"

Margaret Thatcher swept into the room.

In an instant, like those Biblical money lenders of yore despoiling the Temple, Frank Waters's gloomy premonitions were cast asunder.

It was just the four of them around the table.

Two couples seated opposite each other.

Over soup – a very palatable potato and leek concoction – served by a

Royal Marine steward wearing a Browning pistol on his hip, Airey Neave filled a brief silence, well aware of and heartily amused by his old friend's discomfiture.

"I was in the middle of explaining the ineluctable logic of the electoral situation to Frank when you came in, Margaret."

"Oh, that," she murmured between sips of her soup, as if it was just a trifling thing of little or no concern.

"Forgive me," Frank Waters ventured, "but you all seem so," he shrugged helplessly, "very calm about it?"

The others viewed him sympathetically.

"Look," he went on, "I know those bloody Bolsheviks chucked out dear old Winston Churchill after he won the war in 1945 but dash it all!"

He knew he should shut up.

And for once in his life he actually took his own advice.

The Prime Minister put down her spoon, toyed momentarily with a piece of hard brown bread. As always, she was impeccably coiffured, tonight wearing a dark blue dress of the type so popular with Conservative women in the late 1950s, all folds and pleats, covering practically every inch of flesh from neck to calf except a tantalising glimpse of what might have been cleavage. At her neck was a pearl necklace. Beneath the single overhead lamp which lit the table her hair, auburn was almost blond.

She took pity on her guest.

"If the price of 'politics as normal' is the knowledge that one's own fate lies in the hands of others," she consoled him, "in this case the electorate, that is a price worth paying, Colonel. That is, after all, what we have been fighting for ever since October 1962."

Frank Waters nodded disconsolately.

"When we were at war in the Gulf, and elsewhere," Margaret Thatcher explained, 'matters such as the legitimacy of our Government and its reconstructed institutions were, to a degree, academic. Now, as we confront the much more complicated problems of the 'peace', no administration without a mandate from the people has the right to speak for 'the people'."

The old soldier remembered why he had never really taken much interest in politics. It was all too damned complicated!

"For example," the lady elaborated. "Whereas in the Gulf the decision was to kill or be killed; here at home that is not an approach which would be

supportable, morally or legally, in resolving or containing the conflict in Northern Ireland, or wholly appropriate in our efforts to regain control of the bombed areas."

The recent fighting in London had begun to percolate towards the front pages of the newspapers now appearing with ever greater frequency on news-stands around Oxford. Frank Waters's colleagues at the BBC had tried to send reporters and cameramen into the devastated capital and been turned back by the Army.

Having 'tapped up' a few of his old chums it seemed as if a search and destroy operation in the Hammersmith and Fulham area had been largely successful, but that it was anticipated that an ambitious attempt to create a corridor to the docks north to south down the approximate line Woodford-Stratford-Poplar might meet with 'heavier' resistance. Paratroopers had had to be dropped into a Government enclave around Westminster and the Navy had sent big ships, including two destroyers as far up the Thames as Tower Bridge to provide 'mobile fire support' ahead of the 'next' battle.

It all sounded a little grim to the old soldier.

Surveys of the Thames Estuary had identified several new wrecks, fortuitously none of which was judged an intractable hazard to navigation so the priority was to get the London docks on the north bank 'working' as soon as possible and to open up the roads connecting them to the rest of the country. Once that was done the United Kingdom could truly contemplate getting 'back into business'. Longer term there were plans afoot to massively expand the facilities at Felixstowe but presently, the road and rail infrastructure linking that potential gateway simply did not exist. Hence the crying need to get the London docks 'working'.

He found his voice, girded his courage.

"What will you do if things turn out badly, Prime Minister?"

"That's the thing, isn't it," *she* smiled. "We live in a World in which the 'worst' has already happened. So, whatever happens next month I, like everybody else, will get on with my life. I believe that in the Army young officers are taught to deal with what is in front of them, and then, if they are still on their feet, to move forward. That is what I shall do!"

Chapter 22

Saturday 13th February 1965
RCA Building, Rockefeller Center, Midtown Manhattan, New York City

Legend had it that on a clear day from his eerie high in the eight hundred and fifty feet tall seventy-storey centrepiece of the Rockefeller Centre, fifty-six-year-old Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller could see over thirty-five miles in every direction. The great Art Deco skyscraper completed two years after the one hundred and two-storey Empire State Building, was the tallest building of a complex of nineteen structures erected on a twenty-two-acre site between 48th and 51st Streets by the father of the man who was now the Governor of New York State, and since 20th January the 38th Vice-President of the United States of America. At the time of its completion, and to this day, the Rockefeller Center remained the largest private construction project in history.

However, today the view was obscured by low cloud and mist as rain squalls scudded across the indistinct, gloomy cityscape beneath them, and it was impossible to see any farther than the nearest skyscrapers. Not that either man had found time in their diaries for this ‘unscheduled’ meeting so that they could take in the scenery.

Rockefeller and Kissinger had known each other for many years. They were an odd couple: Rockefeller the billionaire grandson of the founder of Standard Oil was a handsome, telegenic man to whom lavish philanthropy and a love of the arts was probably as important to him as anything he honestly believed he might achieve in politics, but who nevertheless felt that it was his duty to pursue high office; Kissinger, at five feet nine inches tall much the shorter, stockier figure, was a German-Jewish refugee from the Nazis with a sombre, unflappable public face who now found himself at the nexus of the ongoing slow motion car crash that some commentators still, mistakenly called ‘US Foreign Policy’.

Neither man was really very much like the ‘persona’ most people saw. Both men had recently been involved in divorces, separating from their first wives but whereas Rockefeller’s ‘affairs’ were in the public eye, few knew that beneath Kissinger’s mask of solemnity their lurked, not just a formidable

intellect but the soul of a true socialite, and party-goer. He was a man who loved women. That was it, plain and simple. No woman who had ever met him, face to face, failed to note the charm, the sparkle in his eye. His 1949 marriage to Ann Fleischer, a fellow German émigré, had been on the rocks for years.

Privately, both Rockefeller and Kissinger found the prudery and veiled misogyny of their new boss in the White House odd, even though each in their own way had been impressed by Richard Nixon's easy grasp of detail, patience and intimate knowledge of the workings of the Office of the President.

This was hardly surprising given that he had been Ike's man in the wings for eight years between 1953 and 1961. In fact, they had both believed Nixon was well-qualified, probably better qualified than Harry Truman and a raft of other incumbents in the White House, to be President from day one. He had certainly walked into the office 'on the run'; wasting no time beginning the arduous process of implementing the 'lead projects' of his programme for Government.

Nelson Rockefeller gazed thoughtfully into the mist shrouding the otherwise awesome views across the East River to Astoria, Jackson Heights and the length of Long Island.

Lyndon Johnson had never got around to appointing a Vice President; it was as if he had known after that melodrama on the steps of the Philadelphia White House in July when those two kids – the British Ambassador and his Maltese wife had stolen the show in front of a nationwide TV audience – that he was not going to be around long enough to make it worth his while forcing 'his' candidate through the House.

LBJ's man would have been Senator Richard Brevit Russell, his long-time mentor, friend and ally in the Senate, whom he had included on the Presidential ticket in November. As it was between the beginning of July and the recent inauguration had anything happened to Johnson, fall back constitutional arrangements would have kicked in, elevating veteran Boston-born Democrat, the 45th Speaker of the House, seventy-three-year-old John William McCormack to the Presidency.

That had suited LBJ just fine; enabling him to keep Russell close to him as his personal political confidante and fixer in the Senate. Richard Nixon, consummately opportunistic had cavilled against the 'Vice President's empty

chair' while wholly understanding and concurring with the good 'political' sense of his rival's thinking.

Most Presidents throughout history had regarded their Vice Presidents as encumbrances, surplus to requirements, a glorified 'bag carrier' at state events and little more. Harry Truman had had no idea that there was even such a thing as nuclear fission, let alone that the people at Los Alamos were getting ready to test the World's first atomic bomb at what was then the USAAF Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range, renamed the 'White Sands Missile Range' just after the end of the war in Europe.

How many people could name Franklin Roosevelt's other two Vice Presidents? There was 32nd Vice President Texan John N. Garner for FDR's first two terms, and then there was Henry A. Wallace, the 33rd man to hold the job, whose public fights with other Cabinet members and officials in Roosevelt's third term had got him dropped from the ticket in 1944, leading to Truman's selection...

Rockefeller had known that Richard Nixon was a man one might trust *personally* but never *politically*, yet even he had been shocked by how quickly he had been side-lined. Nixon did not want a partner, he wanted an absentee resident of the Vice President's office, a messenger boy to corral the House now and then, to look good on TV and basically, to keep his fingers out of Administration policy making.

In Richard Nixon's Administration the Secretaries of Departments were going to be left to get on with their duties and *he*, the President was going to focus on restoring the United States' 'status in the World', a task which was going to involve a great deal of 'rebuilding' of a new 'global consensus'. A once in a generation window presented itself to not just to set back but to defeat Marxist-Leninism, and Richard Nixon was going to be the man who went down in history as the man who consolidated the 'victory' of the Cuban Missiles War.

Neither Rockefeller nor Kissinger believed the President's objectives were intrinsically mistaken; in fact, Nixon's dialled-down, pragmatically measured 'America First' approach was actually in tune with the mood of the country. The last thing most Americans wanted to do was rub the United Kingdom's – the old country's - nose in the dirt; heck, it must have taken real guts to stand up to the Ruskies in the Middle East, and as for taking on the 'goddamned Kitty Hawk' well, how brave were those guys? Don't we want

these people on our side in the future?

It made sense to promote better relations with the British – everybody recognised the Irish Republic was only ever going to be a 'second best' bridgehead in Western Europe – and to concentrate on resolving the Korean conflict by force majeure as soon as possible. Likewise, Soviet weakness and the civil war enveloping much of China ought, in practice, to make it easier to re-secure American hegemony over the Western Pacific. Nor was it unreasonable to attempt to 'charm' and if necessary, to 'bribe' Australia and New Zealand back into the US sphere of influence; that after all had been both countries direction of travel for many years before the October War. Moreover, there were huge opportunities to replace lost European markets for American manufactures and technology in Central and Southern America. The old colonial powers: Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and the British, who had meddled in South American affairs from the Caribbean to Chile, were now 'out of the game' the length and breadth of the continent.

True, there was the festering 'issue' of the Falkland Islands and sooner or later something would have to be done about the bellicose language still coming out of Oxford; but nobody actually believed the Brits were serious about – or capable of - 're-conquering' a that collection of eight hundred windswept, uninhabited and mostly uninhabitable islands over eight thousand miles from the British Isles.

Nixon had already sent Secretary of State Henry Cabot Lodge to the Middle East for 'exploratory talks' ahead of a Presidential progress through the region later that spring. It was only a matter of time before the rulers of Arabia and around the Persian Gulf came to their senses and stepped back beneath the shelter of the US military umbrella. American conglomerates ought to be able to speedily re-establish advance bases in the Middle East long before the British Empire resumed its stalled post-1945 retreat east of Suez.

In the Mediterranean it suited everybody for the British to hold the line, although it was only a matter of time before Portugal was prised from its attachment to its 'oldest ally'. The dollar talked loudly and Portugal was the poor man – the lowest hanging fruit, in State Department parlance - among the viable surviving Western European states. Farther north the Scandinavian group – Norway, Sweden and Denmark – were nominally in the 'British Camp'; but they were in a bad way and ought to be more amenable to

Philadelphia's overtures once they saw the advantages to be gained by accepting US legations on their soil.

The bottom line was that Western Europe was going to be where the US built new early warning radar stations and based Intelligence and other mainly non-combatant military assets, possibly, for a generation. The Navy wanted access to two, ideally three, ports on the Atlantic coast of Europe; but there was no rush. The Soviet Union had withdrawn into its heartland, safe behind the wastelands of Central Europe, Mongolia and the steppes of the Russian Far East; America was again the solitary World super power.

The coming decades would be *American* decades!

It all sounded so plausible and yet...

"I'm beginning to wonder what we've got ourselves into, Henry," Nelson Rockefeller sighed as the two men moved to chairs beneath the windows.

They had swapped small talk about the decision – in principle - to quadruple the number of US 'advisors' in South Vietnam. The unexpected peace in the Midwest and the virtual cessation of the Church of the Great Lakes terrorist insurgency in the states around its Wisconsin-Northern Illinois 'Kingdom' had freed up tens of thousands of GIs and untold quantities of Air Force and Army hardware, the equivalent of at least two fully equipped Divisional 'Expeditionary Forces', for other duties. Notwithstanding Curtis LeMay's objection that 'shouldn't we wait to see if those crazy bastards in Wisconsin keep their side of the peace', a massive re-deployment of Army, Air Force and Navy 'assets' was already well in hand.

The timetable for operations in Korea had been advanced, US troops and aircraft would soon be based in Italy, Sicily, and Spain, former US bases on Cuba would be rebuilt and many of the Caribbean islands which had descended into anarchy such as Haiti and Martinique would shortly be occupied by US 'peacekeepers'. America was flexing its muscles anew and it was time for the World to sit up and smell the coffee!

"The British outflanking Cabot Lodge at the UN Building, you mean?" Kissinger countered, deep in thought.

When Richard Nixon had asked him to become US National Security Advisor he had hesitated, insisted on time to think about it. The President – President-elect at the time – had coolly told him that if his answer was 'no' then it would be the last time he took his call. Not least among Kissinger's reservations was the likelihood that his private life; mainly his affairs, would

become public knowledge if he was fulfilling such a high profile, key role in the new Administration. His 'private life', the parties, his predilection for the company of beautiful younger women, would have gone unremarked in the Kennedy Administration, innocent peccadilloes in comparison with the excesses of JFK, his little brother and several of their 'friends'; but in the Administration of a killjoy Quaker-raised choirboy like Nixon...

His other worry had been working with Henry Cabot Lodge; a man intimately associated with the old failed World order. It seemed to Kissinger that rather than to look to the past for solutions to the daunting problems of the present, new blood would have been infinitely better at the State Department. Not that he had anything against Lodge; in any other age – before October 1962 – he would have been the ideal man to represent his country abroad.

However, what most troubled both men at this very minute was that as both of them had been afraid might happen, the President, or more likely the clique of senior staffers who had been with him back in 1960, had wasted no time starting to settle old scores.

Yesterday's *New York Herald Tribune* had published a no holds barred, titillating expose of an alleged affair between the *black* leader of the Southern Civil Rights Movement, Dr Martin Luther King junior, and the *white* daughter of former movie stars Ben and Margaret Sullivan

This morning *The New York Times*, with whom the *Tribune* had been in a newspaper 'death-wrestle' for most of the last two decades, had published – with a positively gratuitous fanfare – a blow by blow account of how the 'cheating lovers' had 'canoodled shamelessly' in a room at the Warwick Hotel, on West 54th Street, New York at the end of November last year.

Both papers had made a big thing about the 'love tryst' having been at the famous thirty-six floor hotel built in the mid-1920s by William Randolph Hearst, the inspiration for Orson Well's *Citizen Kane*, which was now a favourite watering hole for delegations from the far corners of the globe, drawn to the city that never sleeps by the great 'peace conference' in Manhattan.

The 'shocking affair' had been going on for 'several months'.

...Miss Sullivan is a volunteer worker for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in California, and a staff member of the American Civil Liberties Union...she is currently in hiding... Her parents are

reported to be 'horrified'... Mrs Coretta Scott King told reporters outside the King family home in Atlanta Georgia that only God knows the truth...and that she will be standing by the father of her children... Meanwhile, the Reverend King appears to be in hiding... There were clashes between members of Dr King's congregation in Atlanta and reporters...

The latest edition of the *Tribune* fought the *Times's* revelations fire for fire with a series of allegations that smacked of quotations straight from the transcript of a bugging operation.

The Administration was less than a month old and already its fault lines were opening; ten minutes ago, one of Rockefeller's staffers had brought him a report from a wire service: sources inside the *Tribune* 'confirmed that its story was based on *tapes* it had received from a confidential 'law enforcement' source...

Somebody had been illegally listening in on the lovers' pillow talk and it did not take a great stretch of the imagination, or any kind of intuitive leap, to figure out precisely 'who' that 'somebody' had to be.

A second wire, from Reuters, was now saying that the US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach had begun an internal inquiry into 'unauthorised' surveillance operations aimed at delegates and interested parties attending the Manhattan Pease Process talks.

Less than a month after inauguration day Katzenbach was going after the FBI!

The trouble was that Rockefeller and Kissinger knew that J. Edgar Hoover, having been warned off 'making waves' or pursuing a vendetta against Martin Luther King in the most explicit terms by the Johnson Administration in at least one interview with LBJ's and now Richard Nixon's Attorney General, Nick Katzenbach – the last thing the Administration needed was a summer of race riots all across the South – would never have gone out on a limb and 'leaked' this, of all stories, off his own back.

Whatever one thought about Hoover – most people who knew him loathed and feared the man – unless he had had some kind of psychotic episode nobody had heard about, he must have been acting if not under orders, then with the, probably 'on the record', authority of somebody close to the President.

Or perhaps, the prompting of the President himself and that thought filled both Rockefeller and Kissinger with a vague, non-specific sick feeling in

their guts. JFK, even LBJ could have got away with that forever. They had lived in another age; but times had changed and the respect, and awe for the office of the President of the United States was no longer the impenetrable shield it had been just months ago.

"I rang the President earlier," Rockefeller said, wearily. "He claimed not to have heard about the stories. He said, 'that'll be bad for King', and hung up."

"Cabot Lodge is," Kissinger offered, "unhappy. He's been talking to the same editors you have. Walter Kronkite is doing a special show tonight about the whole thing. He's planning to go heavy on the question of 'who was tapping Dr King's phone'. He'll probably have worked out that this is potentially dynamite by the time he goes on air...."

"Louis Lefkowitz has agreed to go on the show," Nelson Rockefeller interjected. In that moment he was so angry he would have chewed a lump out of his cup if it had been anywhere near his lips at the time. With an effort he got a grip.

The sixty-year-old Jewish-American Attorney General of New York had been elected in 1957 after twenty-two years as a judge on the municipal circuit. He had stood for mayor of New York in 1961 and everybody assumed he would challenge incumbent, Mayor Robert F. Wagner again later this year. A Republican, Lefkowitz had supported Rockefeller in gubernatorial and presidential races, but was in no way Rockefeller's man.

The story about the leader of the Southern Civil Rights Movement cheating on his wife with a white woman *in New York* had broken *in New York.* QED, the malfeasance connected with illegal phone tapping, or 'bugging' must have been carried out *in New York* and was therefore right smack bang in the middle of Louis Lefkowitz's personal turf!

Once Louis Lefkowitz sank his teeth into this one he would hang on like a hungry Wolverine until he had shaken the carcass to death and it was disintegrating in his bloody jaws!

Just twenty-four days after the inauguration Richard Nixon's Vice President and his National Security Advisor were already preoccupied with how they inoculated themselves against the coming political and judicial firestorm.

"Maybe the President doesn't think he's got a problem?" Henry Kissinger speculated.

“Yeah,” Rockefeller grunted unhappily, “that’s going to be *another* problem!”

Chapter 23

Monday 15th February 1965
The Hall of the People, Clermont-Ferrand, Puy-de-Dôme Department, France

Citizen Maxim Machenaud wore a very un-French, rather ragged grey streaked beard that gave him the appearance of a down and out dragged in from the street. He was a man of indeterminate middle years with a sallow complexion, a vaguely sneering mouth and suspicious dark eyes dressed in the grey green dungarees, the uniform boiler suit of other Party members.

The First Deputy Secretary of the Front Internationale – effectively the FI's second-in-command and chief policeman - stepped forward from the grim-faced welcoming committee. Inside the 'Hall of the People', a large but low-roofed communal mess attached to the dormant Michelin works north east of the city centre, carbine-armed Gendarmerie with crimson shoulder patches guarded every door and watched *everybody* with their fingers on the triggers of their guns.

Although Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin had had the opportunity to become partially acclimatised to the customs of the senior members of the Front Internationale; he still found the fact that Machenaud's senior acolytes clutched notebooks and pencils, all the better to instantly dash down whatever words of wisdom spewed or dripped from their leader's pale, bloodless lips, a little distasteful. Increasingly, it seemed that it was only his personal bodyguards and the predators of *la Commission Vérité*, the universally loathed and feared 'Truth Commission', the Front Internationale's secret police, who had no need to constantly convince Maxim Machenaud of their undying loyalty.

Zorin had warned Yuri Andropov and Sergey Akhromeyev what to expect. Notwithstanding that they were children of what had supposedly been the most ruthless, godless police state on the planet, neither of them had believed him until now. Even to the members of a delegation reporting directly to Alexander Shelepin, the atmosphere in the cold, dirty 'Hall of the People' was nonetheless *shocking*.

When the time had come to rein in Krasnaya Zarya in the east the Red

Army and the Red Air Force had suffered tens of thousands of casualties, cities had been destroyed and any amount of irreplaceable treasure and equipment had been lost. It ought to have been an object lesson but in this godforsaken corner of 'Atlantic' Europe, separated from the Motherland by the devastated lands of Germany, Central Europe, White Russia and the Ukraine, the maniacs in control of well over half of all French territory, had clearly concluded that they were well beyond the reach of the Red Army, and probably, reason.

Zorin had known this and warned his masters but the arrival of the 'Andropov Mission' on French soil had confirmed that the Sverdlovsk Troika had ignored his advice.

The Front Internationale was such an abomination that whenever strangers – or nominally, deadly enemies – encroached on its territory local people welcomed the interlopers like liberators because anything was better than living under the insane regime of Citizen Maxim Machenaud and his mad dog wing of the former French Communist Party.

"*Citizen* Machenaud," Zorin announced respectfully. "May I have the honour to present to you the personal emissary of the Collective Leadership of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Deputy First Secretary Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov."

The KGB man stepped forward expecting to shake hands with and to exchange the obligatory non-kisses with the Frenchman. However, Machenaud did not move a muscle; he just stared at him with dull, distrustful eyes.

Andropov halted two metres away from the self-appointed grand inquisitor of the Front Internationale.

In the silence the stench of unwashed bodies mingled with the vile metallic tang in the air. Andropov, the sensitivity of his personal threat antennae suddenly heightened, was deafeningly aware that the whole great factory complex in which this building lay was oppressively silent. The unquiet Michelin works might have been a metaphor for what he had seen of the whole country; nothing was working anymore and the people of the city had turned in upon themselves.

Without preamble the man in front of him spat a succession of words. His delivery was more in the style of a bitter, angry denunciation than a welcome.

“Demandai-je des fusils et des armes modernes guidées. J'ai besoin de missiles pour abattre les signes avant-coureurs de malheur qui profanent le ciel de France!”

The translator, an unusually svelte, sweating man in this lean and hungry city waited until his master paused and then explained in peculiarly flowery, over-blown Moskva Russian: “*I demanded guns and modern guided weapons. I need missiles to shoot down the harbingers of doom who desecrate the skies of France!”*

Andropov flinched, unable to stop thinking about his year-old nightmare in the dungeons of Nicolae Ceausescu’s *Securitate* thugs in Bucharest. He very much doubted if anybody survived the torture rooms of the Front Internationale.

Presumably, thinking the ‘Mission Leader’ had frozen, Zorin opened his mouth to reply but Andropov touched his elbow. If he was the panicky man of straw that people believed him to be after Bucharest that was their problem, under the scars he was still the steely Party insider who had clawed aside countless lesser men to stand by the side of Alexander Shelepin in his country’s darkest hour. He was not about to allow some jumped up local apparatchik to intimidate him!

“You translate, Comrade Valerian Alexandrovich,” he commanded hoarsely, meeting the dead eyes of the Deputy Leader of the Front Internationale with unblinking, deadly intent.

Andropov composed his thoughts for a moment.

“*Comrade* Machenaud,” he began coolly. Behind the Frenchman everybody winced, as if their leader had just been slapped across the face. “I had hoped to speak to you in private. I had hoped that we might have a confidential exchange of views as fraternal brothers in the revolution.”

The other man quivered with gathering rage as Zorin translated.

“I did not ask for diplomats and military advisors, Comrade Andropov,” Maxim Machenaud replied in coarse Russian, his voice barely audible yet carrying into every corner of the hall. “In the East the Red Army and your lap dogs in Rumania and Bulgaria stabbed Krasnaya Zarya in the back. Is that the *collective leadership’s* great plan for us also?”

And there it was; the evil of Red Dawn; and the reason why it had outlived its usefulness. Back in Russia people had speculated about the existence of a ‘popular movement’ ready to harness the undamaged resources

of France to block Yankee imperialist ambitions in Western Europe and to threaten the British...

All he had seen thus far was a patchwork of philosophically and ideologically incompatible tribes and territories. The locals explained away the checkpoints on every major road as a necessary ‘security measure’; actually, each clan and faction was marking out its borders, arming themselves against their neighbours. Here in the Auvergne where the Front Internationale had its headquarters and its illusory fortresses, it enforced its law, the farther one strayed from Clermont-Ferrand, the weaker its ‘control’ became. Marseilles, the Côte d'Azur, and the coast all the way east to the Italian border, was already a different country. The people down there had followed the ‘party line’ last year – stirring up a veritable nest of hornets by attacking a British destroyer – but now they had had their fingers badly burned they were playing dead, and nothing Andropov had learned in the Auvergne gave him any hope the FI was likely to energise its southern ‘comrades’ back into action any time soon.

It was one thing for Alexander Shelepin to mandate that the ‘revolutionary phase’ of Krasnaya Zarya should henceforth morph into Red Sunrise, a subtler, longer-term infiltration of Western Europe and the Americas, another entirely to exercise it in places where Red Dawn had already run rampant and poisoned the well for decades to come. A policy better suited to Sub-Saharan Africa and the freedom struggles in Asia could not, and clearly was not, going to be easily executed in France.

Krasnaya Zarya was a movement built on ideological fanaticism, a lust for revenge and conquest that recognised no borders, no laws. Andropov had been personally horrified when he belatedly discovered the monster Stalin had created, and that Khrushchev had failed to crush in the years leading up to the Cuban Missiles War. Krasnaya Zarya had already laid waste the Anatolian littoral of Asia Minor, spread vast swathes of destruction across Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece and the Balkans; it had run amok, devouring all that came within reach of its merciless maw. Last year Red Dawn had almost drawn down a second, unsurvivable rain of thermonuclear fire upon the Soviet Union; only the diversion of troops from Operation Nakazyvat and the British re-taking of Cyprus had finally halted the spread of the Krasnaya Zarya plague. Even now the pestilence bubbled and fermented in Turkey and the Balkans; and remained virulently endemic on the islands and the waters

of the Aegean Sea, an infection awaiting an opportunity to break out of its reduced heartlands to blight the very idea of civilization.

Andropov waved a hand around him.

"You have *great* factories, *great* modern factories here in this city. Can you not put them back to work for the glory of the cause?"

Maxim Machenaud looked at him as if he had just squatted down and evacuated his bowels.

Andropov refused to be cowed.

"Comrade Major General Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev accompanied me on this mission for the purpose of assisting me in assessing your military requirements to defend France, and to equip you so that you may play your full part in the forward march of international Marxist-Leninism, Comrade Machenaud."

"Do not presume to tell *us* our business!"

Andropov had known that coming to France was a bad idea. Previously, Alexander Shelepin had monopolised dealings with the Front Internationale, albeit at arm's length as if he had recognised the dangers of dealing face to face with madmen.

They all had.

"I have no wish to tell you *your* business," Andropov retorted. "However, before the Collective Leadership considers sending further arms shipments to the Front Internationale it requires certain assurances, and undertakings from the Provisional Government of South France as to the disposition and employment of those weapons."

Machenaud spat on the floor.

"Perhaps, I should send your bodies back to Chelyabinsk? Perhaps, that would make the Politburo take us seriously, Comrade?"

Andropov's heart literally missed a beat.

"That would be a bad mistake, Comrade Machenaud," he replied in a low, breathless voice. "*Remember Bucharest.*" When the silence deepened he sighed. "Besides, I came to France to speak to First Secretary Comrade Jacques Duclos, not his errand boy."

Machenaud might have been a pillar of salt.

He just looked at Andropov, much in the way he might have looked at bacilli on a laboratory slide under a microscope.

It was some seconds before the Russian realised the other man was

waiting, staring past him. Behind the small Soviet delegation, the ranks of the faithful stirred, parted to the sound of the shuffling of feet and muted coughs.

As one man the Russians turned around.

Chapter 24

Tuesday 16th February 1965
Southam House, Gloucestershire

Until a great raft of concrete had been laid from the foot of the Cotswolds deep into the northern streets of the ancient spa town of Cheltenham – in the process obliterating much of the famous old Prestbury Park race course – the magnificent old house had accommodated a private school for girls of a certain class, the Oriel School, in the middle of an idyllic landscaped park. But then the Cuban Missiles Crisis had gone wrong, everything had changed and the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration had, in accordance with the most recent 'War Book' that the traumatised survivors could get their hands on, requisitioned Cheltenham as its first post-war seat of government; RAF Cheltenham had quickly been bulldozed across the race course and the occupants of every large building for miles around had been politely – Armageddon or not this was still England, after all – evicted.

Up until the end of 1964 Southam House had been an outpost of the Ministry of Supply; presently, it was nominated as a 'secure residence' for visiting ministers, senior members of the military and civil servants travelling on official business. The nearby airfield – the nearest taxiway was only, in racing parlance, a furlong from its front door – had become a hub for medium sized transport aircraft after a series of landing 'incidents' had underlined the fact that because of the local topography the main runway was at least five hundred yards too short to safely operate long haul jets like the Boeing 707. Nevertheless, every few minutes another aircraft landed or took off, mainly but not exclusively propeller driven types, interspersed with the occasional De Havilland Comet with its distinctive roaring-whistling thunder of Rolls-Royce Avon turbojets.

Colonel Francis St John Waters, VC, involuntarily looked up as a dark, rumbling shadow rushed over his head. He turned, eyed the big cargo plane – a Lockheed C-130 Hercules wearing US Air Force markings – slap down on the tarmac and with a sudden bellow of engines slow to a halt in what seemed to him to be an impossibly short distance. That would be the Yanks flying in more equipment to install at one or other of GCHQ's – Government

Communications Headquarters – establishments in the nearby town. He still did not know for the life of him why the blaggards had been given permission to set up shop in Cheltenham!

However, he did not waste time worrying about it.

First on the agenda was to get to his room, perform a routine tidy up, make himself presentable and to find out where the bar was. Things were looking up and he felt in the mood to celebrate with a swift, preferably very stiff, drink before the Prime Minister's entourage descended upon Southam House in strength.

'Barry Lankaster will be following Mr Callaghan on the election hustings,' the Director General had decreed. Apparently, nobody in the Labour Party wanted the former SAS man anywhere near them, which suited Frank Waters just fine. 'You seem to get on well with the circle around Mrs Thatcher; I'd like you to accompany the Prime Minister around the country and report back on the same. I'll let you have your old Gulf War production team, just so you don't have to *break in* anybody new, Frank!'

The old soldier had been so surprised by the news he was to be the BBC's man 'with the Thatcher camp' that it had been all he could do not to give the DG a hug and smother him with kisses. David Attenborough was, he had decided, a good sort; notwithstanding, the poor fellow would probably – and rightly - have taken exception to being mistaken for a dockyard doxy. Frank Waters had contained himself, just.

'If you think it's for the best," he had agreed grudgingly, 'I shall do my utmost to justify your faith in me.'

Barry Lankaster was the chap who had been moderating the Angry Widow's debate last year with that odd cove, now sadly departed, Enoch Powell at Cheltenham Town Hall - the venue for this evening's verbal joust with that dreadful, pacifist leftie Michael Foot – when a madman had tried to shoot her. The clot had ended up shooting Powell before being buried under a heap of royally ticked off AWPs.

Subsequently, Lankaster had made that, really quite good, documentary about the Battle for Malta which had turned young Peter Christopher and his lovely young Maltese wife into world-wide celebrities.

In the Gulf War Barry had been given the southern and western part of the theatre; whereas Frank Waters had hit the jackpot based with Michael Carver's forces on Abadan Island. So far as he was concerned Lankaster was

welcome to drag around the country with the grey men of the Labour Party; the whole lot of them were closet Bolsheviks and complete non-entities from what he had seen. Once again, he had rolled the dice and hit the jackpot. In a couple of days Parliament was due to be prorogued and then 'the lady' would be pretty much on the campaign trail right up until Election Day on Thursday 11th March.

He would see *her* every day, be with *her*, within touching distance possibly for several hours daily. To say that he was positively 'made up' by the prospect hardly began to do his anticipation justice!

When he got back down to the bar Airey Neave beckoned him to a window table. Hands were shaken and the two men made themselves comfortable with generous measures of Scotch in handsome crystal tumblers. Cigarette smoke hung in the air, tobacco was no longer rationed, another boon of the superficially improved US-UK rapprochement of the autumn.

Airey Neave sniffed the air disapprovingly.

The Prime Minister was known to detest walking into a smoky room, or people having the temerity to light up in her presence. Frank Waters suspected a lot of people were going to get their marching orders, and the windows flung open to clear the fug regardless of the cold outside before the lady arrived.

"Good to have you onboard, old boy," Airey Neave grinned conspiratorially. "Obviously, it would have been most inappropriate for Margaret, or the Party, to have attempted to influence your Director General's *dispositions* ahead of the coming battle, but the Prime Minister is delighted that you will be *with us* in the trenches in the next few weeks."

Frank Waters opened his mouth, got no further.

"Margaret is of course, a great admirer of Mr Lankaster's work. It's absolutely top hole, what!"

"Top hole," the former SAS man muttered amiably.

"I gather you've sent your chaps ahead to the Town Hall to, er, *set up*, Frank?"

"Yes, Steuart Pringle's AWPs don't want the chaps mucking around getting under their feet after the hoi polloi start to arrive."

Airey Neave frowned.

"We don't refer to the electorate as the '*common masses*'," he observed

with apparent indifference.

But Frank Waters got the message.

“No, no, slip of the tongue. You’ve been out of the Regimental Mess a little longer than me, Airey. Old habits, and all that! I shall do my best to watch my P’s and Q’s.”

“I’m sure you will.” The Secretary of State for National Security sucked his teeth for a moment. “I don’t mind admitting that we’re batting on a bit of a sticky wicket. Margaret is an eternal optimist but we mere mortals, well, sometimes things are against one and there is really not a lot one can do about it. That said, the election has concentrated minds wonderfully within the Party and for the moment practically all the *dissidents* have come back into the fold.”

Neave let this thought hang in the air.

Frank Waters tacitly assumed the nations ‘Security Supremo’ would have been pulling strings, having confidential ‘chats’ to any malcontent with an embarrassing skeleton in his personal cupboard. Nothing heavy-handed, that was not Airey’s way. He was an old-fashioned sort of schemer operating without malice aforethought, keen to remain on friendly terms with his *clients* and detractors alike. The Tory Party was, when all was said and done, a club and its grandees were never less than ‘clubbable’.

“Of course, if we take a drubbing at the polls next month Margaret’s position will be untenable.”

Frank Waters scowled.

“Why on earth does everybody I meet tell me the bloody lefties are going to get a landslide?”

Airey Neave smiled.

“Arithmetic,” he murmured. “But we shall see.”

“Ah, there you are!” Declared Nicholas Ridley waving as he approached the two old friends. The Secretary of State for Information looked careworn as he pulled up a chair and gestured to attract the barman’s attention. “Margaret has been delayed. She will go directly to the Town Hall this evening. The American Ambassador requested an audience at damnably short notice.”

Frank Waters decided he would make polite conversation; it would have been rude, insufferably crass to badger the two ministers about what the lady was planning to say tonight to spike her foe’s guns.

“What is this place?” He asked, gesturing at their surroundings.

“Originally,” Ridley informed him nasally, brightening a little, “it was the manor house of the de la Bere family. After the battle of Stoke in 1487 Henry VII ennobled Richard, the first baronet. The de la Bere’s estates eventually passed to the Bagott family. George III stayed here several times, they say. The man who oversaw the works which produced, substantially, the house in which we are presently sitting was, I believe, Edward Law, 2nd Baron Ellenborough who was created Earl of Ellenborough in 1844. He was a former Governor General of India; presumably he wanted a country seat consistent with his station in society.”

It was at times like this that his companions were reminded that Ridley was the grandson of Sir Edwin Lutyens, a man of many parts; former army officer, civil engineer and in his spare time, allegedly a very gifted artist.

Frank Waters was not sure if having ‘intellectuals’ like Ridley within the highest circles of Government, or the Army either, was always a good thing. They tended to want to make their mark, to change this or that, to challenge accepted wisdom, and they were always having ‘good ideas’ which as any soldier worth his salt will testify rarely goes down well in any Officers Mess, in *any* Army.

“Tonight, might become quite boisterous,” Ridley said, coming back down to terra firma. “The Labour Party is bussing in a crowd of CND types as well as their normal foot soldiers. They’ll be outnumbered in the hall and the Police and the AWP won’t be allowing them to ‘clump’ in the audience but, as I say, it might be a little...*rowdy*.”

“Just so long as none of the beggars takes a pot shot at the PM we should be all right!” Frank Waters offered, trying to be helpful.

His companions looked at him as if he had just tweaked fate’s nose, which was never wise in this brave new post-cataclysm World.

Why is everybody so blasted pessimistic these days?

That was the trouble with being de-mobbed, pensioned off back onto Civvy Street; Frank Waters did not think he would ever get the hang of all the stupid little things one was supposed to worry about.

His heart went out to *the lady*.

Being surrounded by all these infernal Moaning Minnies must be an unconscionably trying thing for the Prime Minister.

Chapter 25

Tuesday 16th February 1965
Government House, Isfahan, Iran

His Excellency General Hasan al-Marmaleki, the President of the Provisional Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran had been carried shoulder high into the city after the post-Soviet invasion regime had collapsed. Now the victor of Khorramshahr and Abadan rose to his feet as Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson was quietly ushered into the reception hall. In the courtyard beyond the open doors to each side of the palatial room water babbled in the fountains of the ancient garden in the secluded inner courtyard of the ancient building.

Somewhere in the near distance the British Foreign Secretary thought he heard children playing, and the song of birds but he might have been imagining it. It was probably the effect of the slightly rarefied air up here on the central Iranian Plateau some five thousand feet above sea level, either that, or it was the heady prospect of exploring the limits of the great game he was playing in a country where generations of his predecessors had mostly, feared to tread.

He was relieved to discover that Hasan al-Marmaleki had adopted none of the trappings of an oriental potentate; nor any of the vestiges of the Imperial baggage of the now displaced Pahlavi dynasty. Distant relations of the dead Shah were constantly coming out of the woodwork; presently one of them – a wealthy banker with a raft of friends in the Republican Party - was trying to inveigle the new Administration in Philadelphia into supporting his, intrinsically flawed, claim to the defunct Peacock Throne.

The Pahlavis, father and son had been self-appointed Shahs, un-royal pretenders who had never had any blood, or in fact, any substantive claim to the throne. The father had come to power in a coup; the son – Mohammad Reza Shah - had stayed in power only with the help and support of the CIA, MI6, the Israeli Mossad and the reign of terror of his secret policemen, SAVAK. By the time the Soviets put him up against that wall in Tehran and - with his harem of terrified young western women – gunned him down for the cameras, as the prelude to nuking the Iranian capital and invading both

Iran and Iraq, Iran had been well on the way to being a huge prison camp. Thus far, al-Marmaleki had shown little taste for re-opening that *camp*; although it was anyone's guess how his as yet tentative moves towards building democracy would fare in the face of the sorely wounded country's regional, sectarian and theocratic tensions.

However, for the moment he was basking in the reflected glory of his triumphs on the shores of the Shatt al-Arab; and he was a heroic figure on a par with any of the legendary Safavid rulers in Isfahan's long history.

"How was your flight, Sir Thomas?" The leader of Iran inquired. His English was of the type one might expect from an internationally educated graduate of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. "I do apologise for not being at the airport to meet you."

"Please, don't mention it." Both sides had independently concluded that this was a visit best kept if not secret, then discreet. While it was true that an infidel former oppressor might have played some small part in defeating the Red Army and in keeping the Russians' filthy, apostate hands off the Iranian oilfields of the south; nobody was placing large billboards in the streets of Isfahan extolling the virtues of permitting the British to retain their 'presence' in the ruins of Abadan Island.

Abadan had been the biggest oil refinery in the World before the Soviet invasion of Iraq, and one day it might be again although not in this decade. Rather than their part in the recent war it was the promise of British and Western technologies and expertise, assisting in the reconstruction of a yet greater refinery complex equipped to fully exploit the oil riches of the Iranian south, and thereby provide the treasure required to drag the country into the twentieth century, that might one day convince the Iranian people that it was a deal 'worth doing'. So, for now, Anglo-Iranian relations needed to be conducted with the utmost discretion, and in private.

Of course, there were already British officers in Isfahan and elsewhere in Iran, including Special Air Service – SAS – men helping al-Marmaleki train his hurriedly cobbled together Army, and operating in the mountains of the north side by side with Iranian units fighting a brutal guerrilla war against the Red Army's lines of communications.

"I am honoured to be at last in such an ancient and holy city, Your Excellency," the British Foreign Secretary declared.

During the latter years of the Safavid ascendency Isfahan was one of the

largest cities in the World, the capital of a great, Persian Muslim Empire, the rival of any city in Europe. A little over two hundred miles south of ruined Tehran it sat astride the main north-south and east-west trade routes of the old and the new Iran. A visitor glimpsed and wondered at its medieval architecture, its wide, elegant boulevards, palaces, mosques, covered bridges and countless minarets; the sum of its glory captured by the Persian proverb 'Esfahān nesf-e-jahān ast'.

Isfahan is half of the world!

"*General* will suffice when we are alone, Sir Thomas," the younger man said smiling. "We shall sit outside. Hopefully my daughters will not cavort so loudly in their rooms as to disturb our meditations!"

The two men guffawed.

At the time of the Battle of Khorramshahr al-Marmaleki's family had been in hiding in Shiraz, knowing that the then provisional Government was intent on holding them to ransom to compel his obedience.

Tom Harding-Grayson had heard that the men responsible for persecuting his family – and incidentally, attempting to parley with the Soviets at the height of the fighting around the Shatt al-Arab in July – had met their 'just deserts' last autumn. Had they, rather than al-Marmaleki's faction prevailed his visit today would have been impossible.

Although it was past noon and it was a sunny, clear day it was chilly in the shadows.

"I'm told the winter has been kind this year?" The Englishman remarked.

"People draw conclusions from that," his host replied. He shrugged. "Winters can be kind, summers spring-like; that is the way of things. We accept whatever Allah – blessed be his name - wills."

A steward dressed in the khaki fatigues of the newly created Republican Guard brought coffee, saluted and marched out of earshot.

"I don't encourage bowing and scraping," al-Marmaleki explained. "I am not their new Shah."

The fingers of his right hand lifted to touch his luxuriant dark moustache. He was a man of athletic build an inch or so short of six feet with an unmistakable parade ground, military bearing.

"Michael Carver tells me that the Russians seem to want to cling on in the north?" The Englishman remarked.

The other man smiled wanly.

"They must hold the north, Tabriz, certainly, or the roads they are driving down through the eastern lands of the Anatolian littoral beside Lake Van to supply their forces in Kurdish Iraq will be as vulnerable as those they are currently dependent upon running through Tabriz. So, they must fight us in the mountains where their tanks and their bombers do them the least good."

The British Foreign Secretary had not come to Isfahan to discuss 'military options'; the Chief of the Defence Staff and his officers were far better qualified to organise those matters.

"As you know, I flew here from Egypt where I had a series of conversations with President Nasser, mainly around the practical implementation of the Anglo-Egyptian Mutual Co-operation Treaty we signed last year."

The job of a British Foreign Secretary since 1945 – notwithstanding the catastrophic intervention of the October War – had been to balance often mutually incompatible strategic interests with local, regional diplomacy in such a way as to not rely on military assets that the country could no longer afford, and in many cases, simply did not have any more. The Egypt – Iran Middle Eastern 'balance' depended not on the needs, or the preferences of the United Kingdom, but upon the shifting moods and sands of the Arabian deserts.

The Egyptians considered themselves to be the socialist descendants of the Pharaonic legacy; the Saudis and their antipathetic neighbouring tribes in the Arabian Peninsula the carriers of the flame of Islam, albeit a particular worryingly extreme Wahhabi version of it; and the Iranians the Shia sons and daughters of the Persian overlords of the known World in ancient times. The only thing the three centres of power had in common was a mutual suspicion of the other 'people of the Book' in the region, the Israelis, and of course, all 'westerners'. That presently, all the major players *except* the Israelis had reason to be thankful for the presence of the British on their soil, or upon the waters off their coasts, offered a narrow window of opportunity which Tom Harding-Grayson was determined not to waste.

That here in Iran the faction which had fought shoulder to shoulder with British and Commonwealth forces in Southern Iraq and south western Iran, and won such undying glory in the process, had come out on top in the struggle for power in the post-Pahlavi dynasty manoeuvring was almost too

good to be true.

It was pure happenstance that Hasan al-Marmaleki was a close personal friend of General Michael Carver, the new Chief of the Defence Staff – and, as odd as it might seem, a pal of that incorrigible rogue Frank Waters – and a huge admirer of many things English, not least the fortitude of the old country under duress. By all accounts his wife was mightily miffed with what the Soviets had done to Harrods and large parts of the Home Counties, but that apart, she too was essentially Anglophile in her outlook, effectively cementing the family support for strengthening the links with 'the British'.

"I shall be frank with you, General," Tom Harding-Grayson promised, smiling a wry smile. "I freely admit that I can lie and obfuscate for my country as well, hopefully better, than any other man in Oxford but here, in the heart of a country which has so recently risked all to stand by Commonwealth forces in the Persian Gulf, I hope, and pray that I am among friends. Even in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office there is still scope for honesty with one's friends."

Hasan al-Marmaleki had been reluctant to pick up the mantle of political leadership; it was one thing for his troops to raise him to the rank of pro-consul in the south by acclamation, another entirely to march on the interior trusting Michael Carver's weakened Commonwealth forces to guard his back, and to sustain the supply dumps his armour needed on right bank of the Shatt al-Arab, and to support his ever lengthening lines of communication. At the time he had had no idea of if his friend was acting 'off his own bat' as his English friends would say, or if he was obeying orders from Oxford. Worse, at any time during his march on Isfahan, the seat of the post-Shah provisional Government, the very fact of Michael Carver's backing for his adventure might have brought everything crashing down around his head. The issue had been in the balance until the clerics, offended by the corruption of the Pahlavi hangers on and the continued oppression of their SAVAK henchmen had placed their weight at his back. In retrospect his career-long probity and his known adherence to the tenets of the Book, both things which had hamstrung his progression in the Imperial Army, had been the crucial factors in the decision of the Imams and Mullahs.

He listened to Tom Harding-Grayson noncommittally, waiting to hear what the man who could so quickly become his enemy had to say. Al-Marmaleki's position was hardly secure; he could not afford to offend what

was left of the Army, or the Ayatollahs.

"Abadan," the Englishman said. "The assumption is that we shall prevaricate, demand conferences and so forth. That is no use to you because long before we hammer out something mutually agreeable, circumstances beyond our control are liable to intervene."

The younger man nodded; refused to be drawn.

"The problem is sovereignty," Tom Harding-Grayson observed. "We think we have it, you, well, your people think we stole it from them in the first place and that it rightfully belongs to you, the new Islamic Republic of Iran; would that be an accurate shorthand summary of your own perspective on this matter, General?"

Al-Marmaleki nodded.

"I would not personally employ the verb 'steal', or any of its pejorative variations, in a conversation about Abadan Island with 'friends', Sir Thomas," he countered. "That said, by rights all the land to the east of the Shatt al-Arab should be sovereign Iranian territory and my people are sensitive to such things in these strange times in which we live."

"Quite so."

"What is your proposal, Sir Thomas?"

"The United Kingdom is prepared to surrender sovereign title to Abadan given that a suitable 'lease back' agreement can be negotiated. Say for fifty years?"

"Twenty-five," the younger man suggested.

"Forty years."

"Twenty-five," the victor of Khorramshahr repeated cordially in his implacable intransigence. "Dependent on the existence of a parallel mutual defence and co-operation treaty along the lines of that you have already signed with Colonel Nasser," the Iranian grinned wanly, "and presumably, with the Arabs in Riyadh?"

Tom Harding-Grayson nodded.

There were no secrets in the Middle East.

"I must also insist upon the right – during any leaseback period – to establish a garrison on Abadan to police the Shatt al-Arab south of Khorramshahr."

The older man had half-expected this caveat.

Al-Marmaleki had to be seen as the strong man of Iran; to have squeezed

every last drop of blood from the stone in his haggling with the British.

This way he ‘settled the Abadan question’ for a generation and put Iranian troops on the Island, just in case the British reneged on any of the terms of the agreement.

“I must have something in writing before I put this to my colleagues in government,” Hasan al-Marmaleki said, involuntarily running a finger through his moustache.

“I took the liberty of bringing several versions of a draft memorandum of understanding pre-signed by the Prime Minister and her Deputy, Mr James Callaghan,” the British Foreign Secretary confessed.

The younger man viewed him inscrutably.

“My, my,” he guffawed dryly, “how very prescient of you, Sir Thomas.”

Chapter 26

Tuesday 16th February 1965
Rue du Parc de Montjuzet, Clermont-Ferrand, France

The city sprawling across the great natural bowl formed by the mountains to its east and the hills to the west was the province of Maxim Machenaud. However, beyond its immediate environs much of the countryside remained, notionally at least, loyal to the Central Committee of the Front Internationale.

Whatever Karl Marx had written there was nothing pre-determined or predictable in real life; life was chaos and chaos was life, and the ‘state’ of the Revolution in France was eloquent testimony to the essential incoherence of the post-Cuban Missiles War World.

The Russians still did not understand this. Why else would they still believe that they could walk in and take over here in the Auvergne as if they were dealing with a bunch of half-naked savages in Equatorial Africa or the rain forests of South East Asia? The idiots had directly confronted the West in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, little good had it done them! Yes, their proxies still clung to their new won territories in Korea; but that would be as pyrrhic a ‘victory’ as that which had been achieved by the Red Army in Iraq. Now the interlopers were dipping their toe in French waters again; nine months more or less to the day after their last ‘intervention’ had led to that idiotic attack on a British destroyer off the North African coast; and brought down the fires of Hell on the FI’s allies on Corsica and driven what was left of its Navy back to port!

That misbegotten episode, prompted by promises of arms and troops, not to mention gold to prop up the regime, had resulted in a ruinous blockade of the Côte d'Azur and the Gulf of Lions, and inevitably, hastened the fragmentation of the FI across its previously contiguous southern domain.

From the leafy terrace of his hillside chateau the Party Secretary and founder of the Front Internationale, Jacques Duclos looked down across the Parc de Montjuzet to where the distant black one hundred-and-eight-metre-high lava stone twin spires of Clermont-Ferrand Cathedral, the Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption, reached for the clear blue sky above the haze which enveloped most of the city. Before the war the lingering ‘smog’ might

have been a consequence of the industrial ring around the ancient city; now it was simply the signature of cooking and other fires stoked with wood and coal in the absence of gasoline and diesel to drive any kind of engine or to heat any oven. There had been no city-wide functioning electrical grid for several months, ordinary people had to forage for kindling in abandoned houses, the woods, or risk summary execution if caught pilfering from the half-a-dozen dwindling coal dumps from which the Front Internationale doled out miserly weekly 'fuel rations' to the populace.

Sixty-eight-year-old Jacques Duclos had told the Central Committee of the Party that attempting to 'appease', or to 'buy off' the Soviets by attacking the British in the Mediterranean was a waste of time. Had the exercise not prompted the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force to *only* snub out the power base of the ideological canker of the independent 'Corsican Wing' of the post-Cuban Missiles War French Communist Party, the whole episode would have been a knife to the heart of his regime in the Auvergne last summer. Indeed, it might still be if Comrade Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov and his henchmen realised that it was *only* in the Auvergne that the Party – in any meaningful sense - ruled. Yes, the Central Committee in Clermont-Ferrand had tentacles which reached deep into other regions, it still held embattled corridors down to the ports of Marseilles and Toulon, it still controlled the Avignon – Valence – Lyons corridor, and in places as far distant as Toulouse and Perpignan its representatives clung to positions on local ruling 'revolutionary councils'; but the zenith of the Front Internationale's territorial expansion had been last spring when it had dominated the Côte d'Azur, held bridgeheads in the Pyrénées at Pau and Tarbes, and had briefly, controlled the Atlantic port of Bayonne.

That however, was before the 'internal contradictions' of the FI had begun to tear it to pieces. As it was his position had become so enfeebled that if that maniac Machenaud and his Krasnaya Zarya zealots had managed to keep secret the arrival in Clermont-Ferrand of the Soviet delegation another day or two, he would have been finished, just another of *Red Dawn's* victims.

The Russians had been as surprised as Maxim Machenaud when Duclos and his 'praetorians' – almost exclusively big hard men drawn from the remnants of the Foreign Legion and France's pre-war elite parachute regiments – had walked into the People's Hall at the mothballed Michelin

Works. Machenaud's green-uniformed militiamen and women were no match for the Front Internationale's few surviving 'Legionnaires', even though Duclos's supporting armoured column had had to halt over a kilometre from the Hall so that the sound of the engines and tracks of its tanks and armoured cars would not forewarn the gathering of vipers of his coming.

"Party and State ought to be the same thing," the veteran French Communist politician observed to Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin and Yuri Andropov.

Zorin obediently translated for Andropov's benefit.

The men were sitting on the chilly veranda of the chateau wrapped in several layers of clothing, still shivering, as they gazed down into the cold, hungry city. They were drinking exceptionally vile coffee laced with gut-rot Cognac.

"Presently, the bandits, the Party and Red Dawn are competing factions," Duclos admitted frankly. Much as he understood the dangers of being honest with his guests he was running out of options, having reached the point at which 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', regardless of all other considerations, months ago. "I speak for the first two, the bandits, people driven out by Red Dawn, and the Party; Machenaud speaks for and is the living embodiment of the abomination of Krasnaya Zarya. Fortunately, I'm the one who still has 'the legion' at my back. Machenaud has the city," he waved towards the vista spread before the three men. "The problem is that while the Legion is tied up containing the enemy within, other enemies beyond the gates continue to encroach. In the North it is only a matter of time before the British intervene to secure the Channel Coast and this will inevitably strengthen the forces holding the north. You must understand, if you do not already, that people like Machenaud and his followers must be confronted if the Revolution is to succeed."

Andropov tried and failed to hide his unhappiness.

Fiddling while Rome burned did not begin to describe this situation!

Here in the Auvergne Duclos and Machenaud led factions virtually at war with each other: in effect Duclos was working with bandits – bands of brigands roaming the country – to lay siege, to starve out Krasnaya Zarya in Clermont-Ferrand. The old communist was so obsessed with 'caging' his rival that the rest of his 'kingdom' was disintegrating around him.

Overnight Sergey Akhromeyev, had interrogated Duclos's Chief of Staff and reported back on what he determined the 'local tactical, and the broader strategic situations to be'.

"Everything is fucked!" He had reported stone-faced. 'France is split approximately north–south, east-west, practically every way, basically. The northern and north western prefectures suffered practically all the major damage back in October 1962. *We* smashed up everything along the German border and hit most of the Atlantic ports, also. We already know about the mess *we* made of parts of Marseilles and Toulon. Otherwise, the south is mainly intact, geographically and industrially, although not in any kind of modern, functioning way.'

Akhromeyev's summation had been concise and pulled no punches.

'Immediately after the war there was a huge influx of refugees from the north and the east into the regions now occupied by the FI. There was no centralized government anywhere for several months. Units of the French armed forces, local mayors, the surviving leaders of the Communist Party, and of course, the sleeper cells of Krasnaya Zarya all vied for control. Initially, Comrade Duclos's faction was successful, mainly because the Party already had an organised infrastructure on the ground and the locally based surviving units of the French armed forces preferred Communist government to chaos. You must remember that in France the Communist Party had a history of being a respectable mainstream political player.'

Andropov had frowned at the suggestion that the Party was anything less than 'respectable' in other European countries.

Akhromeyev had either ignored, or not noticed his expression.

'What we have now is a worsening civil war. There are several 'communes' in the north attempting to aggressively expand into more southerly, undamaged territory. Factions of Krasnaya Zarya are in violent competition in several major cities like Limoges and Bordeaux. Complicating the situation there is a well-organised and heavily armed Basque separatist guerrilla movement in the Pyrénées. Here in the Auvergne Comrade Duclos and Comrade Machenaud's factions are engaged in a stand-off; Comrade Duclos controls the countryside and is effectively 'blockading' the city. The demarcation lines between the factions are porous. The thing nobody back home suspected is that forces of what Comrade Duclos's Legionnaires call the 'Eastern Communes' – mainly remnant armed forces

and survivors from the German border areas - have advanced south and south west from a start line around Besancon, all the way west to Dijon and Auxerre, and to within a few miles of Vichy.'

Vichy was less than sixty kilometres from Clermont-Ferrand.

But that was not the most worrying aspect.

'Legionnaires who have returned to the Auvergne from the 'eastern front' say that the invaders are supported by Americans. But don't get carried away with the idea there is any coherent big picture here. This is a country where nothing works anymore, nobody is sowing the fields, nobody goes to work, industry is idle and whole populations are on the move. It is hard to know but some people believe that there's been a complete breakdown, a return to the Dark Ages in the north; and frankly, everything I've heard and seen tells me the same thing is going to happen down in the south."

The erosion of society, civilisation, of all accepted norms of decency had begun relatively slowly; now the degeneration was spreading fast like a virus, destroying everything.

In towns and villages with weak FI garrisons the local people had turned on Duclos's legionnaires and welcomed invaders from the north and east like liberators before, last autumn the FI had desperately thrown up defensive lines, fortified and blocked likely avenues of advance, and deployed volunteer 'shock battalions' to blunt the enemy's advance.

"Krasnaya Zarya fanatics have their uses," Jacques Duclos observed sourly. He was a balding, round shouldered man who was beginning to shrink with age despite the life of relative luxury and ease he lived in his enclave in the hills overlooking Clermont-Ferrand. "Perhaps, now you understand why Comrade Machenaud wanted weapons, not *envoys* from the Motherland?"

Andropov grunted and put down his coffee cup. He studied the age-weathered face of the last man of the Stalinist old guard of the French Communist Party.

Duclos had fought at Verdun in 1916; wounded he had spent two years in German captivity before returning to France to dedicate his life to the Revolution. Between the First and Second World Wars Duclos had been a leading French member of the Comintern – the Communist International - and afterwards its successor, the *Information Bureau of the Communist and*

Workers' Parties, or Cominform. Duclos was the man Stalin had entrusted to enforce discipline on the Spanish and Belgian Communist Parties in the 1930s, and the man Stalin had ordered to persuade the Spanish Communists to join the Popular Front against Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

In Western Europe nobody had served the cause of Marxist-Leninism as long or as loyally as Jacques Duclos. During the Nazi occupation of France between 1940 and 1944 he had jointly organised the Front National resistance movement, the political wing of the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans, the FTP. Post-war French governments, particularly De Gaulle's had tried to edit the FTP's part in the Resistance out of the story of the occupation, preferring to highlight and glorify the actions of the Free French and the Maquis, the non-communist Resistance. Unlike De Gaulle, Duclos had not 'run away' from the Germans, and *his* FTP had violently *resisted* the Nazis from the moment Hitler had invaded Russia in 1941. In characteristic fashion the sole surviving member of the pre-Cuban Missiles War French Communist Party hierarchy had come to the south, the heartland of the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans to continue the fight.

"Why didn't you deal with Machenaud and his mad dogs when you still could?" Andropov asked the aging French Stalinist. In asking the question he glanced meaningfully at the heavily armed Legionnaires guarding the perimeter to Duclos's personal compound.

"Ah, now there is *the* thing," the old man retorted wearily. "Without Red Dawn we in France would be at the mercy of the Motherland. That really did not work out very well for us in October 1962, comrade."

Andropov scowled wordlessly.

Jacques Duclos shrugged and smiled.

"In life, politics, and in war," he sighed, "there are always too many things one needs to do at once. Choices must be made, priorities allocated. The situation is simple. The Front Internationale can either fight its enemies around Vichy," he allowed himself an unashamedly Gallic shrug, "or it can rip itself to pieces here in the Auvergne. Even Maxim understands that we cannot do both things at the same time. So," he spread his hands, "for the moment we will co-exist. Before it can flourish again in France the Revolution must survive this crisis."

And there it was in a nutshell; the old Stalinist had spent most of his life fighting, metaphorically, from 'behind enemy lines' and if the worst came to

the worst, he would be content to fight a new guerrilla war in the knowledge that his bane, Maxim Machenaud and Krasnaya Zarya could never go underground anew.

"If the fascists," he decided, "break through our lines at Vichy then we will fight them to the last drop of our blood in Clermont-Ferrand. If they ever take the city there won't be one brick standing upon another by the time they hold their victory parade in the Place de Jaude!"

Chapter 27

Tuesday 16th February 1965
Cheltenham Town Hall, Gloucestershire

The two principals, Margaret Thatcher and Michael Foot had greeted each other amicably, with unfeigned civility and a degree of familiarity which would have astonished the majority of their most devoted admirers. The mood of their initial encounter in the Robing Room of the Mayor of Cheltenham, who was all dressed up in his finery for the occasion, had been one of keen anticipation with neither of the participants seemingly infected by the nervousness of their respective seconds. The order of precedence – who should speak first in the ding dong debating battle – was settled with a toss of the coin.

Michael Foot had called heads and won.

Courteously, he had inquired: 'Do you have any strong preference in this matter, Prime Minister?'

'Not at all, Mr Foot. By all means, you lead off!'

Airey Neave had watched with forced joviality; astounded by the transformation in his friend in just the last year. Margaret Thatcher had always had an inner-steel that surprised and shocked anybody so unwise as to underestimate her. In her fourteen months in the premiership she had grown, blossomed until now there were times when he honestly believed that if she set her mind to it she could actually walk on water. It troubled him – deeply and profoundly – that in a little over three weeks men like Michael Foot and the until now, marginalised, ramshackle, mainly Communist from what he could see, leadership of the Trades Union Congress, would probably be calling the shots in James Callaghan's administration.

Jim Callaghan was a decent man, a good man, perhaps a little prosaic of thought but somebody who would seek consensus and try his level best to avoid conflict within and outside the Labour Party. But when, if he became Prime Minister he was going to be the leader of a Government violently divided by entrenched ideological, social and economic disagreements, in which Michael Foot's Tribunist faction – libertarian, pacifist and borderline Marxist – was liable to command the loyalty of at least thirty percent,

possibly up to forty percent of the Labour Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

Last summer Foot's 'Independent Group', having decried the title 'Independent Labour Party' during the crisis in the Persian Gulf in July and never re-adopted it, in the interests of so-called 'Party unity', had tried to unseat James Callaghan, and many assumed that as soon as the Party was in Government there would be a new, better-organised and executed 'putsch' to remove the man who had been Margaret Thatcher's loyal and supportive Deputy and Secretary of State for Wales for the last year.

All of which horrified Airey Neave.

Every time he looked at Michael Foot he blanched.

The electorate knew Michael Foot for his fiery rhetoric and his deeply held convictions, that he was a man who had remained true to his uncompromising socialist beliefs through thick and thin. The man had cavilled at Neville Chamberlain for appeasing fascism; later he had broken with the Labour Party after it had renounced unilateral nuclear disarmament. No sooner had he returned to Parliament after a five-year absence in 1960 than he had rebelled again and had had the Labour Whip withdrawn by the Party's then leader, Hugh Gaitskell. That rift had been so profound he had not come back into the fold until after Gaitskell's death – or rather, like millions of others, disappearance – on the night of the October War.

Foot came from a remarkable family; the youngest of four brothers who had each carved out distinguished and more than middlingly meritorious careers in the law, diplomacy and politics.

His eldest brother, Dingle, was a lawyer and colonial civil servant who had sat in the Commons as the Liberal Member for Dundee between 1931 and 1945, and since 1957 as the Labour MP for Ipswich. During the Second World War he was Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Economic Warfare and a member of the British delegation to the San Francisco Conference.

John, the second Foot brother was a lawyer and Liberal politician; whom in Michael's often stated opinion was the 'finest orator' he had ever heard, no small tribute coming from the man generally acknowledged to have the most eloquent, loquacious stage presence in post-1945 British politics.

Hugh, the nearest brother in age to Michael, had, among other things been Governor of Jamaica, and later, Cyprus in the 1950s and was currently

the United Kingdom's Permanent Representative at the Manhattan Peace Process 'convocation' at the old United Nations building overlooking the East River in New York.

Fifty-one-year-old Michael Foot was a contrary man of many and varied parts; a renaissance man of sorts. Outside Parliament Foot had enjoyed a successful career in journalism which included the editorship of the major organ of the left in British politics, *Tribune,* and writing for the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Herald*. Moreover, before the October War he had become one of, if not *the* highest profile political pundit on British television, and despite his chronic asthma no man had worked harder or had spoken on more soap boxes than Michael Foot in opposition to Harold MacMillan's - Supermac's – pre-war *ancien regime*. His countless friends and widespread admirers knew him to be an innately generous man, whose motives were pure and whose disputatious nature was leavened with a gentleness of spirit and a disinclination to cling overlong to a grudge. He was that most rare thing; for all his faults he was a genuinely good man.

Airey Neave had known Michael Foot for many years, although not closely for they moved in different circles. Of the secret world Neave had inhabited ever since he got home from Colditz in the middle of Hitler's war, Foot knew little or nothing which went a long way to explaining his stunning – positively extraordinary - naivety about the reality of international affairs.

At the lectern in front of the packed hall Michael Foot had thrust his left hand inside his jacket and adopted the declamatory pose he had patented on a hundred platforms; the self-same pose he had struck at the end of each annual pre-war Aldermaston CND march in Trafalgar Square.

His voice rang and echoed over the public address system with and almost musical rhythm as if he was not declaiming prose but blank verse. In these moments he was more a Shakespearean protagonist that mere political hack; he was a man who believed that the matters under discussion were soul food, sustenance for the spirit, vaguely religious. To him everything was fervour and belief, not *just* politics.

From the wings the Secretary of State for National Security, whom in one recent election hustings in his Welsh constituency Michael Foot had referred to as 'the Prime Minister's personal secret policeman' – likening him to being Lavrenty Beria to Josef Stalin – let much of the hyperbole wash over his head.

He looked to Margaret Thatcher.

The Prime Minister was listening attentively, her expression politely stern and respectful. Unlike her opponent she was immaculately turned out, not a single hair out of place, her trade mark dark handbag was on the floor beside her chair. She was attired in pale blue, her hair almost blond in the bright stage lighting.

Michael Foot was in full flow, his rebellious hair flopping and flying with his every expressive gesture while the Prime Minister listened with magnificent equanimity, now and then turning to gaze seraphically into the body of the hall.

Although it had the feel and atmosphere of a building fifty years older Cheltenham Town Hall had not been completed until as recently as 1903. Back then it had been a part of a major late Victorian, early Edwardian redevelopment of the old, somewhat careworn spa town, built on one side of Imperial Square – in peaceful times a green garden area for the citizenry to enjoy, rather than a semi-permanent tented refugee and displaced persons camp – at a princely cost of some forty-five thousand pounds. The hall was the jewel in the architectural crown of the building, designed to hold a thousand people, its Corinthian columns and balustraded first floor gallery giving it a regal, old world authenticity. On alcoves either side of the stage there were plaster statues of King Edward VII and King George V dressed in their coronation robes. The Town Hall was a marvellous relic from the England that had been swept away by the October War.

Margaret Thatcher had stood – anonymously and oddly virtually unreported – for the vacant Parliamentary Constituency of Cheltenham in May last year. It was one of a series of uncontested by elections – some two dozen in total – held under the auspices of the Conservative-Labour accord negotiated the previous year during Edward Heath's time to begin to restore 'politics as normal' in which 'safe' Labour and Tory seats lacking MPs with a 'significantly surviving electorate' should be given the opportunity to re-elect a representative to Parliament from 'that sitting party'.

In the event several 'independents' had challenged her, reducing her proportion of the vote to ninety-four percent.

This time around the Labour Party had put forward a candidate, with whom Margaret Thatcher had agreed to hold a 'local debate' in ten days' time. Nobody seriously imagined that Cheltenham remained anything other

than the safest of ‘safe’ Tory seats.

Michael Foot roared on.

He would ‘do away with British nuclear weapons’, he would shut the ‘factories of death’ at Aldermaston and Burghfield, he would turn ‘swords into ploughshares’, and ‘shoot the crow on the cradle’ presently ‘looking over our children’, and yet ‘honour our commitments to our friends overseas’, which seemed somewhat of a tautological impossibility to the Prime Minister given that he also wanted to scrap the Navy.

Workers’ rights!

Ban the bomb!

Good will, and presumably, fraternity to all men!

Nationalise all foreign businesses!

End National Conscription into the Armed Forces and into industry!

Jaw jaw not war war when it came to dealing with ‘our’ enemies!

Bring Trade Union leaders into the Cabinet!

Abolish the militaristic regional governments of England and Wales!

End the military occupation of Ulster!

Set up a Public Inquiry into the treatment of ‘alleged’ Irish Republican ‘so-called’ terrorists under the ‘present regime’!

Hand over reconstruction to ‘the people’!

Michael Foot over ran his allotted time of forty-five minutes. Nobody thought this at all strange; the man simply got carried away in the heat of the moment.

Margaret Thatcher rose to her feet, smoothing down her skirt as she approached the lectern gracing her flushed, perspiring and trembling opponent with a cool, suddenly steely smile.

Michael Foot was breathless, confused now the first phase of combat was completed. He circled his chair before deciding to sit down, fulminating still.

“May I congratulate Mr Foot on a most entertaining and diverting ‘talk’,” the Prime Minister declared, turning to nod her approbation to her foe and making a dismissive hand-clapping gesture that was picked up by a handful of half-hearted souls in the audience. Even the supporters of the putative leader of the Independent Labour Party had been battered into submission by their standard bearer’s fiery, pummelling rhetoric in the last hour. “I would like to be able to say that I found it,” the lady hesitated, ‘elucidating, but a ‘talk’ based on readings from the collective works of Karl Marx, Comrade

Lenin and Leon Trotsky, no matter how expertly wrapped up by such an erudite man as Mr Foot, hardly offers anything new to the debate about the future of our great, wounded nation."

The man next to Airey Neave guffawed spontaneously: "HEAR! HEAR!"

The Secretary of State for National Security frowned at him.

"You're supposed to be working for the bloody BBC!" He hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "You're supposed to be neutral, Frank!"

Colonel Francis St John Waters grimaced.

"Sorry, no can do. As you well know I've never been 'neutral' about anything in my whole damned life; I'm not about to start now, old boy!"

"It seems to me," Margaret Thatcher announced imperiously, "that the World has moved on. I honestly do not understand why the Labour Party continues to fight the battle of the past in this modern era. We know that past Governments, past leaders must take their share of the blame for the events of October 1962 but what purpose does it serve to re-fight old, irrelevant battles. The dead cannot speak in their defence. And as for socialism," she shook her head sadly, "it no more has the answers to the problems we face now than the little Englanders who once held sway in my own Party. I am not here to defend Harold MacMillan's old guard, I stand here before you to proudly proclaim the achievements of the peoples of Great Britain and the Commonwealth in defending our shores and our vital overseas interests, to honour the sacrifices of our courageous fighting men, and to put to you a vision of a future that we can proudly build for all our children."

Airey Neave clapped enthusiastically.

The first time he had heard Margaret Thatcher speak in public he had winced; there was something of a cat's claw scoring glass in her delivery that tended to set a man's teeth on edge. She had toned that down a little by the time she became Prime Minister, and although occasionally there was still a razor edge in her words, now there was also something gravely maternal, matriarchal and a gentle touch that leavened any bitter pill. It was anybody's guess how much of the change in her was down to the influence of Pat Harding-Grayson, or simply that in surviving the last year's test by fire many of her former 'rough edges' had been brutally knocked off.

There was no doubt whatsoever that her speeches were hugely better written than a year ago; that was certainly the doing of the Foreign

Secretary's novelist wife. It was as if Pat Harding-Grayson had a perfect, intuitive feel for the natural rhythm and tempo of her friend's voice. Even in this evening's speech there were passages which were more like confidential conversations with her audience than the normal blustering, hectoring party political call to arms. Tonight's offering was in fact, yet another minor masterpiece.

Nevertheless, privately Airey Neave's heart was sinking.

The 'back woodsmen' wing of the Conservative Party that would still infest the shires after the coming election no matter how bloody it got - the little Englanders who dreamed of no more for the country than its restoration to some idyllic rural stasis that had never actually existed other than in the poems of A.E. Houseman, and who saw everything in terms of class and one's 'rightful' station, a thing fixed at birth – understood that there was no place for them in any of the futures envisaged by the grocer's daughter from Grantham.

They had plotted to stab her in the back time and again in the last year, but never really had the guts to do the deed. When Edward Heath had been assassinated they had thought 'one of them' should have been Prime Minister, not some 'woman' who had only been in Parliament a blink of an eye, and a tradesman's daughter to boot! They were the shameless representatives of a class which had sleepwalked into the Third World War; and might willingly have enlisted en masse with the Powellites had Enoch Powell, his health failing, not come to an uneasy, unspoken accommodation with 'the lady'. Now, with an inevitable, probably crushing defeat in prospect on 11th March, they would have their revenge. In *their* terms Margaret Thatcher was an accident of history, a passing 'blip', a small 'c' conservative who had been tolerated by the grandees of her Party before the war, one of a handful of *token* women in a Party which, under Harold MacMillan, had been a middlingly indolent and very complacently privileged Gentleman's *club*, populated by and large by the 'right sort of chaps' who belonged to the 'right sort of clubs'.

Airey Neave had advised, asked, and pleaded with Margaret Thatcher to court 'the back woodsmen' even though he knew she never would.

"The difference between Mr Foot and I is very, very simple," the Prime Minister said, her voice ringing with authority. "He believes that Great Britain is 'Little' Britain; that we have no role, moral or otherwise in the

World and that if we pretend to be a little island everything will be all right. That is just ‘surviving’ and I think our children deserve more than that!”

Airey Neave drew comfort from the way his friend had so easily cowed the ‘Footites’ in the audience and prompted the deep murmuring support of the majority. But it was cold solace, competent local damage limitation in the big picture of a forlorn campaign.

“Surviving is not enough. If surviving means turning our backs on our international obligations, if it means depending on others for our security, on living on the scraps from richer nation’s tables I want NONE OF IT!”

“HEAR! HEAR!” Muttered Frank Waters with a vociferous hissed vehemence. “You tell the blighters what’s what!”

“We have lost so much but we have not lost our PRIDE!”

Airey Neave blinked, Margaret Thatcher had touched a raw nerve in the hall and people were beginning to jump to their feet.

“Are your chaps recording *all* of this?” He asked the former SAS man.

“That’s what I told them to do,” he confirmed. “I said for them to just get a couple of minutes of that Foot chappie’s stuff, he always comes out with the same tripe, anyway. But they’ll be filming every minute of *the lady’s* speech.”

The Secretary of State for National Security blinked even harder.

“Every minute?”

“Oh, absolutely!”

Airey Neave was momentarily lost for words; not so the other man.

“Goodness, isn’t she...*magnificent*!”

Chapter 28

Wednesday 17th February 1965
Yacht ‘China Girl’, Sausalito, California

It was a nightmare. She had hoped that jumping on a plane back to the West Coast from Philadelphia – where she worked as an information officer for the American Civil Liberties Union – would shake off the jackals but the way things had turned out she could not have been more wrong. If her ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ had not whisked her away from the airport she might have been crushed in the stampede!

If her one-time movie star parents had tried to rescue her from the circus at the airport there would have been a riot, a positive media feeding frenzy. That was where Uncle Harvey and Aunt Molly came in – where they always seemed to come in the last few years – to pick up the pieces.

They had always been there for her.

The weird thing was that they were no more her ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ than the next middle-aged man or woman on the street; but they had *always* been there for her.

Describing Uncle Harvey as her parents’ ‘lawyer’ was a bit like saying that Bobby Kennedy was *just* JFK’s kid brother; it might be factually accurate but it grossly misrepresented the true nature of the long-term relationship. Her father and mother were the public faces, Harvey the brains behind the nearly thirty-year long partnership between the former B-movie actors and the seemingly unassuming, bumbling lawyer.

There had always been an aching gap in the otherwise happy and rock-solid marriage of Harvey and Molly Fleischer; they had no children. Aunt Molly had tried for a kid several times; but something always went wrong and in the end her Aunt and Uncle had given up trying. Basically, before it killed Molly; this Harvey had once confided one night to Miranda’s parents when he was a little drunker than he thought he was.

Miranda and her four siblings had always treated the Fleischer’s big house on Nob Hill as a second home, especially in the holidays, and it had been to its familiar surroundings that Uncle Harvey had initially brought her on Monday night.

Harvey Fleischer had gone outside to speak to the baying crowd, blinked through the barrage of camera flashes and told the press and the TV to ‘go home’ because ‘nothing’s going to happen until tomorrow’. He had not believed – for a single minute – that it would do any good but ‘it’s the thought that counts’.

Uncle Harvey had been a college line-backer in his younger days. Never the fleetest footed of men he had gradually filled out over the years, becoming a commanding, granite presence with an increasingly gravelly voice that tended to bestow immense gravitas upon the tritest of pronouncements. A call to the Mayor of San Francisco, George Christopher, a liberal Republican who had held off a strong challenge by Congressman Jack Shelley in last year’s four-yearly Mayoral race had resulted in a police line in front of the house, and the clearance of the road so that traffic could pass. Beyond that, apart from locking the doors and pulling the blinds it had seemed as if there was not much to be done.

Miranda’s mood – well, despair and despondency – had reached a new nadir when Gregory had turned up. Of her three ‘big brothers’, he was the sweetest by a country mile; the least driven and perhaps the only one of the four Sullivan siblings wholly lacking in personal demons.

Miranda had demons enough for both of them!

Her eldest brother – Ben junior - was a hot shot lawyer with political ambitions; another, David, was a rocket scientist at Rice University in Texas. Gregory was a history teacher in Marin County, just across the Bay who lived on a boat with his wife, Darlene, and baby son. Darlene was expecting again, sometime in July.

“You’ll come with me to the *China Girl*,” he had decided, “and we’ll pull up the gangway!”

The *China Girl* had once been a rich man’s plaything, a seventy-three-foot brigantine rigged yacht built from Oregon spruce before the First World War. Legend had it that she had been moored off Coronado Island most summers in the roaring twenties but sometime in the fifties, three decades after her glory days she had ended up moored and near derelict, a half-forgotten hulk in Richardson Bay.

One of Miranda’s fondest family memories – actually, her favourite recent memory – was of the afternoon at the Sequoyah Country Club in Oakland when Greg and Darlene, who had been a waitress at the

aforementioned ‘club’ when they met, had turned up at their mother’s sixtieth birthday party, and broken the news that he and Darlene were getting married, and moreover, he wanted a loan to purchase the *China Girl*. Miranda had thought her father was going to have a stroke and her mother had, very nearly, swooned.

To her parents Darlene was white trash, a gold-digger who had traduced their innocent, unworldly baby boy into bed to get her hands on the Sullivan family fortune. She was nothing of the sort.

Darlene Lefebure had grown up on what middle class Americans liked to call ‘the wrong side of the tracks’, been mistreated and abused by a stepfather who would have killed her had not she and Dwayne John – an African American - who later died in Atlanta at the Bedford Pines Park shooting, her unlikely childhood friend in a town where blacks and whites *never* dated because that was a sure fire way to get lynched, jumped on the first greyhound out of Jackson, Alabama the year before the October War. A lot of water had flowed beneath the bridge since then!

It was through Dwayne that Miranda had become embroiled in the Civil Rights Movement, ended up working for the ACLU in Philadelphia and fallen in love with the greatest living American.

From way before the October War chaos had visited Miranda’s life with the regularity of the spring following autumn and winter. Before the cataclysm it had been drugs, dropping out of college, and with one notable exception, in hindsight, sleeping with exactly the wrong sort of men. After October 1962 she had got her act together, got clean, turned old maid for a while when it came to men; then she had met Dwayne again. They had had a chemically-blurred brief coupling on the night of the war, but been changed people when they met again over a year later; and still been chaste ‘friends’ when he died, shot to pieces by the bullets meant to assassinate Martin Luther King...

She had always known this day would come.

They had spoken of it more than once.

Right now, *he* was doing what *he* had to do and she was...a mess. No surprise there!

Miranda had thought her brother was joking about ‘pulling up the gangway’ when they got to Sausalito – the news posse had pursued his pickup relentlessly across the Golden Gate Bridge, despite the police

outriders trying to keep it at bay – until she saw that since her last visit to the Bay Area the old yacht had been warped twelve feet clear of the quayside.

'The municipality is laying services; you know, cables and pipes to create something they're calling 'a marina' to raise the 'tone of the place'. So, we had to get the boat warped clear of the dock so the contractors could get to work."

There were pontoon gangways at the *China Girl's* bow and stern, which Greg had proceeded to crank up as soon as Miranda was onboard, much to the annoyance of the press.

That was yesterday.

Darlene had given her a long, sisterly hug and Miranda had retreated to her tiny cabin – which was always there for her – and stayed below deck ever since.

"They's got *five* TV cameras out there!" Darlene announced as her sister-in-law dragged into the main saloon of the old vessel that morning.

Miranda's baby nephew, Jackson Benjamin Sullivan, was gurgling contentedly in his crib on the big table that dominated the compartment running over half its length fore and aft.

Darlene was dark-haired, sexily plump and positively blooming in the early stages of her new pregnancy.

"There's a couple of cops up on the deck. If you hear the generator it'll be because they're turning the fire hose on the guys who come too close. One guy tried to get onboard from a boat just now."

Gregory's wife spoke with an unaffected lazy southern drawl. She had taken this latest 'excitement' completely in her stride, as people who find themselves unexpectedly happy in their own skin often do.

Miranda envied her.

"I'm sorry, I always seem to end up here in the middle of a new crisis," she apologised ruefully.

Darlene giggled, poured her sister-in-law a coffee.

The two women had taken an instant dislike to each other when they were unexpectedly reunited in December 1963. They had met on the night of the war, sort of, but what with the drugs and the booze...that did not really count. However, both of them were different people, different women now and although they were never going to live in each other's pockets, or worlds, when they were together they were relaxed, close.

“We had no idea!” Darlene exclaimed, with pleasure rather than angst as she joined Miranda at the table. “About you and the Reverend King, I mean!”

Miranda was tall, blond and willowy; physically, and in terms of their backgrounds the women could not have been more unalike. The privileged college screw up daughter of a wealthy and more than moderately famous family, and the girl from the wrong side of the tracks in the Deep South, the product of an impoverished and abusive childhood.

However, Miranda was under no illusions that for as long as they lived she would be the one whose life was a mess; Darlene did not care or judge her, she had the priceless capacity to take one day at a time, and to accept things for what they were.

God, how she envied that...

“We didn’t exactly advertise it,” Miranda shrugged, suddenly very little girl lost and close to tears. “I think I was the only one, I never asked. But it seemed that way...”

Her vision blurred.

Darlene had taken her left hand in her hands.

“What is it?” She asked gently. “There’s something else?”

Miranda sniffed, tried to wear a brave face.

Then she made her confession.

“I’m pregnant.”

Chapter 29

Thursday 18th February 1965
Governor's Residence, Verdala Palace, Malta

Rachel Piotrowska had not expected to be officially acknowledged, let alone socially recognised by any senior member of the British authorities on Malta. There was far too much scope for embarrassment, for officials to have to obfuscate, cover up, deflect inquiries or to be forced into issuing bare-faced lies if her 'little mission' caused any unforeseen 'local difficulties' and she had assumed that the Governor – who had been informed by Dick White of the purpose of her return to the Archipelago as a matter of courtesy, protocol – would wish to have absolutely nothing to do with her.

But then life was full of surprises.

For example, that morning the Governor was dressed in 'whites' and shorts – creases improbably sharp – behind his desk on the second floor of the 'Palace' when she was shown into his presence. This surprised Rachel because military men usually dressed to the nines, chests laden with medals, when they warned off spooks like her.

The man was as she remembered him that first time they met over a year ago. The Battle of Malta had been over by then bar the mopping up of stray Soviet parachutists, Julian Christopher had just been killed, fires still burned all over the main island, it was chaos and she had been just one more problem on his plate. What had impressed her about the then acting Commander-in-Chief of All Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean – he was now the C-in-C Mediterranean (excluding Gibraltar), and the Military Governor of Malta, and other territories under Commonwealth Protection in the Central Mediterranean – was, apart from his dapper handsomeness, was the calm in his grey eyes and the quietness in his voice. She imagined there were a few more flecks of grey in his hair now although he was not quite fifty years of age. The fact he had been promoted and left in command in Malta spoke volumes to the trust the people back in Oxford had invested in his person.

Air Marshal Sir Daniel French put down his pen, rose to his feet and came around the table to greet his visitor. They were of a height, she in sensible, stylish flat shoes otherwise she might have been by a whisker, the

taller.

They shook hands before the man ushered Rachel to the cushioned cane chairs off to one side of his overlarge office next to the window.

“Forgive my impertinence,” the Governor apologised, “but you look very well, I, er...”

Rachel hesitated.

Okay, he knows about what happened at Wister Park. That means he knows everything. Why I am here and perhaps, what I have been ordered to do if things need to be resolved in a hurry. And he is still playing the part of a complete gentleman...

“Thank you. I am quite recovered.”

“Good, good. I always stop for a cup of tea at about this time of the morning.”

Rachel had dressed anonymously – the comfortable shoes she had brought back from America apart – in an attempt to appear like just another British service wife.

Dowdy, her hair a windblown mess...

“That would be...nice.”

As if on cue a knock at the door was followed by the entrance of a WREN, who looked so young she ought to still be in school, bearing a silver tray.

“The Palace is a little less cluttered than the last time I was on Malta,” Rachel observed pleasantly.

“Yes, the field hospital finally moved out last October. Valletta is still a bit of a bomb site – well, the governmental buildings, leastways – so it seemed sensible to re-locate as many offices as possible out here.”

Although the Verdala Palace had been the official residence of British Governors of the Maltese Archipelago for over a century, Daniel French’s predecessor, Admiral Sir Julian Christopher had singularly eschewed its comforts and grandeur for much humbler and baser lodgings in Mdina and Valletta. Situated on the high ground overlooking the village of Dingli on the rugged western coast of the main island, the Palace’s ancient stones and its tranquil gardens had survived the bombing of December 1963 and the naval bombardment of last April unscathed. Now it was an idyllic oasis of calm on a battered and only very slowly recovering island.

Rachel chanced to glance out of the window down into the inner walled

garden. From memory she knew there was a broad, marble veranda overlooking a luxuriant, marvellously arranged terrace populated with all manner of indigenous flora.

The man guessed her thoughts.

"I once had occasion to brief Sir Julian about this place. He never really set up shop here, of course. Those were strange times. It seems like an age ago, not just last year."

Rachel allowed her host to pour the tea.

Presently, she viewed him over the rim of her cup.

This is surreal.

Patience, he will say what he wants, needs to say soon enough. Until then, enjoy the moment for what it is.

"I should like very much to hear a little about *this* place," she heard herself saying.

"It has quite a history," the Governor smiled. "It was built in 1586 by a certain Grandmaster Hughues Loubenx de Verdelle. Hence the castle became the *Verdala Palace*," he went on, clearly in no hurry to get to the point; any point. "As you'd expect, having served on the archipelago before, as with most buildings the Palace was actually constructed on the foundations – possibly, the ruins - of an even older building. In this case a hunting lodge owned by a certain Jean Parisot de Valette, for his pains a previous Grandmaster of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and of Malta." Dan French's expression became self-deprecatory. "And I used to think that being Military Governor and Commander-in-Chief of All British Forces, et al, was a bit of a mouthful!"

Rachel very nearly giggled.

The man waved beyond the window.

"The building is pretty much surrounded by a *boschetto*, landscaped gardens by any other name. I'm reliably informed that the gardens used to be more extensive in olden times when the famous Knights of Malta allegedly came over to this part of the island to do their hunting. That unspeakable bounder Napoleon Bonaparte turned it into a prison during his brief stay, but that was after the towers had gone up. Ever since 1858 it has been the Governor's residence..."

Rachel sipped her tea.

The man sobered.

“I wanted to speak to you for two reasons,” he explained, without drama, plainly, directly. “Because of the potential, well, embarrassment of the new rumours being disseminated about the Calleja family,” he sighed, “and,” a momentary hesitation, “to be perfectly honest because I wanted to see you again.”

No, I did not expect that.

“I don’t know the whole story, Miss Piotrowska. I know what happened at Mdina, and something of what you must have gone through in Philadelphia. I know nothing of your work for Dick White, nor do I want, or need to know anything about that part of your career. However, it seemed to me that your particular, er, skills, allied to the fact that you are known and trusted by members of the Calleja family, may make it possible for a discreet resolution of the current ‘situation’.”

Rachel had returned to Malta as Sally Beard, the wife of a Royal Engineer on detachment to the Anglo-Egyptian task force upgrading the naval dockyards at Port Said. On his return to Malta *he* was supposedly to join a similar detachment to complete the surveying of French Creek ahead of a design study to establish the practicality of building one, perhaps, two large dry docks capable of accommodating vessels half as large again as either of the Royal Navy’s two largest aircraft carriers, the Ark Royal and the Eagle. The notion that she – Sally Beard – was setting up house on the main island was flimsy but she only planned to be on Malta a fortnight. Her hair was almost shoulder length, dyed dark and without makeup, and dressed like a harassed housewife unless she physically bumped into somebody who knew her, her legend was good enough. She planned to keep away from Mdina, and any of the known haunts frequented by her old, MI6 ‘colleagues’.

“Your ‘husband’,” the Governor continued, “Major Beard, is supposedly the son of a very old and dear friend of mine from my Lancaster days back in the forty-five war. He’s long dead now but I know he’d have been mortified if I didn’t say ‘hello’ while his daughter-in-law was on the island. I’m also the godfather of your son, Jonathan, who is boarding at Charterhouse School.”

Rachel put down her cup and saucer.

He is invested in my legend...

This is all wrong, and yet...

“I should very much like to see the gardens,” she decided. *These*

conversations were *always* best conducted out of earshot, in the open air where no walls could possibly have ears; especially when they had taken a truly *strange* turn into what the Americans tended to call ‘left field’.

“Capital idea!”

In the shade it was cool, in the sun a light breeze threatened to blow strands of hair into Rachel’s eyes.

“What else don’t I know about *my* legend?” She asked in a whisper.

“Nothing, I promise. I’m not about to meddle in security affairs.”

He had already ‘meddled’!

This visit...

The adornments to her cover story...

It seemed to Rachel that one of them needed to inject a little common sense into the conversation and she decided it was going to have to be her.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been *asked* to clean up a mistake that ought never to have been made in the first place. I warned Oxford that it was a mistake to cover up the execution of Samuel Calleja.”

The man halted.

They looked at each other for a moment.

“I’m the man who signed his death warrant, Miss Piotrowska,” he reminded her.

“I hadn’t forgotten. It was those idiots in Airey Neave’s department who wanted it covered up.”

“I’m sure they had their reasons.”

“Joseph ought to have been told the truth at the time. Like Peter and Marija Christopher and Rosa Hannay; at least that way they would have had clean hands, and time to prepare themselves for what happens when the truth comes out. The truth always comes out in these cases, always. Eventually, even if I manage to delay it another month, a year, or maybe several years, the truth always comes out in the end.”

The man nodded, walked on. Slowly, they progressed down one lovingly tended flower bed, and turned down another. There were grape vines along a nearby wall, gravel crunched softly under their feet.

“Regrettably, we are where we are,” the Governor of Malta said resignedly. “To be frank I can’t see how Joe Calleja knowing the truth will help him very much at present?”

Rachel knew it was a bad idea continuing this conversation.

“Marija half-suspected the truth,” she said softly. “So, did Samuel’s wife, Rosa. It was awful for them but at least they *knew*. Joe must know that Admiral Christopher – for whatever reason – covered up the true facts surrounding the sabotage of HMS Torquay. Initially, to protect Marija, and perhaps, his son; that was one thing, what happened after the Battle of Malta was another...”

“*We* needed heroes and heroines at the time,” Dan French shrugged. “Peter Christopher, Marija, and Joe; they perfectly fitted the bill at the time and the fact of the matter is that Her Majesty’s Government doesn’t want anybody throwing a spanner in the works.”

Silence fell for several steps.

“I don’t have a magic wand that will make all this go away,” Rachel explained. “What I do is I scare people so badly that they can no longer control their bladder or bowel movements,” she confided, matter of factly, “or I kill them, and depending on the circumstances I do it in such a way as to ensure nobody ever finds the body, or bodies, or I leave them where others *will* see them so as to encourage them to draw the right conclusion.”

The Governor of Malta missed a step.

The man and the woman were suddenly looking at each other.

“I’m not a schoolboy, Miss Piotrowska,” Dan French said. “None of us has clean hands these days. I was one of the fellows who burned down Dresden,” he stated grimly, involuntarily quirking his lips in a fashion that no right-thinking person could mistake for a smile, “and a few other places in Germany before the end of *that* war. Nevertheless, I firmly believe in the greater good of the many over, when all is said and done, the good of the few. You must do what you do. I will not interfere in any way; and if necessary I will do my level best to clear up the fallout afterwards. That is my job, my duty, if you like.”

Rachel nodded.

“I will try not to make too much of a mess.”

“Good. I am entertaining Dom Mintoff and his wife to dinner tomorrow evening. Just a small affair. Will you join us?”

Rachel blinked at the man in incredulity.

“Seriously?” She blurted.

“Oh, yes.” The man grinned. “*The Dom* is positively obsessive about building new docks. The moment our ‘legendary’ Major Beard steps foot on

the island he'll want to be all over him like a rash; from his point of view anything that makes Malta better equipped to stand on its own feet after perfidious Albion is kicked out is grist to the little beggar's mill!"

Rachel could not make up her mind if meeting the Chief Minister of the archipelago and the leader of the Maltese Labour Party was a good, or a very bad idea. On the plus side Mintoff was bound to bring several of his bodyguards with him, it would be a good opportunity to fix a few faces in her mind, and to look at the vehicles they were driving...

"Sally Beard would be completely out of her depth with these people."

"You think?"

She nodded, beginning to warm to the idea of encountering her quarry so early in her stay on Malta.

"That works," she conceded, thinking out aloud. "They'll think I'm an empty-headed floozy. I'll say a few stupid things and shut up. If I need to speak to Mr Mintoff again later it might make things...simpler."

Alarm flickered in the Govern of Malta's eyes.

"No," Rachel said quickly, manufacturing a less than impeccably white lie. "He's not on my list at the moment."

"Right..."

Rachel's mind was suddenly running through half-a-dozen 'plays'.

"Okay. My legend doesn't work after today," she informed the man. "Not if we're going to meet again, especially so publicly."

What did work?

"I'm sorry, I don't..."

"We have to be having an affair," Rachel decided. "The idea I came out here on my own setting up home was 'thin', an off the shelf job. An affair with a senior officer works much better. You pulled strings to get me out here. You're unattached, a widower. Everybody knows you don't take liberties with local women or with the wives of your Staff. You deserve a little leeway, you are lonely. I am available, I am leaving my husband. Divorce is easy these days. What harm does it do? A not very secret fling? My husband neglects me; all that matters to him is his career. You and I have known each other for years..."

The Governor of Malta's lips moved but no sound emerged.

"Yes, it's almost perfect," she went on. "I'm still of child bearing age. We're doing the public-spirited thing. It might even get into *The Times of*

Malta. After I'm finished here I can just disappear, everybody will take your side. It wasn't your fault it didn't work out; I was a shameless gold-digger all along!"

"Steady on," Dan French protested, struggling to stop himself raising his arms in gesticulation.

"Yes," Rachel concluded, the hint of a wry smile playing on her pale lips. She looked around, wondering how many eyes had followed her little stroll with the great man. Somebody would be watching; there was always somebody watching. "I shall be your mistress. I don't know why I didn't think about it before now. It's perfect!"

Authenticity was...*everything*.

Rachel rolled her eyes, made as if to stagger knowing that Dan French was the kind of man who would make a complete fool of himself trying to catch her.

He did.

Clumsily but effectively.

She looked into his eyes.

And without further ado kissed him squarely on the mouth with a passion that quite literally, took his breath away.

Chapter 30

Friday 19th February 1965
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire

Joanne Brenckmann squeezed her husband's hand as the flagship of the Presidential Fleet of jetliners touched down in the distance, grey smoke puffing from its undercarriage wheels as they first encountered the cold tarmac of what was now the longest runway in the United Kingdom.

The Deputy Prime Minister, James Callaghan, the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party coughed bronchially.

Joanne glanced concernedly in his direction. The poor man really did not look well; it probably explained why certain commentators had remarked on his somewhat lack-lustre contributions to the election campaign. Thus far a contrasting triumvirate of Denis Healey, the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins and the charming, fiery left-winger Michael Foot had garnered all the headlines, with Callaghan playing the role of a wise, somewhat weary old man in the background.

Joanne thought it was rather quaint that each of the party leaders had their own dedicated British Broadcasting Corporation crew that followed them wherever they went. Back home every candidate would have had an unruly scrum of demanding, feuding, back-biting TV, radio and newspapermen stalking and harassing them at every step. In their electioneering, as in so many things, the British were still, despite everything, so...civilised.

People used to remark that she and Walter seemed to have had trouble getting past the 'young lover stage'; they invariably held hands in public, stayed close at functions, and basically, touched whenever they were in reach.

Young lover stage!

The kids had all been a bit spooked by it when they got into their teens; old folks like their Ma and Pa were not supposed to be so 'fresh' with each other at *their* age. She and Walter had laughed, smirked privately over that. Anyway, they were not about to change their ways now, not after everything they had been through in the last two years after that dreadful night in

October 1962 when they had sat on the sofa in the basement utility room of their house in Cambridge, Massachusetts – within a stone's throw of the MIT Campus – and waited for the end of the World.

Thinking about it recently, Joanne was prepared to concede that she had always been just that little bit possessive about her husband. All the men on her side of the family were either fishermen or musicians – who mostly clerked in law practices and accountancy offices in Boston to pay the bills – and right from the day she had set eyes on Walter him she had known he was a 'keeper'.

He had been working his way through law school; she was working in a typing pool. Soon afterwards she started working nights in local diners to help to pay his way through college. Like her, Walter came from 'ordinary' stock, his parents were second generation German immigrants who had come to the United States in the nineteenth century in pursuit of the American Dream and there was never any spare money in either of their houses when they were growing up. Several more distant members of her family, and one or two of the girls she had thought were her friends, had been scandalised that she was engaged to be married to a 'younger' man – it was the 1930s and there was the best part of four years between them, Walter had just turned fifty-six a fortnight or so ago, and she would be sixty in November – but that had never mattered to her; it had just meant they needed to get on with having kids in a hurry and that was what they were always going to do anyhow.

SAM 26000 was one of two long-range US Air Force Boeing VC-137Cs – specially modified Boeing 707s – in the Presidential air fleet, proudly wearing the blue and white of its unique livery as it slowed and turned ponderously off the runway to approach the reception committee awaiting it at the hardstand nearest the control tower.

"Are you warm enough, my dear?" Her husband asked Joanne. She had had a head cold for much of the last week and he had not liked the idea of her standing out in the cold overlong. Fortunately, there had been no delays and everything was going to schedule. In fact, the Vice President's flight was some twenty minutes early.

"I'm fine, honey," she whispered.

There was a small part of the wife of the United States Ambassador to the Court of Woodstock that was still so ecstatic about the roller coaster ride she and her husband had been on these last two years that remained positively

gauche, naive, girlish. She and Walter had been in England over a year and despite the lows – of which there had been several – she had fallen in love with the country and its people. And every day she met new, fascinating, exciting people!

She was definitely more of a 'people' person than her husband; he was a lawyer, always a little bit reserved unless he knew himself to be among the best of friends. Her eldest sons took after their father, Sam, her 'baby' boy and Tabatha, her youngest, had inherited her temperament. That was the way of it in all families, she had assumed.

Sam was coming over to England sometime next month. Hopefully, her daughter-in-law Judy's pregnancy would not stop her coming over, too, with her granddaughter, Tabatha...

Joanne's eighteen-year-old daughter had disappeared with hundreds of thousands of other people's sons and daughters in the six-megaton fireball which had utterly destroyed Buffalo and everything around it on the night of the October War...

If Judy came over with Sam and 'the boys' – his band and their girlfriends – she and little Tabatha would stay at the Embassy in Oxford while her son spent at least a month touring the British Isles, possibly the whole summer if things went well; in which case it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Judy's second baby might be born in England.

Joanne tried not to get ahead of herself. Judy might decide to stay in Los Angeles: she and Sam were co-owners of a club called *The Troubadour*, and so many arrangements still had to be made...

So much could happen in the time between now and then; and it paid not to count one's chickens these days. For example, Walter had never expected – not for a single minute – that he would be asked to stay on as Ambassador by President Nixon. Everybody knew that Walter was a long-time associate of old Joe Kennedy's go to corporate litigator and legendary New England Democratic Party fixer Claude Betancourt, and that basically, he could not be more embedded in the 'enemy' camp; and yet, Nixon himself had put through the call to Oxford and asked 'in the interests of stability and to continue to develop the excellent relations you have fostered with the British' if Walter would, as a 'personal favour', remain in post in England 'for at least the next couple of years'. Given that her husband was the most patriotic man she had ever met in her whole life he was never going to say 'no', even though cynics

might speculate that Richard Nixon's request had more to do with practical stateside politics than diplomacy.

Claude Betancourt, who had made a flying visit to Oxford in November just after the US election, had sounded Walter out about his views on a run for the Presidency in 1968. Joanne had thought her husband was kidding her when he told her about it but apparently, Claude was deadly serious. Claude thought Nixon was going to be a disaster and that in four years' time the American people would be looking for a safe 'pair of hands at the wheel'. To her immense discomfiture it transpired that Claude saw Joanne as some kind of 'latter-day Eleanor Roosevelt figure'; and that Walter and she would 'make a Hell of a ticket!'

But actually, now she had had a chance to think about it, Walter had a lot of the right credentials for a shot, if not at the Presidency, then at least the early primaries. He could probably count on whatever was left of the Kennedy caucus assuming Bobby did not stand, Claude would sort out the funds needed to mount a serious campaign, he was an ex-Navy man, he had had a blameless career and exemplary private life; one son was a hero (Walter junior) of the October War, The Battles of Kharg Island, and recently of the Second Korean War, another (Dan) was a clerk to the Chairman of the Commission into the Causes and Conduct of the Cuban Missiles War, Chief Justice Earl Warren, and for variety Sam was getting to be famous as a national 'voice of conscience' through his song-writing and stage performances. And if Joanne cared to be cynical, the family had undeniably paid a terrible blood sacrifice in losing Tabatha. Add all that to Walter's court room gravitas and complete unflappability in any public forum and yes, he was exactly the sort of candidate the Democrats might want to run with in 1968.

Joanne realised she had been daydreaming.

She recognised the tall, handsome, imposing man who emerged from the forward door of the jet as Nelson Rockefeller. Presumably, the stocky man in the Homburg behind him was Dr Henry Kissinger, the new United States National Security Advisor.

Publicly, the Vice President had been dispatched to England to reinforce the Nixon Administration's 'confidence building' agenda with its oldest, somewhat estranged ally. However, Joanne understood that the real purpose of the trip was to attempt to 'free up' the log jams which had brought the

Manhattan Peace Process to a shuddering standstill in the first weeks of the Nixon Presidency. There was also more than a little behind the scenes 'smoothing over' to be done in the wake of President Nixon's blanket refusal to consider any 'technology exchanges' in respect of 'submarine launched missiles systems'.

Polaris was going to remain a 'US only' project; the thought of such a deadly weapon falling into the hands of the 'socialists' likely to win the forthcoming British election was anathema to the White House. Moreover, this hastily arranged trip had more than a little added frissance given the 'awkwardness' of the President's recent meeting with Margaret Thatcher in Philadelphia. Not to put too fine a point on it that encounter had set the alarm bells ringing in the Philadelphia White House.

Notwithstanding that neither Walter or Joanne Brenckmann had ever met Rockefeller, Kissinger or any senior member of their respective entourages, the introductions at the foot of the disembarkation steps were like those of old friends meeting again after a long separation.

"I'm glad that's over!" Declared Margaretta Large Fitler Murphy 'Happy' Rockefeller, the Vice-President's newly acquired second wife.

She turned to Joanne, seated next to her in the back of the third car in the convoy carrying the VIPs back to Oxford. The Deputy Prime Minister, the Ambassador, the Vice President and Dr Kissinger were in the first limousine, senior Navy, Air Force and Army officers in the second, travelling Staffers in the vehicles behind them, and the press and TV corps had piled into a bus which was presently lagging far behind the rest of the procession. As was normal on these occasions a pair of RAF helicopters paced the convoy as it traversed the still wintery countryside.

The Vice President's wife stuck out her hand.

"Let's do this properly. Everybody calls me 'Happy'," she explained, "on account of my childhood disposition!"

"I'm delighted to me you, Happy," Joanne smiled. "I'm Jo."

In normal times Nelson Rockefeller's marriage to the divorced mother of four some eighteen years his junior who had resigned from *his* staff announcing *she* was leaving her husband of twelve years – James Slater Murphy, a virologist working for the Rockefeller Institute who was, incidentally, a close friend of the mogul - just before *he* divorced *his* first wife, Mary, of thirty-two years in 1963, might have been a big issue in the

race for the White House. However, the *First Lady of* New *York* - technically, Nelson Rockefeller was still Governor of New York for another couple of weeks pending the forthcoming special gubernatorial contest, and her billionaire husband had been saved all that by the madness of the World around them.

Back in 1963 there had been snide remarks in the Democrat-leaning press comparing 'Happy Murphy to the Duchess of Windsor when she was plain *Mrs Simpson*'.' But these days people had more to worry about than the peccadilloes of the rich and famous, and in the wake of the October War people – rich and poor alike - tended to grab 'happiness' wherever they found it.

"Now," the Vice President's wife said, mischievously, "my claim to fame is that I'm the great-great-granddaughter of Union General George Gordon Meade, the fellow who won the Battle of Gettysburg, and," she smiled, "the scarlet woman who wrecked Nelson's marriage. What about you, Mrs Brenckmann?"

"Oh, I'm..."

"No, that's not good enough. All your boys are famous and in January 1969 you and I may well be standing on the same podium in front of the Capitol Building in Washington DC on Inauguration Day." Another smile, genuinely playful. "I might even be crying. Who knows?"

"Perhaps," Joanne conceded, intuitively 'liking' the younger woman. She knew that Happy Rockefeller had travelled to England leaving her eight-month-old son, Nelson junior, at home in New York. It could not have been easy for her to leave her first husband especially as she sensed, woman to woman, that Happy was not the sort of woman to ever stop being a mother to her offspring. "Walter and I have never really thought that far ahead. Right now, we're just thinking about how to make this visit go well. Life has been pretty rough for the man in the street over here since the war. And as for some of the things which happened last year, well, in most other places in the World, Walter and I would have been lynched..."

"Nelson says that's a hopeful sign for the future," the younger woman offered. "Not that I know anything."

"You know that the DNC has sounded out Walter about running in 1968?" Joanne countered gently.

"Yes, but everybody knows everything the Democratic National

Committee discusses ‘in secret’ the next morning.”

The two women laughed.

“I met your son, Dan, and your daughter-in-law Gretchen at a VA fundraiser in Philadelphia last week. Pregnancy suits Gretchen; it makes her a lot less scary.”

Joanne tried and failed to suppress a giggle.

Not for nothing had Claude Betancourt invested all his political capital and practically all his hopes and ambitions in his daughter, rather than her slew of older brothers. Gretchen was a remarkably formidable young woman who had recovered from the life-threatening injuries she had sustained in the Battle of Washington in December 1963 and come back fighting twice as hard. Presently, she was ploughing a lonely furrow defending the ‘constitutional and human rights’ of precisely the sort of people most Americans wanted to see strapped into electric chairs.

“Gretchen is a force of nature,” her proud mother-in-law agreed. “Has anybody discussed *your* schedule while *the boys* have their meetings?”

“I want to do all the museums in Oxford,” Happy Rockefeller returned instantly. “Nelson has ideas about setting up two or three endowments. Nothing flashy you understand; nothing too public but things that will make a real difference and that need year on year funding.”

Joanne was briefly taken aback.

“I didn’t just marry him for his money, you know,” the younger woman said, before laughing. “He’s got his job to do over here. I’ve got mine.”

“We’ll start at the Bodleian,” Joanne announced. “Then we’ll move on to the Ashmolean, then we shall visit the John Radcliffe, that’s the biggest hospital in Oxford, and you must visit the women’s colleges.”

“The Brits have colleges just for women?”

Joanne gave her companion the exact look which - occasionally – much to her surprise had been known to even give Gretchen pause for thought.

“Where do you think *we* got the idea from, Happy?”

“Sorry, I’m not myself. I must stop behaving like an American abroad!”

“There are other colleges elsewhere, principally in Cambridge, but here in Oxford we have Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Colleges, they date back to around1879, if my memory serves me well, and St Hugh's which opened in 1886, St Hilda's in 1893, and St Anne's, the newest which started up in 1952. Obviously, a lot of the college buildings were taken over or

displaced by the move of the Government up here from Cheltenham but most are now functioning alongside their civil service ‘guests’ or have found new premises in the city and the surrounding villages. I can’t imagine a single college bursar in Oxford would fail to beat down your door if it was made known that you wanted to ‘explore the possibilities’ with them.”

The other woman was genuinely disconcerted.

“The people at State said you had a lot of contacts in the city, but I...”

“Knowing everybody is the first rule of diplomacy,” Joanne suggested. “And actually, getting to know people is really fun. I fell in love with this city the first week we were here. The Vice President and Dr Kissinger are here to mend, and hopefully build bridges; and we must do what we can to help them.”

Chapter 31

Friday 19th February 1965
Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility, Philadelphia

Commander Alan Hannay stood aside to allow Commodore David Penberthy, the Head of Mission of the Royal Navy Liaison and Equipment Commission - the RNLEC - to precede him across the gangway between the two huge deactivated cruisers.

His friend and since February last year his ‘captain’, Peter Christopher, had once confided to him that from the day he took command of HMS Talavera to the moment she sank off Sliema just over two months later all he had done was what ‘I thought *Captain Penberthy* would have done’. Now the older man – he was prematurely grey, older than his forty-eight years – who had lost his right foot at the ankle at the Battle of Lampedusa, was Alan Hannay’s ‘captain’.

Notwithstanding that Alan Hannay had been promoted to full Commander and confirmed as the ‘Naval Attaché’ to the United Kingdom Embassy, he had been working for Penberthy for most of the last month; inspecting laid up ships and haggling with US Navy lawyers – rather than sailors – diplomatically negotiating the tortuous protocols their hosts routinely placed in their path. Fortunately, nothing really ruffled David Penberthy’s composure and his calm, deliberate dignity had characterised each and every detail of the dealings he, and members of his team, had had with the American side.

The positively giant mothballed heavy cruisers USS Salem (CA-139) and USS Des Moines (CA-134), were moored outboard of the even more massive battleship USS Wisconsin (BB-64). The adjacent and opposite quays were occupied with still more unwanted Second World War builds; cruisers, destroyers, destroyer escorts and several big, ugly amphibious assault ships. This was one of the three places the US Navy sent its ships to die; often to await ten, fifteen or twenty years on a minimum maintenance ‘warship death row’. The other big Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facilities – NISMFs - were at Bremerton in Washington State, and in the Middle Loch at Pearl Harbour.

The United States had built so many warships during the 1945 war that by the time the Japanese surrendered onboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, the Navy had run out of men to man them. Right up until August 1945 US shipyards had been launching new hulls and delivering still more ships at a ferocious pace that even before the end of the Pacific War the Navy had been forced to start mothballing surplus ships. Regardless of the peace many ships like the Salem and the Des Moines under construction in the autumn of 1945, their construction paused or delayed at the end of hostilities, had later been completed even though they were so obviously superfluous to post-war naval requirements that the profligacy of the US Treasury frankly boggled the credulity of independent international observers.

Few classes of ships ordered at the height of the Second War US Naval building 'frenzy' so marvellously exemplified the prowess of mid to late 1940s American naval architecture and the casual hubris of those wartime building programs than the mighty Des Moines class heavy cruisers.

Late in the Pacific War the US Navy had commissioned two even bigger Alaska class 'battle-cruisers' equipped with a 12-inch calibre main battery; but the 'Alaskas' aside – they were hybrid cruiser-battleships - the Des Moines were the largest gunship 'cruisers' ever delivered to any Navy on the planet.

Originally, no less than twelve ships had been ordered but only the first four; Des Moines (CA-134), Salem (CA-139), Dallas (CA-140) and the Newport News (CA-148) had actually been laid down before the end of the Second World War. The Dallas, twenty-eight percent completed, was subsequently scrapped on the slipway, and the eight vessels which had not commenced construction were cancelled, with the three remaining ships completed – more or less as designed – in 1948 and 1949.

In the 1950s the Newport News had been extensively modernised, while the Salem and Des Moines had retained their World War Two 'as built' configurations effectively unaltered; and as the new generation of guided missile frigates, destroyers and cruisers were commissioned they had subsequently been deemed obsolete. Both the Salem and the Des Moines had been mothballed for some years in the Atlantic Reserve Fleet and assigned to the Philadelphia NISMF with the majority of their weapons, machinery and equipment intact pending future modernisation, transfer to other 'service' – that is, to a friendly Navy – or scrapping.

A cursory technical inspection of the Salem had confirmed that the ship was in remarkably good condition. As befitted a fifteen-year-old hull which had seen relatively limited peacetime service the ship seemed ‘young’ for her age in a way that no Royal Navy vessel of comparable vintage could possibly match.

The Des Moines cruisers were essentially larger, longer-range, up-gunned and even more robust versions with significantly improved machinery layouts of the preceding Oregon City and Baltimore classes. Weighing in at over twenty-one thousand tons fully loaded they were over seven hundred feet long, seventy-six feet wide and capable of better than thirty-three knots – over thirty-seven miles per hour – in practically any sea conditions. They were – by a whisker - bigger than the original Royal Navy Dreadnought battleships and battlecruisers with belt and turret armour respectively six and eight inches thick, nearly as well if not better armoured. Their vitals were protected by three-and-a-half inches of cemented steel deck armour, and beneath their main decks they were subdivided longitudinally and latitudinally by a system of watertight strengthened, and in places armoured, bulkheads designed in the light of the experience of the hard-won lessons of the Pacific War.

The general up-scaling of the hull from the Baltimores had allowed a more efficient, better sub-division of the Des Moines’ fire and turbine rooms, and for the installation of a main battery of nine ‘auto-loading’, genuinely ‘rapid fire’ 8-inch 55-caliber Mark 16 rifles in three triple turrets. It would have been pointless mounting these guns in earlier classes because the rate of fire of the guns – up to twelve rounds per minute, four times as fast as the Mark 15s and Mark 12s fitted in the preceding Oregon City class and the Baltimores, would have emptied those ships’ magazines in a matter of minutes. The Des Moines class possessed cavernous magazines on a par with those of any battleship which had ever joined the US Fleet.

Although the Mark 16s had a high-elevation dual-purpose capability against aircraft, the Des Moines carried a secondary battery of twelve 5-inch 38-caliber guns in six twin turrets as per the earlier Oregon City class, but a much heavier specifically ‘anti-aircraft’ armament including twelve twin 3-inch 50-caliber Mark 27-gun mounts. Originally, she had also mounted a positive forest of 20-millimeter cannons, all of which had been removed at the time the cruisers were deactivated.

Designed to traverse the fastnesses of the Pacific the Des Moines had an operating range of over ten thousand miles at a constant speed of fifteen knots.

They were majestic, beautiful ships, superb products of engineering and the very epitome of naval castles of steel.

They were also dinosaurs, relics of a bygone age.

But it would have been churlish to reject – out of hand – the Nixon Administration's 'conciliatory' offer to transfer them to British service.

After inspecting the forward main battery turret of the USS Des Moines, David Penberthy had asked their US minders if he and Alan Hannay 'might explore alone for a while'.

After clambering high into the superstructure where they gained a sublime – for a Navy man – view of the ships around them in the NISMF basin, including the Cleveland class twelve thousand ton 'light' cruiser USS Portsmouth (CL-102), another vessel included on the provision 'transfer list'. A fourth cruiser on that list, the USS Astoria (CL-90), a sister ship of the Portsmouth was currently mothballed in the rusting 'Reserve Fleet' in San Francisco Bay

Neither Penberthy or Alan Hannay was remotely interested in a ship which had been swinging around its chains forgotten and rusting for a decade or more. Whereas, most of the ships at the Philadelphia NIMSF, notwithstanding many had been mothballed for many years, had all been 'cared for' on the assumption that one day their country might need them again.

In the near distance the USS Oregon City (CA-122), an only slightly less massive incarnation of the Des Moines – from a distance virtually indistinguishable in fact – lay inboard of the Portsmouth. The Oregon City, had been at the NIMSF since early 1948 after having spent only some eighteen months in commission, patiently awaiting the recall to arms.

Back home in England the Royal Navy's 'Reserve Fleet' theoretically included several British cruisers of a similar, perhaps slightly older vintage, but all of them had been left to rot, and shamelessly cannibalised for spare parts. Not that any of those old hulls were a patch on anything of comparable size moored in the Delaware River.

Probably of more utility to the Royal Navy at present than the big cruisers on offer, was the proposal to transfer over twenty late war-build

Fletcher class, and slightly more modern – but still largely obsolete – unmodernised Allen M. Sumner class fleet destroyers.

Nevertheless, the two Navy men understood how the minds of their political masters worked; the big cruisers were the thing that would seal the deal. With ships like that nosing in and out of Spithead and flying the flag around the World what government in Oxford could not convince itself that Britain was still 'Great'.

"The politicians will love these ships," David Penberthy remarked, digging a pack of cigarettes from his pocket as he nodded across the basin to where the USS Oregon City lay inboard of the only slightly smaller castle of steel, the USS Portsmouth. Both he and Alan Hannay were in civilian suits so as not to unnecessarily inflame tensions. The US Navy did not want to give the Royal Navy so much as a life raft, let alone a fleet of gunships. It certainly did not want men in Royal Navy 'rigs' being photographed on the decks of 'its ships'.

The younger man chuckled.

Penberthy lit up, inhaled deep.

Both men rested their arms on the rail.

"I still can't get over Lady Marija's expert exposition of the whys and wherefores of the American 'offer'," the older man guffawed.

Anal Hannay laughed, shook his head.

"Actually, she's probably right. Assuming the Americans are willing to supply ordnance on demand, we can certainly make use of most of the ships on the list, sir. Frankly, from what I've seen the last few days I don't need to wait to read the surveyors' final reports; all of these ships are far better built than any of our old war-time conversions. Goodness, the standard of work in British yards was so dire before the October War that we were routinely sending our ships out to Gibraltar and Malta to be made seaworthy!"

Penberthy nodded sagely.

In comparison to the ships he had inspected in recent days the last 1945 war-built cruisers in the Reserve Fleet at home were derelicts that no sane naval designer would even think of trying to reactivate for service in the modern age.

"Before we took Talavera to sea for the first time after her conversion to a Fast Air Detection Escort was supposedly completed," he reminisced ruefully, "Peter was literally tearing his hair out trying to get any sense out of

the jobsworths running the dockyard. “

He recollected that Peter Christopher had been horrified by the criminally slapdash working practices and the consistently poor – virtually non-existent on some shifts - quality control of much of the work carried out by the Chatham Royal Naval Dockyard. Every second weld on the destroyer’s newly re-fashioned superstructure had had to be re-welded; inspection cableways breached watertight compartments rather than following prescribed, pre-prepared conduits, and every second seal leaked, whole sections of wiring were missing, or worse, fitted in completely the wrong place. Peter had quickly discovered that virtually nothing specified on the master conversion planning schematics was to be trusted without exhaustive and time-consuming checks and tests. His division had spent so much time putting right the shoddy workmanship, mistakes and omissions of the dockyard that Talavera was five weeks behind schedule putting to sea to commence chasing down basic operating faults and to start, belatedly, to fully familiarise itself with their new radar and electronic warfare suite of ‘toys’.

Chatham Royal Naval Dockyard was no more, of course; likewise, the ‘jobsworths’ who had caused Peter and he so many headaches. On the other hand, but for all the delays Talavera might have been alongside in port that weekend in October 1962 less than two or three hundred yards from where the bomb had gone off.

Probably best not to dwell on that...

“Okay,” he decided, “we’ve been out of earshot of our ‘bodyguards’ long enough to have them panicking that we’re stealing the Wardroom silver. Let’s go and see what else *they* don’t need any more!”

Chapter 32

Friday 19th February 1965
The Verdala Palace, Malta

While it would have been untrue to describe the Governor of Malta's mood as being one of nervous – albeit well-concealed – agitation, Air Marshal Sir Daniel French found himself uncharacteristically 'distracted' that evening as he welcomed his guests into the ornate, vaulted dining hall of the residence. Beneath the chandeliers and the opulently painted scenes on the ceiling panels the small party was lost on the table set for them at one end of the hall. There were other rooms which might have sufficed; and had the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party not been present the Governor would have made other arrangements. Unfortunately, the man was so touchy, insecure really, that to be asked to dine in an otherwise perfectly suitable 'lesser' setting would have been interpreted as some kind of slight or outrageous personal insult.

As a rule, it was Dan French's invariable policy to avoid upsetting anybody unless it was absolutely necessary, or practically speaking, unavoidable. Life had been much easier back in the good old days when all he had to do was fly his kite to Germany, bomb a bunch of strangers and try to get home if not in one piece, then with as many members as possible of his crew alive.

At the time he had arrived on the Archipelago in August 1963 the Women of Malta Movement was in full swing, and the man whose seat he now occupied, Vice Admiral Sir Hugh Staveley-Pope, still bereft after the loss of his young wife in the October War and self-evidently, on the verge of a nervous breakdown was presiding over not so much a vital strategic colonial territory, as a massive prison camp. While Dan French prided himself on eventually persuading Staveley-Pope to stop further wide scale internments, by then the man had got it into his head that the only thing to be done, was to unilaterally evacuate all British forces from the Mediterranean. If he had not been killed in the American bombing raid in December the man ought to have been shot...

Everything had changed the day Julian Christopher arrived. Overnight,

what had gone before seemed like a bad dream. The new man had emptied the ‘concentration’ camps, begun a dialogue with the islanders and most importantly, made it crystal clear that if it came to it *we*, the British, would defend the archipelago to the death.

In short order Dan French had found himself scheduled for early promotion and appointed, in effect, the number two man in the Mediterranean and largely responsible for overseeing the smooth operation of the ‘civilian side’ of the Maltese Archipelago, while the new C-in-C did what he could to shore up the ‘military situation’ in the theatre.

Those had been heady, exhilarating, exhausting days.

He had only known Julian Christopher a little less than four months but it seemed in retrospect, as if those months had been years. He still mourned his friend.

Dan French knew for a certainty that Julian Christopher would never have got himself into the ‘situation’ he now found himself in. The ‘fighting admiral’ might have salted the battlefield over the small matter of Samuel Calleja’s treachery; but he would *never* have become embroiled in the machinations of the woman now viewing him with theatrically wide, awestruck, positively adoring eyes.

He ought to have never got involved.

Kept a million miles away from her.

Yet, like an idiot he had had to meet her again...

She had invited herself into the residence...

She was installed in a room down the first-floor corridor from his own!

What on earth must the Staff be making of all this?

“The Governor tells me that your husband will be leading the team surveying French Creek on his return from the Canal Zone, Mrs Beard?” Dom Mintoff asked over soup.

“So, I believe,” Rachel said, reluctant to drag her gaze from the face of the man at the head of the table and directly to her right for a moment longer than politeness demanded. “But that may not be for months.”

“My husband is an architect,” the dark-haired Englishwoman sitting demurely to Dom Mintoff’s left explained to the other woman.

Rachel smiled a tight-lipped smile.

In her business one always did one’s research well in advance of encounters such as this.

Moyra de Vere Bentinck, forty-seven years old; the second daughter and third child of Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald Joseph Bentinck and Florence Frederika de Vere Beauclerk, which meant she was probably very distantly related to the current Earl of Portland. She had met Mintoff while he was studying in England; the couple had married in 1947 and had two children, daughters born in 1949 and 1951 called respectively Ann and Joan, the latter of which translated into Yanna in Maltese.

The marriage was not, according to rumours - as these things go - a bed of roses.

Mintoff was one of eleven children of a Royal Navy cook who had made good; partly through a keen, predominantly feral intelligence and good luck, but also, indisputably because he had an appetite for hard work and he was very, very ambitious. A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford who became an architect he had spent the war years as a garrison engineer in the English Midlands before returning to Malta as a favoured son of Empire.

In post-1945 Malta Mintoff was the assistant - the man on the spot - of the British Government appointed architects charged with overseeing the reconstruction of the bomb-damaged island, starting with Valletta. Had he not been so busy building up his political muscle within the General Workers Union at the Admiralty Dockyards, people said he might have achieved more than was actually achieved – truth be told, something between nothing and not a lot - in the first post-war phase of reconstruction. However, nobody ever accused 'the Dom', all five feet five inches of him, of lacking an eye for the main chance.

Malta's post-1945 constitution had effectively granted self-rule in everything but defence and foreign policy, an arrangement which most Maltese had embraced. Mintoff had, too, and had continued to support it right up until the day the British Government rejected the formal integration of the Archipelago into the 'British State' – a sort of Mediterranean 'Isle of Wight' scenario - after which he had focussed on turning the Maltese Labour Party into the principal instrument of 'national independence' that his personal ambition and ego demanded.

Rachel gave the bespectacled former Prime Minister of Malta a toothy smile as if she was – improbably – dazzled by his company. It was she had determined best that she made every pretence to be an air-headed housewife horribly out of her depth.

“Oh, really? That must be terribly interesting, Mr Mintoff?”

The man had no idea how to reply to this.

Did the woman not know who he was?

Rachel had viewed the arrival of the Chief Minister of the Maltese Archipelago through binoculars from an upper floor window. Two cars: Mintoff driving his wife in the first; two goons in the second. The goons had parked up a little way down the road up to the hill top Verdala Palace.

“I have not worked as an architect for many years,” the Dom replied politely.

Condescending little prick!

“Oh, no, I’m sorry, I must have misunderstood...”

“I work now for the Maltese people.”

“Oh, that’s very generous of you, I am sure.”

The Governor stirred uncomfortably. He would have burst out laughing in any other circumstance.

“Mr Mintoff is the Archipelago’s most senior political figure, *Mrs Beard*,” he said neutrally. “He and I collaborate closely in the civil affairs of Malta. His,” French looked to the little man and nodded approbation, “support and advice is invaluable to my Staff and I.”

Rachel ignored this.

She pretended she had not heard it.

Instead, she turned to the only other diner, the Governor’s son. The younger man, a slightly taller more youthful incarnation of his father who wore his RAF Mess ‘bib and tucker’ with a natural élan, was watching proceedings with amused eyes, clearly not knowing what to make of the older but not unattractive female interloper who had suddenly materialised in his father’s life...as if out of thin air.

Other men in his place might have had ‘a view’ about the sudden appearance of the woman everybody assumed to be his father’s mistress from England. Guy French was simply...curious.

“Guy and I have not set eyes on each other for years. We must have first met when he was a schoolboy,” Rachel said playfully. “My son Harry in England is the age he was then.”

Guy French was perfectly well aware that his father was not the godfather of anybody called Harry Beard, in England or anywhere else.

Curiouser and *curiouser*...

Rachel had guessed that any son of Daniel French would have been far too well brought up to start interrogating her about: when and where exactly he was supposed to remember her from; or who on earth she was; or why precisely she was staying at the Verdala Palace when she was supposed to be 'setting up house' for a chap who was supposed to be in the Canal Zone whose name he had never heard of?

"I don't remember you ever being this quiet when you were a boy, Guy?" Rachel asked innocently.

"Yes, well, there's been a fair bit of water under the bridge since then, *Mrs Beard*."

"Sally! Please, I do hate the way people are so formal sometimes!"

"*Sally*, then."

Rachel realised the son had made eye contact with his father who had nodded, imperceptibly for him to pick up the conversation. She had wondered, ever so vaguely, if she had pushed things too far with Sir Daniel. He was a good man but even good men had their limits. Now she had her answer, he was prepared to play the game and to see where it led.

The son changed the subject.

"Actually," Guy French shrugged, quirking a deprecatory grimace to his companions, "I recently met, or rather, met again, a lady I encountered last July back in the Persian Gulf." He involuntarily touched his face, his forefinger stroking his moustache.

Rachel did not think Guy French's developing handlebars suited him. He wore his dress uniform with pride, as if it was an old, very comfortable glove. He was still a little weathered in the face from his near-death experience in the Second Battle of the Persian Gulf.

"I met her in Valletta, I recognised her immediately." He grinned anew, sheepishly. "I looked rather different the first time we met, and I was unconscious of course. I must have been a bit of a mess, I suppose. Anyway, we got to talking. She's a nurse in the US Navy and by her kind offices I was able to go onboard the USS Dewey and personally thank several of the men who save my life back in July. I'd wanted to do that for a long time..."

Rachel sighed.

Why do I not think there is going to be a happy ending to this story?

"Anyway, while the Dewey was in port we met a lot. I showed her around the island. The reason she, Heidi is, was, her name, became a nurse

in the first place was because as a girl she read about Doctor Margo Seiffert, the Director of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women in Mdina. All about how she was the chief surgeon on a hospital ship off Okinawa that was hit by two Kamikazes; and later her pioneering orthopaedic work at RNH Bighi. But now she's gone, Heidi, I mean."

"Oh, dear," Rachel pouted melodramatically, mostly for the benefit of the Mintoffs.

"She left me a letter," Guy French explained, brightening. "It seems she isn't ready to settle down. The US Navy has a special programme under which they train their best nurses to be doctors. Trauma and combat surgeons, just like Heidi's heroine, Margo Seiffert. I always wanted to fly and when I learned to fly I always wanted to fly big jets, V-Bombers. I wouldn't have given that dream up for anything. Heidi has every right to chase her dream."

Moyra Mintoff sniffed.

"That is so...*noble*."

Guy French chuckled.

"Heidi sailed away; she knew I was headed back to England in March or April. I doubt if the RAF will ever let me fly Vulcans or Victors again, even if dear old England can still afford to keep them in the air, but I'll settle for a spell instructing and teaching until I'm fully mended. These days it pays to be thankful for what one has, for small mercies, don't you think, sir?"

This last interrogative he put to his father.

Who nodded, thoughtfully.

Rachel had been watching Dom Mintoff, listening with half an ear. She had seen the Maltese politician from afar dozens of times, but never been this close, in his face. With some people one needed to be in their face to glimpse their true mettle, to identify the fault lines in their psyche.

Interesting...

I could be wrong but I think he's observing me the same why I am studying him; like bacilli under a microscope...

The Governor of Malta was an accomplished, charming host but conversation was a little stilted, forced as if the guest of honour understood he had been invited to dinner for the sake of form. He had attended, eaten well, and been relieved to depart without having shown obvious weakness in the face of his overlords.

The Governor escorted Mintoff and his wife to the entrance to the Residence, saw them safely into their car and watched them drive away before returning to ‘wash up’ the evening’s business with Rachel and his son.

“What’s going on, sir?” Guy French inquired laconically.

His father poured three glasses of Brandy, two fingers in each.

“We’ll go outside,” he determined, leading Rachel and his son out onto the patio. A spotting rain was falling so the trio took cane chairs on the sheltered veranda to contemplate their drinks. “Sally,” he explained, softly, “has been sent out from England to help us with a little problem which has arisen.”

The son nodded, sipped his drink.

“I didn’t think I’d heard of a Major Beard.”

“Oh, he exists,” Rachel assured him. She had dropped the ‘Sally Beard act’ the moment they were alone. “Just not anywhere near here.”

“And this little problem we have out here?” Guy French asked, knowing he probably did not need to, or want, to know the answer. “Whatever it is...”

Rachel contemplated this for several seconds.

She quirked a half-smile at Guy French’s father, who raised a questing eyebrow as if not trusting himself to speak.

“Perhaps,” she suggested, a little more mischievously than she had planned, “the best way to look at it would be...”

She hesitated.

“To think of me as the maid clearing up the fallout you boys have left behind after a particularly good Mess *binge*.”

Chapter 33

Saturday 20th February 1965
King's College, Oxford

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson was feeling his age. Worryingly, he had also been starting to feel a little disconnected with events at home by the time his plane flew back into Brize Norton. His trip to the Middle East had emptied his physical and psychic batteries and what he needed now was not a new round of 'talks' about 'talks', or another game of diplomatic blind man's bluff with the Americans but a week away in the country catching up on his sleep in between perusing the pages of a couple of good books. However, it was not to be.

"Eat up your toast, Mark," the Foreign Secretary's wife prompted the eleven-year-old son of the Prime Minister.

The boy frowned but did as he was told.

Of the Thatcher twins he was the less confident, moody. He and Carol had been banished to boarding schools in the Home Counties before their eighth birthdays while their mother launched her career in politics. There was nothing reprehensible in that; it was the way of things, an English tradition that when parents were called to the Service of their country, they packed their offspring off to one or other of the schools which had been founded to serve precisely this need.

It was because Margaret Thatcher had collected young Mark on the way to visit his sister, Carol, at Queenswood School near Hatfield, in Hertfordshire, before going on to stay overnight with family friends, that she and the twins had survived the night of the War.

Carol, the more self-reliant and happier of the twins had adapted better to her mother's long absences; Mark brightened with a parent's reassuring presence and was obviously the needier of the siblings. The twins had been born six weeks prematurely by Caesarean section, small babies but otherwise, thankfully, they were stubbornly healthy children who had benefitted immensely from having acquired honorary grandparents in the last year. Pat Harding-Grayson, and to a lesser degree on account of his peripatetic and demanding duties her husband, had spent most of the last year in loco

parentis, as one crisis after another had demanded Margaret Thatcher's whole attention.

"Where is Mommy today?" The boy asked with a note of petulance.

"She's gone to Wales," Pat Harding-Grayson told him. "To make several speeches, I think."

She hated lying to the twins.

While it was true that the Prime Minister was visiting Wales; it was only so that she could secretly board a Royal Navy destroyer for the short trip to Belfast Lough for an ultra-secret conclave with the leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party.

One last attempt to appeal to reason...

If ever there was such a thing in the politics of the island of Ireland.

Pat Harding-Grayson shared her husband's reservations about attempting to bring the Irish 'Unionist' part of the Conservative and Unionist Party to its senses in the middle of an election campaign. If the 'security' situation on the ground in the province was not so dire, or apparently, so hopeless, Margaret would have knocked it on the head; instead, she had swallowed her pride and gone along with the consensus view in the Cabinet that at the very least an effort should be made to do 'something to try to stop the bloodletting', and that this was as good a time as any.

One unfortunate consequence of being the children of the Prime Minister had been that the twins rarely mingled with other children of their age. They lived a life hemmed in by bodyguards, cloistered within secure buildings, sheltered in all the ways that were least natural to growing boys and girls, almost entirely in the company of adults.

Pat had discussed – albeit in passing – the lives of the children of national leaders in her regular correspondence with Marija Christopher in Philadelphia. The Ambassadress had become a prolific letter-writer since travelling to America last April. 'A natural network builder', as the Foreign Secretary was wont to remark, infallibly with a wry smile playing on his lips.

President Kennedy's children were still very young, so it would not have been so bad for them. Lyndon Johnson's daughters – Lynda Bird and Luci - both of whom had befriended and been befriended by Lady Marija and her 'embassy ladies' were twenty and seventeen respectively, and President Nixon's daughters Patricia ('Tricia in Marija's letters), nineteen as it happened, tomorrow, and her younger sister Julie, was still only sixteen.

Initially, Pat's husband had scoffed at suggestions that the best way 'into the White House' was via the President's daughters; and been proven completely mistaken. Not that Pat believed for a moment that Lady Marija, and her 'circle of embassy ladies', were that mendacious. It was more the case that she and many of her friends understood what it was to be like to be cut off from one's roots, re-planted in an alien place; like for example, a White House surrounded by police and tanks in the middle of the most turbulent period in American history since the Civil War.

Everybody marvelled at how easily the 'Christopher Regime' in Philadelphia had contrived to form so many essentially friendly, benevolent relationships with so many influential people despite the near breakdown of 'normal' diplomatic and strategic linkages to the 'Old Country'. It helped that Peter Christopher and his beautiful young Maltese wife had a movie star presence, a natural celebrity that appealed to the American soul but that alone would only have achieved so much; what they had somehow managed to do was to go on winning new friends as successive decisions and actions by the British Government alienated old ones.

Peter Christopher had been the first major foreign figure to 'reach out' to Jack Kennedy, a seemingly broken man living in what amounted to internal exile in Cape Cod. Back in July Lady Marija had held Jackie Kennedy's hand at the Jefferson Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia as a priest stood ready to administer the last rites to her husband. Marija and her Maltese 'sister' Rosa Hannay had invited the Johnson girls into the Embassy for an 'English tea', and thereafter got on like a house on fire, it seemed. The Nixon girls had accepted a similar invitation, and subsequently Lady Bird Johnson had extended a very public, open-ended invitation to Sir Peter and Lady Marija to 'stay over' at the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall; remarkably, among the guests of honour invited to attend the forthcoming baptism of little Elisabetta Margo at the Roman Catholic Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia in the middle of April, were two past Presidents – JFK and LBJ and their families – and Richard Nixon, his wife Pat and their two daughters, and a veritable who's who of the great and the powerful of the House of Representatives.

The icing on the cake was that Margaret Thatcher, whether or not she was still Prime Minister by then, as one of the godparents, would be rubbing shoulders with a host of Administration and Congressional glitterati who

would otherwise run a mile when she entered the room.

Pat could not remember ever having looked forward to attending a christening so much as she was to that of Elisabetta Margo. Her husband, an old cynic, kept referring to the occasion as '*the* diplomatic event of the age'!

Mark Thatcher was unenthusiastic about 'a christening'; his sister got wide-eyed and dreamy just at the thought of travelling to America and being among so many 'famous people'.

The Christophers, being the sort of people that they were, had already contacted 'James Callaghan's Staff' to ascertain who might 'represent' the Labour Party in Philadelphia in the event of a 'change of Administration in Oxford'.

Tom Harding-Grayson would much rather have remained at the kitchen table, telling tall tales for his young audience, than confront again the reality of the day's business.

The Cabinet had reacted with uncharacteristic discord to the Prime Minister's report that she had broached – to no avail - the subject of the transfer of submarine missile and the latest miniaturised nuclear weapon technologies with President Nixon.

The problem was that the Labour contingent had not – in Party Terms, leastways – settled on a policy in respect of what happened to the country's nuclear deterrent in the years to come, even though the V-Bomber Force, what little of it remained operational, was facing obsolescence. Some claimed that the evidence of the recent wars; notably the precision strike which had – probably – decapitated the Soviet Troika at an, in retrospect, critical juncture of the Iraq Campaign, and the sinking of the USS Kitty Hawk, signalled that the day of the manned bomber was far from over. However, in both cases V-Bombers had been operating in conventional, non-nuclear strike roles. Moreover, in between those gallant exploits both Vulcan bombers used in 'nuclear attack' operations over Central Iraq had been shot down by Red Air Force surface-to-air missiles shortly after they released their bombs. Leaving aside the fact the 'deterrent' had not done the United Kingdom much good at the end of October 1962; clearly, the V-Bomber Force was not the long term 'deterrent' it might have been in the 1950s. Technology moved on apace and one day it was not inconceivable that the Soviet Union might again threaten the West. Perhaps, as apposite, was the notion that the way the World was now – a mess – a 'credible deterrent' was

as relevant as it had ever been.

‘Basing missiles in silos in the British Isles just makes our cities targets,’ the Prime Minister had declared. ‘Rationally, we must put our deterrent somewhere beyond the reach of *any* potential enemy.’

Tom Harding-Grayson could not think of *any* reason that – given recent history – a US President would be remotely interested in permitting *any* British Government access to, or a short cut to obtaining the Polaris system, or the technologies required to build a home-grown version of a similar submarine-launched ballistic missile capability.

And yet, notwithstanding the Prime Minister’s refusal to accept President Nixon’s blanket ‘no’, the subject was the first item on the agenda for this morning’s ‘talks’ with Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger.

Chapter 34

Saturday 20th February 1965
Westminster, London

Forty-one-year-old Colonel Edwin Noel Westby Bramall had never had any illusions about what a filthy business taking back the ruined city was going to be. That morning, as he had at dawn each day since he had set up his battalion field Headquarters in the old, structurally more or less intact Foreign Office building in nearby Whitehall, he had walked across Parliament Square and climbed the battered, defiantly still standing Clock Tower of the shattered mother of Parliaments, and looked out through the shattered clock-faces, surveying the great, ravaged once and future capital.

Down on Parliament Green and in the Square beyond Miriam Prior's 'huddled masses' – as one of his subalterns had called the hundreds of civilians who insisted on remaining in the middle of what was likely to become a battlefield – lived in a tented, ramshackle camp. Grey smoke from their cooking fires rose almost vertically in the still frosty, wintery air. To the north it was too misty, the overcast too low over Hampstead to make out many ground details. To the west new palls of smoke hung over the last redoubts of the rebels.

The constant patrolling of the gunboats had driven the diehards far from the river bank; now they were concentrated around the piles of rubble that marked the outline of where Stamford Bridge, the former ground of Chelsea Football Club had stood, in Eel Brook Common, and in the trench-lines abutting the perimeter of the gas works along Imperial Road. Several aircraft had made high-level – carpet-bombing – raids on the area overnight. As the fighting had intensified in the last fortnight two fresh infantry battalions – 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers and the 5th Wessex Yeomanry – had relieved the original assault force, now the fresh troops were slowly, surely closing the circle.

Farther down the river the Royal Engineers were working to fully re-open Tower Bridge to permit the Navy to moor a couple of destroyers in the mid-stream between it and London Bridge. Ships so positioned would be able to direct fire onto practically any target in Greater London. Other 'fire

support' vessels were already in position in the Thames Estuary ready to back up the forthcoming north-south 'London Corridor Campaign' to open the route to the docks from the north via the least damaged districts of the capital. Engineers had already re-activated several of the locks in the Royal and West India Docks, and set up a forward logistics depot in North Woolwich. South of the Thames a company of the Scots Guards had gone ashore at Greenwich, taken possession of the heights around the old Royal Observatory and extended their lines as far west as Deptford Creek without encountering significant resistance.

Bramall studied the South Bank across a deserted Westminster Bridge. The Ton class minesweeper HMS Kellington had contrived to anchor on the Embankment to his left, opposite the burned-out shell of County Hall. The Navy had done wonders, he conceded grudgingly. They had had to pull down the minesweepers masts and aerials to get it this far up river and until the last couple of days when all his communication kit had finally arrived, the Kellington's radio room had been his only reliable means of talking to the World.

Every time Bramall set eyes on the scorched wreck of County Hall he experienced a pang of loss and remorse. His elder brother, Ashley, had died in London on the night of the war. Notwithstanding they were different kinds of men with contrasting views on many things, politics included, he felt his brother's death as keenly now as he had two years ago.

Through his powerful Zeiss binoculars Bramall saw ragged people moving around on the South Bank. It was known that a commune survived in the shadow of the half-demolished Festival Hall, eking out its subsistence in the warren of concrete passageways and tunnels in and around the old Festival of Britain site. The men and women, possibly a transient community of between three and four hundred souls scavenged a 'territory' of four or five square miles south of Westminster, trading their wares for food and other supplies from the peoples now beginning to encroach on the rim of the worst blasted areas. The Festival Hall 'group' had sent regular emissaries across Westminster Bridge, and been allowed to pass through the barricades to affirm their peaceful intentions and understandably, to request rations for their 'children'.

The Bramall brothers came of well to do Hampshire merchant stock. Contrarily, their mother had been an ardent socialist and Ashley, nearly eight

years Edwin's senior had adopted her 'leanings' despite their father's best endeavours; sending Ashley to Westminster and then Canford Schools before dispatching him up to Magdalene College, Oxford. Ashley was by far the more cerebral of the brothers. At Oxford he had chaired the University Labour Club, and been an enthusiastic member of the Union, becoming its treasurer in 1939, frequently debating with a certain Edward Heath with whom he had regularly corresponded for the rest of his life. Ashley had been commissioned into the Northamptonshire Yeomanry, finishing the war a Major but unlike Edwin he had thrown himself into the profession of law – and politics - after 1945. He had won Bexley in a by-election, losing it to his old verbal sparring partner, Edward Heath in 1950. Called to the Bar of the Inner Temple in 1949 he had immersed himself in London's 'local' politics, being elected Alderman in 1959, and at the time of the October War had sat on Westminster City Council. His particular interest had always been education...

Bramall put down his glasses, hearing booted feet on the stairs behind him. In the family he had always been 'Dwin', the precocious one. Just to make sure he did not go the 'socialist way' of his brother he had gone up to Eton and missed out on the ideological quagmire of University life because of the Second World War, going straight into the Army, commissioned into the King's Royal Rifle brigade in May 1943. Thereafter, he had gone ashore during the Normandy landings with the 2nd Battalion of his Regiment and fought with it all the way to Germany acquiring a Military Cross in the process.

The Army was always going to be his career after that.

His profession had taken him to Japan in 1946; he had served as an instructor at the School of Infantry, and after a posting to the Middle East he had returned home to instruct at the Staff College in Camberley...

His life had been an adventure, a fulfilling adventure during which he had found time, in 1947 to marry...but all that was over, his wife Dorothy and their two children had disappeared on the night of the war and that once handsome, now burned hulk of a building stubbornly still standing on the South Bank was like a thorn in his unhealed soul...

"Ah, there you are, Bramall!" Brigadier David Willison gasped, having not quite recovered his breath from the steep ascent up the Victorian stairway to the Clock Room.

“Good morning, Edwin,” Miriam Prior smiled, stepping out of the Royal Engineer Sector Commander’s shadow.

Initially, Bramall had been intuitively suspicious about the woman’s presence in what was, after all, a combat zone, and unimpressed when Willison had informed him that ‘Miss Prior has been granted authority over all civilian matters in Central London by the Home Office’.

Bramall nodded to her, smiled tight-lipped.

Miriam Prior lived as her ‘people’ lived, down in the squalor of the camp yet she was invariably – the mud splashing the hem of her long skirts and boots apart – well turned out, ‘spic and span’ in the soldier’s terms. In fact, far from being a bunch of grubby, smelly, hopeless supplicants like most of the Germans he had encountered in the spring and summer of 1945, Miriam Prior’s followers took pride in their appearance and personal hygiene, exactly as he expected his own men to behave, and seemed to be preoccupied ‘taking care of each other’.

The murder of their nominal leader – ‘King Harold’ – had simply made them coalesce even more determinably around and behind his ‘Queen’, Ms Prior.

“How are things looking this morning?” She asked Bramall, stepping across to join him standing at the shattered south face of what had been before the October War the most iconic of all the symbols of the British state.

David Willison’s men had cleaned out the debris from the tower and bolted makeshift hand-rails to make it harder for the unwary to fall out of it to their deaths far below.

“Quiet, I think,” the man replied, finding it uncommonly easy, and pleasant to address Miriam Prior as if he was presenting himself to a member of the lesser aristocracy. Beneath her oddly coloured kaftan-like attire, and despite the flowing, sometimes purple streaked hair she carried herself like a ‘real’ lady. She often seemed to him like a woman out of some ancient stained-glass window in a great cathedral. Eleanor of Acquitane, perhaps, a modern Guinnevere... A woman to be reckoned with, at peace within her own skin and despite her reservations, it was readily apparent that she actually liked being treated thus.

“That’s good,” she murmured, lost in thought as she stared out into the dull morning.

David Willison had recovered his breath.

“How long it will stay this way later is another matter, of course.”

The 1st Armoured Brigade had moved up to the start line for Operation Poplar under cover of darkness last night; a motley column of every kind of armoured vehicle the British Army could scrape together: a handful of Centurion tanks, several Saladin armoured cars, six-man four-wheel drive ‘Humber Pigs’ and a few of the new Avis Saracen six-wheel armoured personnel carriers would lead the assault, supported ‘as necessary’ by Brigade artillery – some twenty guns of various calibres - positioned between Waltham Abbey and Loughton, and the 4.5-inch rifles of the Royal Navy destroyers moored in the Thames.

It was hoped that the gangs, rebels, insurgents – nobody really knew what to call ‘the enemy’ – who seemed determined to defend their ‘ground’ would shrink away from the show of armoured might and that all the firepower would not be needed.

The big problem was that nobody knew how many potential ‘effectives’ the ‘enemy’ had on the ground, or when if push came to shove, how hard they would resist. While it was known that there had been an exodus of mainly women and children from the ‘corridor area’ – roughly running north-south up to two to three miles wide from the untouched suburbs around Loughton, through Buckhurst Hall, Woodford, and Walthamstow down to Stratford all the way to the river below Poplar – very few men of ‘fighting age’ had been identified leaving the potential battlefield. Worryingly, there was evidence of military stores having been ransacked both north and south of the river soon after the October War.

Other imponderables surrounded the question of how badly the gangs, clans and tribes which had infested parts of the ruined city had ‘predated’ on each other before the first military parties began to explore their territories a year ago. This mattered because the forces available to subdue Greater London and to ‘force’ the north-south corridor to the docks amounted, in total to little more than that of a pre-war under strength semi-motorised infantry division. Although the Naval contribution to the firepower available to Operation Poplar significantly increased the available artillery component, it was only boots on the ground that took, and in the final analysis held territory.

Right now, Edwin Bramall was painfully aware that most of the hard ‘intelligence’ about the ‘enemy’ guarding the ‘corridor’ in East London had

been obtained not by the SAS, the Intelligence Corps, or by infantry patrolling but by the men and women – particularly the women – of Miriam Prior's clan. Her people, the women especially, could pass across boundaries with relative ease, and understood and could navigate seemingly impassable rubble fields with easy familiarity, threatening *nobody*.

Until Bramall's battalion had joined Willison's detachment in Westminster the British Army's incursion into Central London had been virtually ignored by the surrounding tribes because King Harold's, and now Queen Miriam's pacifist clan had been the only peacemakers, if not wholly trusted, then at least half-trusted by practically everybody.

They would never be that again; the King of London and his consort had known that when they allowed the forces of the old world to invade their little kingdom, knowing in their hearts that they could no more stop it happening than Canute could hold back the tides.

Presently, all three companies of Bramall's battalion, 3rd King's Royal Rifles, were standing ready in and around Whitehall, having extended the battalion perimeter overnight as far east as Trafalgar Square without encountering resistance.

His men were fit, well-equipped with field rations for five days; they had spent most of last year in Ulster, a thankless task attempting to hold the line in an undeclared low-level civil war between protagonists who were still fighting the Battle of the Boyne (circa 1690). By the time he brought his men back to England, having suffered eighteen dead and seventy-three seriously wounded during a ten-month tour of duty, the 3rd Battalion had been sickly, disheartened, determined but in no sense battle-ready. Three months assimilating replacements, re-equipping, re-training in warm, dry barracks at Winchester had repaired much of the damage. A Hampshire-raised formation, his boys had had a chance to see their families again, let off steam in English Inns where no lunatic was suddenly going to kick in the door, throw in a hand grenade and start shooting...

Bramall glanced at his watch.

H-Hour was 09:45.

There was still over an hour to go...

Chapter 35

Saturday 20th February 1965
Tower Street, Sliema, Malta

A gusting, wintery north easterly wind was buffeting Malta. The storm had blown up overnight, and a weather front was swooping towards the Archipelago like an avenger. The surf smashed into the footings of the ramparts of Valletta, crashed on the rocks of Dragut Point guarding the churning mill pool of the entrance to Marsamxett Anchorage. Even within the waters of Sliema Creek where the long lean two-and-a-half thousand-ton greyhounds of the 7th Destroyer Squadron strained at their chains, the swell surged two, three feet high and overlapped the seawall, flooding The Strand, threatening to inundate the ground floors of houses and shops across the narrow pot-holed road.

Marija's mother did not recognise Rachel when, eventually, she came to the door.

Why should she?

The two women had never met.

However, Rachel had not discounted the possibility that either Marija or Rosa Hannay might have inadvertently sent a snapshot back to Malta from America which, accidentally, might have included her in the margins...

Some things one simply could not control.

"Mrs Marija Calleja?" Rachel inquired pleasantly.

Her friend's mother was at once unalike and yet instantly alike her daughter. Unlike the daughter the mother was a rotund, barrel-shaped woman now in her mid-fifties with hair greying from the worries and the burdens of her life. Rachel's friend had explained that she took after her father in physique; he was lean and never seemed to put on a spare ounce of flesh, whereas her mother had been even in her youth a plump, buxom woman.

'Like me,' Rosa Hannay, a busty, curvaceous presence had proclaimed proudly, breaking into that particular conversation much to the two young Maltese women's mutual amusement.

The daughter had inherited her mother's almond eyes but not, perhaps,

her excitable Sicilian temperament.

"Joe may have spoken of me," Rachel suggested. "I was with Marija and Rosa in Philadelphia until recently..."

Rachel found herself enveloped in two strong arms and embraced with such gusto that she momentarily felt her feet loose contact with the damp pavement.

Instantly she was released, her rib cage momentarily so compressed she could hardly catch her breath, she was being drawn inside.

"PETER! PETER!"

The older woman's bellow was so loud and highly pitched, and so adjacent to her right ear that Rachel suspected she would be deaf on that side for some seconds.

"PETER! LOOK WHO HAS COME TO VISIT US!"

Rachel had not known quite what to expect; she had certainly not expected...*this*. However, it was too late to back out and run away, and besides, the grip on her arm was positively vice-like as she was guided up the stairs to where she knew the lower floor of the Calleja family apartment was located.

Her friend's father had clearly been dozing in the armchair he sluggishly rose from attempting to fold the copy of that morning's *Times of Malta*, which had, as obviously, been lying crumpled in his lap a few seconds ago.

Peter Calleja's greeting was rather soberer than that of his wife; he was the balm to his spouse's excitability, the rock around which the family was built.

Rachel shook his hand.

"Marija gave me specific instructions that if I was ever back in Malta I was say 'hello'," she explained. "And that I am to tell you that she is very happy. And before you ask, Elisabetta is absolutely beautiful!"

Marija's mother very nearly swooned in ecstasy at the mere mention of her as yet unseen granddaughter's name. Elisabetta's grandfather smiled proudly.

"I was there in the Embassy the day she was born," Rachel added, suddenly struggling to keep a straight face.

The Calleja family's best tea service was produced.

"You wouldn't normally find me here, Miss Piotrowska," Peter Calleja explained, "not on a Saturday. I swapped duty rosters with my opposite

number. His daughter is getting married in a few weeks and he needed more time away from the yards to make preparations. May I ask what brings you back to Malta?"

Rachel decided that Marija's father probably knew all about Mdina and guessed that she was not in any way an English housewife abroad.

Peter Calleja viewed his guest thoughtfully as he and Rachel listened to his wife clattering about, complaining to herself in the adjacent kitchen as she boiled water for coffee and collected plates for biscuits and spicy local cakes to offer her visitor.

The room was something out of an earlier age. Bare-boarded with sepia pictures hanging from a lintel on one wall, a mahogany sideboard cluttered with picture frames of every vintage, proudly displaying family portraits of many generations. One wall was given over to framed drawings and small monochrome photographs of warships, large and small, including one – bigger than all the others - of HMS Talavera...

It was slightly blurred, the ship in motion, the spume of a shell burst at her stern where the water bubbled; Talavera racing to escape the confines of the Grand Harbour en route to her destiny in the cold deep waters off Sliema...

"The BBC presented us with that picture," Peter Calleja explained. "When we were in England last year; they say it is the last ever picture of the Talavera."

Rachel hesitated, was about to open her mouth when the man spoke again.

"My son is not himself," he confessed. "At first, I thought it must be the coming anniversary of the Battle," the man shrugged, his rheumy eyes placid, "but no, I don't think so. So, it must be to do with these wicked rumours about Samuel again."

Rachel said nothing.

"Yes, I thought so," the man sighed.

His wife clumped back into the sitting room.

She wanted to know about her granddaughter and was briefly – albeit only very briefly – struck speechless when Rachel referred to her daughter as the 'Ambassadress'. Marija's mother was stunned into awed silence when Rachel alluded to that day last July when her little princess and her husband had comforted *Jackie Kennedy* at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Hospital in

Philadelphia; on the day his doctors very nearly gave up hope for the stricken President.

"The Ambassadress and Rosa are also very friendly still with President Johnson's girls, Lynda and Luci," she added innocently.

Marija's mother clutched her husband's hand with such fervour Rachel was afraid she was going to hear knuckles popping.

"As we feared our little girl has outgrown little Malta," the father observed ruefully.

"I was hoping to bump into Joe," Rachel went on.

A flicker of pain crossed the mother's face.

It seemed that Joe was rarely at home. He was not 'taking care of himself' and mixing with the wrong kind of 'friends'. There was a 'bad atmosphere' in the General Workers Union at the Admiralty Dockyards and Joe did not like 'everybody recognising him' all the time wherever he went.

"The only one who cares about him is that nice boy Paul at the *Times of Malta*..."

"Paul Boffa?"

"Yes. He is a good man," Peter Calleja remarked. "And a good friend to Joe; I think Marija asked him to watch over him while she was away. My daughter and Joe were very close," the father remembered fondly. "With Marija so far away there is nobody who can make Joe laugh at himself. We all need to do that, sometimes."

Rachel sat with her friends' parents until the afternoon began to draw in, sipping coffee, nibbling the sweet, aromatic cakes Marija Calleja continually pressed upon her.

"I am right that you came to Malta to help Joe?" The father asked in a whisper during one of his wife's short absences from the room.

"Yes," she had nodded. Eventually, she made her excuses and left after one final request that: "Please let Joe know that I'd really like to catch up with him and share all the gossip from America with him."

With the dusk the wind had eased to the south, lessened in strength and although the water still lapped at, and occasionally, slopped over the sea wall the eye of the storm had passed.

As she had expected the men who had followed her to Sliema tailed her as she walked down Tower Street to The Strand – or the Triq lx-Xatt, in Maltese – that curved around northern side of Sliema Creek; a pair of the

Dom's tough guys who probably honestly believed they were being inconspicuous.

She waited at the bus stop next to the small, empty – it was the wrong season – square in front of the shuttered Majestic Theatre as the silhouette of nearby Manoel Island darkened and was finally swallowed up by the night.

A bus juddered and wheezed up to the halt some twenty minutes later and several people boarded it with Rachel. She redoubled her hold of her handbag, an ugly, practical very British thing big enough to carry a pistol and a spare magazine in it without using up all the space a woman needed for 'girly' essentials.

Most of those who had boarded the bus remained onboard as the charabanc slowly ground and bumped this way and that around Sliema, Lazaretto, Msida and finally little Pieta Creek before climbing the neck of the Valletta-Floriana peninsula onto the plateau which accommodated both cities. She stared out of the window; for all the world a woman lost in her thoughts.

Her 'tails' had not jumped on the bus after her which meant they had a car and they would be following the bus; she denied herself the satisfaction of glancing back to check her assumption. Notwithstanding she was trying – quite hard - to avoid unpleasantness she did not want the Dom's goons following her to the offices of *The Times of Malta*, or anywhere else she planned to go that evening.

The main bus terminus was situated directly outside the gate to the city of Valletta, a Romanesque, neo-classical construction accessed by a bridge barely wide enough to accommodate two small cars across the city's thirty-foot-deep landward defensive ditch. Back in the days of the *Ordo Fratrum Hospitalis Sancti Ioannis Hierosolymitani* – in English, the Order of Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem – at least one Grand Master had wanted to dig a sea-moat to separate Valletta from the main island but that had been one great project too far even for the Knights of St John.

Stepping off the bus she walked, unhurriedly to the middle of the bridge into the city, turned, and waited. Both her following 'clowns' stared at her before they remembered – if they had known it in the first place - that the one thing you *never* did was make eye contact with somebody you were supposed to be following.

The numbskulls kept walking, their steps faltering until they were

practically in front of her, literally half-a-dozen feet away. She had slung her scuffed handbag over her right shoulder, now she opened its flap and stuck her hand inside.

Both men's eyes followed her movement.

As hired muscle went neither of her 'tails' was overly prepossessing. Although they were above average height – on Malta that meant they topped out at between five feet six or seven at maximum – it still left them a little short of her own stature. They had the hard look of most men who had spent their working lives in the docks, and the vexed insecurity of proud males of the species accustomed to letting, expecting in fact, others to do their thinking for them.

In the distance Rachel heard a group of men joking, goading each other with the boisterous good nature which preceded drunken fights later in the night.

"I don't like people following me," she said, very slowly in English. She hardly spoke any Maltese; it was one of those odd languages that was totally alien even to somebody who, like her, had mastered several Russian dialects. But then her native language had been Polish...

"Nobody's following you, lady."

"That's all right then," she retorted. "In that case I won't have to shoot you."

Two pairs of eyes widened like soup plates in surprise, and sudden alarm quickly replaced disbelief.

Rachel's hand, buried in her handbag closed menacingly around...*a compact*. The Dom's heavies did not know that though, and as if they were joined at the hip they took an involuntary step backwards.

Her stare was unblinking.

Later, after the two men had had a drink to settle their nerves and they had begun to concoct what they imagined was a convincing story to explain how they had 'lost' the 'Englishwoman' they were supposed to be following; the one thing that they both agreed on was that there had been something really, really 'scary' about the look on her face.

It had been as if she was disappointed when they backed off; as if she had been looking forward to shooting them, then and there in cold blood...

In public...

"Idiots," Rachel hissed in the darkness, watching the men disappear into

the night.

The ‘temporary’ offices of *The Times of Malta* had been located in Ordnance Street ever since the American bombing of Malta in December 1963. The newspaper’s presses were housed two streets away. The arrangement, like many of the compromises the Maltese, a stoic and resilient people, had made to carry on living as normal a life as possible, was not ideal but Paul Boffa and his youthful joint editorial and management team had *made* it work for the last thirteen months and would, if necessary, ensure that it went on working for as long as it needed to!

Affecting a Yankee drawl and introducing herself as a ‘freelance journalist for *Time Life* who was *passing* through Malta’ she was immediately ushered into Paul Boffa’s cluttered, broom cupboard of an office. The youthful editor was on the phone surrounded by galley proofs as Rachel tapped lightly on his open door and looked in.

The young man waved her towards a chair without looking up.

“No, no, we don’t need to discuss it. Just go ahead, thank you...”

He focussed on his visitor.

Blinked, once, twice and again with a mixture of curiosity and sudden existential angst.

“You’re...”

“A friend of a friend, Mr Boffa,” Rachel assured him as she made herself comfortable – or as comfortable as was possible, her Wister Park injuries still pained her more than somewhat at the end of a long day – in the hard chair in front of the desk.

“Oh...”

“Until I returned to the United Kingdom from Philadelphia last month ‘the Ambassadress’ passed all her letters to you to me for ‘vetting’, in case she had inadvertently disclosed classified information,” she explained, adding, “therein.”

“The Ambassadress?” Paul Boffa mouthed, still trying to get used to being in the presence of the so-called ‘Avenger of Mdina’. Nobody had ever really got to the bottom of what had happened that day at the height of the Battle of Malta; and lately, the stories that were coming out of America about the so-called ‘Wister Park atrocities’ sounded impossibly gruesome. The one incontrovertible aspect of those bloodbaths was that the woman sitting before him – every inch a demure English housewife in her thirties – was the single

common element in both bloodbaths...

“Yes. Lady Marija.” Rachel rested her hands in her lap. “Okay, you know who I am. And I know who you are. Moreover, we are both friends and trusted confidantes of Malta’s most famous and well-loved daughters.”

Paul Boffa nodded numbly.

“And,” Rachel went on, “I’d speculate that you are just as keen to see that things stay that way as I am?”

“Of course,” the man re-joined, finally collecting his wits.

“Good,” she smiled. “Then we shall be friends, too!”

Chapter 36

Saturday 20th February 1965
Rue du Parc de Montjuzet, Clermont-Ferrand, France

Major General Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev drew up his men in a line in front of the broken down old Renault trucks assigned to transport them north to Vichy; or rather, as far north as the roads and the 'evolving tactical situation' permitted.

He elected not to think about that.

Under his command he had twenty-four Red Army hard types; mostly Spetsnaz trained men who had been combat-hardened in the Balkans exterminating Red Dawn fanatics unwilling, or unable to come to terms with the changing facts on the ground. Krasnaya Zarya had had its use and its day was over everywhere it seemed, apart from this particular disintegrating corner of Western Europe.

Twenty-four men; not much of a command for a fucking General!

He did not count the seven Frenchmen, three drivers and four 'guides' – more likely spies – he had been assigned for his mission.

...Scout up to Vichy and report.

If Vichy was still in the hands of the Front Internationale he was to reconnoitre farther north...

...You are authorised to wage guerrilla operations against fascist sympathisers encountered in the region...

Akhromeyev had flown to France as the military advisor of Special Commissar Yuri Andropov, who predictably, had offered him and his men to the FI as some kind of sop to guarantee his own free passage home.

A lesser man than Akhromeyev might have wasted time getting bitter and twisted about it. However, a small voice in his head whispered that of all the places in the World where he could actually make some kind of a difference; this was probably a prime candidate. At home the Motherland was drawing in upon itself, entering a period of recovery, rebuilding, refreshing the Revolution and it would be years, or decades before it emerged from the inward-looking chrysalis it was constructing under the leadership of the new Communist Tsar Alexander Shelepin. Besides, there was nothing for

him back in Russia; his family was gone, the Red Army was a disgraced, enfeebled shadow of its former mighty self. Back home the coming years held struggle, purges, endless recriminations about the mistakes of the past and the persecution of real and imagined present-day traitors. If he was to die for the Revolution, France was as good a place as any.

"Comrade Andropov is returning to the Motherland to receive new instructions from the Politburo," he told his men, ignoring the Frenchmen, slouching around in the background smoking cigarettes while his men stood on parade. He had no idea if any of the locals spoke Russian and cared less. "In his absence I have been ordered to conduct an armed reconnaissance to Vichy, that's the thick end of fifty kilometres north of here. My intelligence is that the roads between here and there are in a bad state; and my understanding is that it is bandit country most of the way from here to Vichy. There aren't many of us but you are all good soldiers. We won't be in any kind of a rush; I don't want to walk into an ambush."

He ran his gaze down the line.

A gang of desperadoes...

Thus far he had contrived to keep up his own personal standards of hygiene and 'presentation'. He doubted if he would be shaving, or bathing very regularly in the coming days, or that his uniform fatigues, thus far impeccable would remain so overlong once they departed Clermont-Ferrand.

"We're a long way from home, boys," he said, his voice quietening. He hardly knew most of the men in the line; and badly needed to do something about that in the coming days. He suspected they would all learn a lot about each other on the road to Vichy. "I won't waste my time giving you a lot of bullshit about duty and loyalty; you're the best of the best at what you do. But I will put a bullet in the neck of the first man who disobeys an order I give him. Either we are in this thing together or we are nothing!"

Imperceptible nods along the line.

For all these men knew he was some prissy staff officer with Party connections who had never seen a gun discharged in anger, let alone kicked through wintery fields strewn knee-high with gore and shattered bones.

"You don't know me very well, yet," Akhromeyev continued. "So, this is the one and only time I tell you what and who I am. I was a naval infantry officer during the siege of Leningrad. One day I found myself ordered to hold a road down which the whole fucking German Army was advancing. I

thought I was screwed!"

This provoked a flicker of amusement in several faces.

"I'd never seen so many fucking tanks and the fascists just kept on coming at us! Screwed, that's what we were! But we held that fucking road and eventually our artillery blew the fuckers away!"

He let this sink in.

The German dead were still lying on the ground a year later when the siege of Leningrad was finally relieved; so far as he knew, or cared the bastards' bleached bones were still there, either side of that road. Inconceivably dreadful as it had been the slaughter around Leningrad had been as nothing compared to that at Stalingrad, where after the war the bodies had been ploughed into the earth, mile upon square mile of killing fields, bone yards that stretched from one horizon to another...

"I've done other shit since. That's what soldiers do. Some things you get medals for, others you don't. But if I'd let the fucking Germans drive down that road into the outskirts of Leningrad Stalin would have had me shot! And he would have been right to have me shot!"

He paused again while he tried to make eye contacts.

"That's who I am! I don't take a backward step and I never leave any of my people behind!"

Neither Andropov nor Special Emissary Zorin had bothered to brave the cold of the morning to wave the three-truck convoy on its way. The old shits had washed their hands of the 'French mission', like Andropov had washed his hands of Baghdad when the going got too hot.

Akhromeyev scowled; now that he knew where he stood it made things simpler. He and his men had been betrayed. They were on their own.

Getting to Vichy in one piece was the first priority; after that he would review his options. In the meantime, Akhromeyev intended to employ his soldiering experience to mould his small command into an effective fighting unit, and to mull the possibilities of the situation.

Today his priority was to disappear into the landscape; the trucks would head due east seeking the sanctuary of the forests across the other side of the valley of the Allier River. His hosts had been surprised when he had not queried the paucity of the rations they had allotted him for the journey to Vichy. Idiots! Did they not think his men could not live off the land even at this season of the year?

That was his one big advantage.

His boys could travel fast, light and if they had to, hit hard, and seize what they could not forage. A larger force would have had to depend on looting and scouring the country bare but the ‘great men’ of the FI understood none of this.

Although Akhromeyev worried about walking into a trap at Vichy there was nothing to be done about that; the only thing he knew for certain was that there would be new opportunities in the north the farther he moved away from the dead hand of the local, tribal war that was approaching its inevitable pyrrhic denouement in the Auvergne.

It did not matter whose side came out on top: George Duclos’s Soviet-aligned Communists, or Maxim Machenaud’s Red Dawn Devil’s storm troopers, whoever won would be weakened, likely crippled and inevitably, the ground under their control would shrink until Clermont-Ferrand was just another lonely island in the stream.

That night the convoy laagered off a single track, a crumbling road north through the Livradois Forest. It came on to rain about an hour after awnings had been spread between the trucks and a cook fire lit. Men had spread out into the woods and brought back roots, edible bulbs. There were wild boar in the woods but Akhromeyev had ordered no shots to be fired. Six men had remained on picket and guard duty at all time, two hours on, six off throughout the night.

From what he had seen and learned in Clermont-Ferrand the FI was incapable of finding its collective arse in a darkened room; nevertheless, it paid to be safe. If the FI followed them or had tried to set up an ambush ahead of them he would be prepared. Moreover, keeping his boys on their toes helped remind them that they were Red Army soldiers, and aggressively promoted unit cohesion early in their acquaintance with their new field commander.

In the darkness of the Livradois as the steady rain dripped off the edges of the canvass over his head Akhromeyev listened to the snoring of several of his troopers. The noise of the rain deadened, cloaked the natural sounds of the forest as he rested with his back against the trunk of a tree smoking a vile-smelling Gaulois.

Cigarettes....

That was another pleasure soon to be foregone.

Back in Clermont-Ferrand George Duclos had talked about the ‘interlopers’ from the east and the north as if they represented a conquering army. Whatever the ‘invaders’ were they were no army; or not in any sense he understood the meaning of the word. A half-modern ‘army’ would have rolled south straight over the FI in the Auvergne hardly noticing they were there!

There were no ‘armies’ in France.

Just rabbles, freebooters and brigands.

Like him and his boys!

Chapter 37

Saturday 20th February 1965
HMS Hampshire, Belfast Lough

The five-thousand-ton County class destroyer HMS Hampshire had not so much been repaired after being badly damaged by a Soviet made P-15 Termit anti-ship missile, fired by a French warship sympathetic to the Red Dawn regime in Southern France last June, as ‘patched up’. Apart from her gun director and air search radar, and a basic – essentially World War Two – communications suite she was a shadow of the ship she had been designed to be. In effect she was simply a gun platform servicing her two forward undamaged twin 4.5-inch gun turrets, operating with a minimal engineering and deck crew.

The second of the batch of four ships laid down in 1959 and 1960, Hampshire’s planned Sea Slug Mark I surface-to-air missile system had never been installed and the financial constraints under which the Royal Navy was now operating had led to the construction of the fifth and sixth ships of the class – respectively HMS Fife at the Fairfield yard at Govan on the Clyde, and HMS Glamorgan, at the Vickers Armstrong works at Newcastle –on-Tyne – being suspended indefinitely, and the cancellation of the orders for the final two vessels of the class, the Antrim and the Norfolk.

However, from a distance the Hampshire cut a fine, impressive silhouette and when a visitor stepped on her deck in sheltered waters she felt reassuringly ‘solid’ under one’s feet. Sometimes, that was more important than what a ship could actually do in battle; and Margaret Thatcher hoped that this was one of those times.

It had been Airey Neave’s idea to hold the secret meeting with the leader and deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party onboard a warship in Belfast Lough. Partly, he had been motivated by the need to find a venue that minimised the chance of some Republican hothead taking a pot shot at his friend; mainly he had wanted to project a sense of power and prestige in an environment in which he, and his Prime Minister might conceivably talk a little sense into their ‘Unionist’ colleagues.

The word ‘Union’ had had varyingly fraught and brutal meanings within

the Conservative and Unionist Party for most of the last century; rather like the ‘special relationship’ with the United States which had caused so much trouble lately, exactly how ‘unionist’ the ruling Ulster Unionist Party was in its relations with the rest of the United Kingdom was a thing that oscillated, often wildly, between violent attachment and an histrionic impassioned separateness according to the mood of the rank and file of the Ulster Unionist Party, and the ever-changeable whims of its leadership clique.

Margaret Thatcher had never been to Northern Ireland and had had no opportunity to observe the rocky County Down coast as the Hampshire had approached its destination. There had been too many briefings to cram in, the latest news of Operation Poplar from London and then there had been the first, fragmentary reports of the bombings on the mainland.

‘Perhaps,’ she had suggested, ‘we ought to go straight back to England.’ Before the Hampshire had sailed from Holyhead she had been joined onboard by the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Michael Carver, Sir Dick White, the Director General of the Combined Security Services, Airey Neave, the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, and Lord Dilhorne, since last June the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who had flown to Oxford to brief the Cabinet on the ever-deteriorating ‘situation’ in Ulster two days ago.

‘Our problem, Prime Minister,’ Michael Carver had observed, ‘is not what the Irish Republican Army is, or is not doing in Ireland or on the mainland, but in persuading so-called *Unionists* to show sufficient restraint long enough to avoid an open civil war in the six counties which inevitably, would spill over the border into the south. Respectfully, whatever else is going on we must go ahead with this conference.’

‘Yes, of course.’

In her mind there was very little difference between ‘loyalist Unionists’ and ‘nationalist Republicans’ who took up arms against the Crown. Michael Carver was right; the Army could hold the line against either the Republicans, or the Unionists, but not both at the same time without becoming ever more partisan protagonists in somebody else’s war. Election or no election; she had to try to do something to knock a little sense into the two men she was about to greet on the darkened deck of a glued-back-together damaged ship which might have been a metaphor for the state of the whole country.

The lights of Carrickfergus on the northern, County Antrim shore of the

Lough shone brightly as the thrumming rotors of the approaching helicopter warned of its coming.

HMS Hampshire idled in the cold dark waters.

Her running lights came on with a dazzling suddenness, floodlights illuminated her landing pad aft of the ship's main amidships superstructure. At the time she had been attacked by the French off Algeria last summer she had been returning home from 'running' huge ten-ton Grand Slams and six-ton Tallboys to RAF Akrotiri, and there had been massive steel cradles welded to her decks to carry the giant missiles. On each of her two-high speed 'outward' journeys to the Eastern Mediterranean up to five of the huge bombs had been lashed onto their rests on the destroyer's helicopter deck.

The great bombs the battered ship had carried out to Akrotiri had crippled the Soviet leadership as the battles in the deserts of Iran and Iraq reached their savage apogee, knocked down most of the bridges over the Tigris and the Euphrates and avenged the perfidy of Carrier Division Seven's destruction of the Centaur, the New Zealand frigate Otago, and the Hardy and the Palliser south of Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf. Now the Hampshire was on a mission even more fraught with uncertainty...

The Army Westland Wessex flared out, sank onto the deck and men rushed forward to chock its wheels and to place steps beneath its cargo compartment door.

In the destroyer's wardroom the customary civilities were coolly, cautiously exchanged. Margaret Thatcher had wondered if the first argument would be about where certain persons were seated; in the event the unpleasantness was deferred although not for long and when it arose it was because, as often happens, in politics, the two men on one side of the table and the Prime Minister's delegation on the other, completely misunderstood why the other had convened the conference.

Fifty-year-old 'Captain' Terence O'Neill, the man who but for the imposition of direct rule from Oxford vested in the hands of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Lord Dilhorne, would have succeeded Sir Basil Brook as the - fourth - Prime Minister of the six counties of Ulster, was unaccustomed, unprepared in fact, to engage with a 'mere' woman. Notwithstanding his impeccable manners, or that he was a gentleman to the core, disdain oozed from his every pore as he viewed the Prime Minister down the length of his patrician nose.

Born in London, educated at West Downs School, Winchester and Eton College, O'Neill who had holidayed in Ulster as a child, was that most English of Ulstermen, a thoroughly natural conservative. As a young man he had worked in the city of London before serving in the 6th Guards Tank Brigade, albeit only as a supply officer, during World War Two. Both his brothers had died in the war and in common with many Unionist politicians he had subsequently carried his military rank like a banner throughout his future career. It had not been until after the war that he took his family to actually live in Northern Ireland. Almost immediately he had been elected to the Stormont Parliament in a by-election for the Antrim constituency of Bannside, and at the time of the October War he had already held the Northern Ireland Minister of Finance portfolio for several years. Within the Ulster Unionist Party – nominally the Ulster wing of the Conservative Party – O'Neill was a moderate who had expressed his belief that the way to erode, if not end sectarianism in Northern Ireland was to promote improved relations in the workplace.

'Moderation' of course, was a relative thing and in the context of Ulster politics it tended, historically to indicate that a Unionist's place in the Conservative Party was so far to the right that he needed a wireless set to communicate with anybody in the centre ground of the mainstream English Tory polity.

If O'Neill's upright, officer's bearing spoke of a man who reeked of old-fashioned aristocratic authority; his deputy – to whom 'moderation' was a dirty word, and his keenest rival, was a man cut from a different, perhaps more contemporary mould but in many ways as temperamentally intransigent as O'Neill when it came to actually facing up to the new realities of the age.

Forty-four-year-old Arthur 'Brian' Deane Faulkner had been born in Helen's Bay, a mile or two south of where HMS Hampshire now idled in the tide-stream. He had been schooled at Elm Park in County Armagh, and later, despite being a Presbyterian, aged fourteen at the Church of Ireland St Columba's College at Rathfanham in Dublin, where his best friend was Michael Yeates, the son of the poet W.B. Yeates. During the 1945 war he had quit Queen's University, Belfast, where he had been studying law to work in his family's shirt-making business. Subsequently, in 1949 he became the first member of his family to stand for and win a seat in the Stormont Parliament; and by 1959 he was an aggressive Minister of Home

Affairs whose measures to counter the IRA's so-called 'Border Campaign' of the six years before the Cuban Missiles War, had endeared him to the right wing of his party and earned him the broad approbation of the hierarchy of the Orange Order.

The Loyal Orange Institution – the Orange Order – had been founded in County Armagh as a Masonic Brotherhood sworn to defend the Protestant Ascendancy. One hundred and seventy years later the Ulster Unionists, regardless of their affiliation to the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom *and* Northern Ireland, was still actively fighting to maintain the Protestant Ascendancy and a little thing like the recent global nuclear war had done nothing to alter the Order's malign strangle-hold on the province of Ulster.

No sooner had everybody taken their seat than Terence O'Neill retrieved a sheet of paper from an inside pocket of his immaculately tailored pre-war Savile Row suit.

"In the coming election," he prefaced, "the *Ulster* Unionists will return all twelve Members of Parliament sent to Oxford by the six counties. This would be the case even if it were not for the IRA's intimidation of the Nationalist community to stay at home on the day of the election. It seems reasonable to *our* people in Northern Ireland that *our* continuing support for *whichever* party is in power after the 11th of March should take into consideration the wishes of the majority of Ulster voters in the formulation of future security policy in..."

"Thank you, Captain O'Neill," Margaret Thatcher interjected irritably. "It was agreed that Lord Dilhorne would chair this 'meeting of minds'."

"We agreed no such thing, Prime Minister," Brian Faulkner declared. 'Captain O'Neill and I came onboard this ship in a spirit of collegiate co-operation..."

General Sir Michael Carver groaned out aloud.

He glanced to Lord Dilhorne, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who waved resignedly for him to speak.

"Presently, British soldiers," he said unemotionally, "*British soldiers*, are dying and being maimed by Irishmen to protect *your* right to treat a section of your own population as second-rate citizens to whom the laws of the land do not, necessarily, apply. Let me speak plainly, gentlemen. Militarily, when addressing the situation in the six counties, the United Kingdom would be

better off withdrawing its forces and letting the Irish Republic pick up the pieces. Understandably, the Dublin Government is unenthusiastic about that but I am sure that in time the United States would be prepared to intervene with appropriate 'peace keeping' forces..."

"Is this Government policy, Prime Minister?" Terrence O'Neill demanded querulously.

Whatever he actually said what Margaret Thatcher heard was: "*How dare you! What right do you have to tell us what to do!*"

"No," The Prime Minister uttered bleakly. "Not yet. But all *My* Government's 'problems' with the Irish Republic, and in some measure, those with many influential Americans stem from the failure of the political parties in Belfast..."

"You mean our refusal to surrender?" Brian Faulkner growled. "Is that why the Navy is starving Harland and Wolff of new orders and sending ships elsewhere to be repaired and refitted?"

"No," the Chief of the Defence Staff interjected wearily. He was about to elaborate when Lord Dilhorne held up a hand.

Prior to his ennoblement, as Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller he had served in Harold MacMillan's Cabinet as Attorney General for England and Wales, now he adopted a sternly judicial expression.

"As I have explained to you on previous occasions," he prefaced severely, "works undertaken by Harland and Wolff here in Belfast Lough, on account of labour disputes and politically motivated stoppages, take longer and cost more than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Moreover, because of years of lack of investment in facilities, and the expectation of contractors, including Harland and Wolff, that the United Kingdom Exchequer will subsidise their fixed costs, and automatically pay all increased costs sustained by dint of *their* inefficiencies and delay, yards *like* Harland and Wolff have effectively, priced themselves into bankruptcy. Ten years ago, the Government might have baled them out; that was then and this is now, gentlemen."

Terence O'Neill gave Margaret Thatcher a hard look.

"We're on our own, then?" He demanded with urbane scorn.

"No," she replied angrily. Why did these idiots only see things in black and white? "That is not at all what we are saying. What we are saying is that if you want to remain a part of the United Kingdom then it is high time that

you, and the people you represent, start behaving like you actually are a part of the kingdom. In the straits we find ourselves in – it doesn't matter if a Conservative or a Labour Government is in Oxford – everybody, in every part of what is left of the United Kingdom must contribute to the wealth and the survival of the nation. And that includes Northern Ireland."

Both the Ulster Unionists were glaring at Roy Jenkins, the solitary representative of the Labour Party. The Home Secretary slowly removed his spectacles.

"This is not a party issue," he said regretfully. "I cannot go to my constituents in Birmingham and ask them to subsidise an Ulster polity which automatically directs aid and advantage to only one religious and political grouping. People in England need every penny to go to things that matter to them, and to their families. To the things that they know to be right and just. Not so long ago there were riots on the streets of the nearby city, stoppages and acts of vandalism and sabotage directed at ships in the very Harland and Wolff yards we have been discussing, and why? Because the Prime Minister had the temerity to direct ships carrying food not just to Belfast and Londonderry but to Dublin; frankly, I fear many of my constituents must ask themselves what on earth do we have in common with *those* people? In England the principle is well understood; if one can one works for the good of all, and in return one receives rations and assistance as to one's reasonable needs, the availability of scarce supplies and public services permitting..."

Terence O'Neill scoffed, looked to others around the table to back him up.

"That's just socialism..."

"No, it is called justice. That is how *we*, the rest of the *United Kingdom* have somehow got through the trials and disasters of the last two years as a *nation* in spite of the Ulster *situation*. We have pulled together; not buried our heads in the sand, or sheltered in our Tory, Labour and Liberal camps."

The Home Secretary's gently excoriating critique fell on wholly deaf ears.

Faulkner snorted his contempt.

He opened his mouth to speak, shut it abruptly as an officer hurried into the wardroom and passed the Prime Minister a note.

She read it.

The colour drained out of Margaret Thatcher's face.

“There’s been another big explosion. In Glasgow, this time; outside the Govan shipyards as the men were clocking off, and,” the words choked in her throat. “*They’ve* murdered Willie Whitelaw and his wife in Oxford...”

Chapter 38

Monday 21st February 1965
Dover Castle, Kent

Sir Varyl Begg, the First Sea Lord, had thought, if not overlong then very hard overnight about cutting short his four-day tour of the Royal Navy's Channel Coast shore establishments. The dreadful news of the assassination of Secretary of State for Defence William Whitelaw, his wife, and the death of an unknown number of as many as seven bystanders in the resulting gun battle between the surviving members of Whitelaw's protection detail and his killers had sent an electric shiver of despondency and shock through the machinery of the State. That such mayhem could suddenly erupt on the streets of Oxford seemed...*unthinkable*. Whereas, the rising death toll from the bombings yesterday afternoon and evening in Glasgow, and now Birmingham and Coventry hardly registered.

The latter attacks had been 'claimed' by a spokesman for the 'Irish Republican Army' in Dublin; nobody had yet owned up to responsibility for the Oxford atrocity. In Oxford early reports now indicated at least two of the gunmen involved had been killed and a third, critically wounded, and while the assumption had initially been that the three men were an IRA 'active service unit', this seemed increasingly unlikely.

The acting Defence Minister, Lord Carington's tone was grave, and his clipped, scrambler attenuated delivery, was terse in the way all old soldiers understand. He had lost many friends in Hitler's war, the October War and since; one grieved privately, whilst in public one got on with one's duty. It was not being cold, it was just being pragmatic. His friend was dead, his focus automatically switched to the living.

"There was some discussion overnight of a retaliatory strike against districts in the Republic and along the border," Carington explained tersely 'but after consultation with the Chief of the Defence Staff, myself and the Deputy Prime Minister, the PM has ruled this out; for the time being, at least."

HMS Hampshire has steamed at her best speed – some twenty-four knots in her present condition - back to Holyhead and her VIPs had flown into RAF

Brize Norton early that morning.

The First Sea Lord had been given to understand that nothing – whatsoever - substantive had come of the meeting with the two most senior members of the Ulster Unionist wing of the Conservative Party. Personally, he had never thought anything would come of the meeting; the Ulster Unionists and the Orange Order were synonymous, interchangeable facets of the same outdated sectarian farrago which was slowly, surely driving a wedge between the 'loyalists' of Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

A week ago, the Prime Minister had asked Begg his thoughts on the consequences of losing Belfast Lough, and the unused – for over a decade - wartime port facilities of Londonderry's Lough Foyle, and the implications of not 'holding' the western coast of the North Channel between Scotland and Ireland.

'Belfast and Londonderry are unusable as bases at present,' he had reported. 'The issue of the free navigation of the North Channel would only arise in a war situation with the Irish Republic. Otherwise, we would continue to operate in that area as we do now.'

The First Sea Lord forced himself to focus on the here and now, concentrated on specifics.

"That's the wisest course of action at present, sir," he advised. Carington had been Navy Minister until a few hours ago – he probably still was in fact if not name – and one of the reasons Begg had come to the South Coast to 'inspect' the bases at Plymouth (Devonport), Portland, Southampton, Portsmouth and this morning, Dover before moving up the Kent coast to still mostly ruined Ramsgate, had been to report to him on the handling and the situation of the refugees making the Channel crossing from France and the Low Countries.

Despite the intermittently appalling winter weather thus far over a thousand people a week were coming ashore – hundreds more had been 'washed' ashore, drowned – since the beginning of the year and the tide of humanity had quickened from a trickle to a flood in the brief window between the storms of the last week.

The First Sea Lord had bitten the bullet and informed his political master of the orders he had issued to the Flag Officer, Channel Fleet at 21:00 hours last night. If people across the Channel were so desperate that they were

piling into any available boat – sometimes dinghies and skiffs in mid-winter to get across one of the most dangerous stretches of water on the planet then human decency simply did not permit him to do 'nothing'.

He had *not* become the professional head of the Royal Navy to besmirch its long and honourable traditions by turning a blind eye to a fast-developing humanitarian catastrophe that was happening to people exactly like 'us'.

"I have mobilised the Channel Fleet to mount search and rescue missions, navigation permitting, in the inshore waters off the French, Belgian and Dutch coasts, sir." He took a deep breath. "The main embarkation ports seem to be Calais and Dunkirk, then Boulogne and Le Havre and Dieppe, also. I prefer to send my ships into those harbours if they are navigable rather than have my people recovering large numbers of bodies of drowned men, women and children from the Channel, sir. The 'political' situation on the French Channel coast is confused. There is no centralised 'government' as such but most of the local 'communes' have co-existed with their neighbours until the last few weeks. What's happening now is people are coming to the ports from the interior all the time, and basically overwhelming the resources of the coastal towns. Newcomers are being forced to attempt the Channel crossing. The choice is to risk drowning or to starve. The talk is that things are so bad over there that the local mayors, or military people, or whoever is in charge in a given place is encouraging anybody they don't 'need' to get in a boat and take their chances at sea."

The man at the other end of the line was silent for some seconds. Everybody who had ever met him said Peter Carington was a decent, profoundly honourable man; especially for a politician.

"I will speak to the Prime Minister," he said at length. "Carry on as you think best, Sir Varyl. You may put 'naval liaison parties' ashore at your discretion to open lines of communication with the authorities in the major ports. However, at this time we cannot make undertakings to our French 'friends'. At least, not until we know more about the tactical and humanitarian situation on the ground over there." He hesitated. "Would you like me to draft you a personal note in this matter?"

In other words; do you want me to provide you with a piece of paper you can use to defend yourself with if the political wind turns against us?

"No, sir," Begg replied, relieved. Two Englishmen did not need to 'minute' a confidence shared and a decision verbally enunciated. He moved

on. “I plan to return to Oxford this evening, sir.”

“We shall meet to compare notes on your return, First Lord,” Peter Carington signed off.

The First Sea Lord had gone into a side annexe adjacent to the old operations room deep beneath Dover Castle to speak to the acting-Secretary of State. It was from these tunnels that Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey had directed the evacuation of nearly a quarter-of-a-million troops of the British Expeditionary Force and over a hundred thousand French soldiers from Dunkirk in 1940.

Operation Dynamo.

The miracle of Dunkirk...

There were five tunnel ‘levels’ beneath the ancient castle overlooking Dover: A ‘Annexe’, B ‘Bastion’, C ‘Casemate’, D ‘Dumpy’ and E ‘Esplanade’. ‘Dumpy’ had been converted to be a Regional Seat of Government in the event of a nuclear war before geologists pointed out that the chalk around it was too unstable to provide protection from a near miss ground burst and made it impossible to keep radioactive contamination out of the bunker.

The tunnels had been dug out at different times; some parts of the complex were twentieth century, most of it much older. Back in 1941 switchboards, communications cables, generators and batteries had been installed and in the middle years of the Second World War the Royal Navy had used the complex as a command and control centre for air sea rescue operations in the Channel. The newest – ‘Annexe’ – level had been extended during this period to serve as an emergency field dressing station and hospital with two operating rooms.

Dormitories, kitchens and mess areas had been re-populated since the October War to accommodate the over spill from Dover’s enlarged military and naval garrisons.

The First Sea Lord’s Personal Naval Secretary – effectively his Chief of Staff, the man who ran his office and made sure his diary was organised down to the last minute – thirty-six-year-old Commander William Doveton Minet Staveley, straightened respectfully as his superior approached the big table displaying the ‘current state of play’ in the English Channel.

The First Sea Lord had inherited Staveley – a distant relation of Sir Hugh Staveley-Pope, the late Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet –

from his predecessor. Staveley had distinguished himself during Operation Manna and at the time of his sad death, Sir David Luce was reconciled to losing him to Sir Julian Christopher on Malta. Begg felt a little guilty 'hanging on' to such a good man as Staveley; a man of his qualities merited an overdue promotion to Captain and a sea going command.

Staveley was a Navy man through and through, born with salt spray in his veins. He was the grandson of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Doveton Sturdy, the victor of the Battle of the Falklands in 1914, and the son of another Admiral, who had joined the Navy in 1942. A man marked out early in his career he had been Flag Lieutenant to the C-in-C Home Fleet in 1952, an instructor at the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth in 1954 and served on the Royal Yacht Britannia in 1957. He had been in command of the minesweeper HMS Houghton on the day of the October War. Julian Christopher had advanced him to command the fleet destroyer Carysfort ahead of the commencement of Operation Manna in March 1963.

Sir David Luce had plucked him off the bridge of the Carysfort shortly after that ship had docked at Portsmouth last January.

"We have Cavendish, Dido and Ajax moving onto station mid-Channel, sir," Staveley reported, keenly business-like.

HMS Cavendish was, like Carysfort, Staveley's recent former command - an old war-built C class destroyer. The Dido and the Ajax were brand new, still 'working up' Leander class general purpose frigates with modern air and sea search radar suites and the capability to operate small Westland Wasp anti-submarine helicopters, although only the Ajax was thus equipped at present. The big ships – more would join them in the coming hours and days – were there to support the 3rd and 8th Minesweeper Squadrons based respectively at Devonport and Portsmouth which would go closer inshore to the French coast mainly looking for people attempting to cross the Channel in small boats. Royal Fleet Air Arm helicopters operating from fields in Hampshire and Sussex would be in the air for as long as the light held.

"Is there any more news from Oxford, sir?" Staveley inquired.

Begg shook his head.

"No. Just that everybody is to carry on as before. Lord Carington will combine the duties of Navy Minister and Secretary of Defence for the time being; presumably until the election."

Begg studied the map table.

In the Royal Navy history was always with a man. It was around him everywhere, inoculated in his soul, and a part of his living, waking psyche: Drake finishing his game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe as the Armada sailed up the Channel; Nelson leading the battle line ‘inshore’ of the French Fleet at the Battle of the Nile, his blind eye at Copenhagen a few years later; Henry Harwood’s outgunned cruisers chasing the pocket battleship Graf Spee into hiding and self-immolation in Montevideo; Andrew Cunningham’s determination to evacuate the beleaguered garrison of Crete in 1941 even though he knew it would cost him a dozen or more ships; and more recently Talavera and Yarmouth steaming down the barrels of battleships to defend Malta; and Admiral Nick Davey’s incomparable doomed Shatt al-Arab Squadron steaming seventy miles upriver to halt the Red Army quite literally, in its tracks...

Now as he looked at the situation developing on the map table in the very room where, in 1940, Bertram Ramsey had plotted the recovery of the *only* British Army in the northern hemisphere the First Sea Lord could not help but wonder if what he was watching was the early stages of another ‘miracle of Dunkirk’. Except this time on a broader, chaotically scattered scale which might in years to come be viewed as being as significant, if not more profound for the future of European civilisation than its heroic forerunner.

Chapter 39

Tuesday 22nd February 1965
Parliament Square, Westminster

Margaret Thatcher felt utterly bizarre kitted out in Army camouflage fatigues. She had drawn the line at donning boots – her feet would be ruined in minutes – and insisted on being allowed to retain her 'sensible' flat-heeled walking shoes despite being warned about 'the mud'. Now she was in the cargo compartment of one of three Westland Wessex helicopters racing low across the ruins of Central London. Although the noise and the vibration were mind-numbing the man sitting opposite her – similarly dressed, obviously – was grinning broadly, loving every moment of the harum-scarum trip across 'the war zone', even if his three-man BBC crew seemed to share none of his exhilaration.

"THREE MINUTES!" The loadmaster bawled.

The Prime Minister was regretting having abjured the offer of a radio headset. True, the contraption would have played merry hell with her hair, but at least she might actually be able to hear something!

Yesterday had been the worst day of her life.

Well...certainly the worst day since the last worst day...

That after all was the real cruelty of this age into which the blunders of latter-day kings and princes had plunged humanity.

There had been the disaster of the meeting with Terence O'Neill and Brian Faulkner which had served only to further entrench an irreconcilable divide, there were over three hundred dead in the cowardly bombings of public squares, railway and bus stations in Scotland and the Midlands...and as for the despicable attack on poor Willie Whitelaw and his wife Celia, she could not imagine what it would have been like to break the news to the couple's four daughters...

Peter Carington's briefing about the 'developing situation' on the South Coast had mostly gone over her head. Last summer and autumn the influx of people who had nothing but the clothes on their back, many starving, had sorely stretched the resources of the two South Coast regional administrations responsible for local policing and the distribution of rations; so much so that

Alison Munro's Ministry of Supply had had to send special 'support teams' to the displaced persons camps around Brighton, Chichester, Portsmouth and Southampton soon after the crisis in the Persian Gulf had 'quietened down'. If anything, the country was less well-prepared to deal with a new influx now than it had been then. Food and fuel supplies were going to be tight as it was, if there was a late winter cold snap or anything happened to disrupt the steady – still far below pre-October War level – transatlantic traffic in grain and refrigeration ships from Canada and the United States, people would go hungry again in the spring.

Last year's approach; essentially to unquestioningly take in everybody on humanitarian grounds had not been universally popular within the Cabinet or the Party. The Trade Unions were starting to worry about their members' jobs, and on her side of the political aisle she had regarded some of the comments emanating from certain quarters in the Party – little Englanders mainly – at best uncharitable, at worst borderline pernicious. Not that this taint of Imperialistic condescension towards foreigners was unique to her Party; as a group her most intractable 'back woodsmen' were generally more comfortable in the presence of 'foreigners', particularly of their own class, than many Labour diehards.

The 'Channel issue' was going to have to wait...

Peter Carington was wise to suggest that they ought to 'watch developments'. In the meantime, while she was Prime Minister the United Kingdom would do the 'decent thing' and it was entirely proper that the Royal Navy should be permitted to lay its plans unfettered by 'politics'.

Her acting-Secretary of State for Defence had concurred that 'we simply cannot turn away people in need' and that their 'Christian duty is to take such unfortunates in'.

It was the 'decent thing' to do.

"TWO MINUTES!"

Did Colonel Waters wink at me just then?

She had missed the man's presence on the 'Hampshire excursion', as Airey Neave now referred to their doomed mission to talk some sense into their 'friends' in Ulster.

It was the former SAS man who had offered the remark – off the cuff - that the attack on the Whitelaws was: 'damnably out of character for the IRA'.

She had questioned him.

‘That sort of thing went out of favour with those boys years ago,’ he had explained. ‘This whole affair smacks to me as a suicide job; a one-way mission. The one thing nobody can really defend against is a chap, or several chaps, determined to go out in a blaze of glory. This is more like the sort of stuff I’ve come across in Cyprus, Aden or in Oman. I know our Irish ‘chums’ are pretty well-motivated but they don’t usually go in for this death or glory stuff. Apart from anything else I honestly doubt the IRA have that many good men – good terrorist operatives, I mean – that they can afford losing two or three of them at a time, which is what happened in Oxford, every time they mount an attack.’

Her friend Airey Neave had been oddly terse.

“Frank may have a point, but...’

The Oxford killers had worn stolen British Army uniforms. No dog tags, nothing to identify the bodies of the dead men. The doctors would try to save the third man...

The IRA – or rather, the so-called Army Council of the Irish Republican Army - had claimed responsibility for all the bombings and, this was the truly sick part, falsely claimed to have ‘warned the authorities in time to allow for the safe evacuation of civilians’ from the scenes of all the explosions.

Three car bombs, and several smaller bombs placed in dustbins, or in satchels dropped in doorways, each wrecking whole streets; and apparently, ‘it was only the start of our campaign on the mainland’, supplemented a few hours later by a statement that ‘all active service units in the North have been temporarily stood down until 31st March 1965.’

Not that she or any other right-thinking person in England was going to ‘stand down’ or withdraw a single British soldier from the province on the basis of a promise like that!

“ONE MINUTE!’

The helicopter thumped down onto the ground within thirty seconds of this last warning. The doors were flung open and Margaret Thatcher found herself being unceremoniously handed down to terra firm as everybody piled out into the cold bright, strangely dazzling morning sunshine.

It was all a blur.

There was cheering, applause, the crescendo of roaring, thrumming as the helicopter lifted off.

Before she knew it, the Prime Minister was standing in front of Miriam Prior; the other woman dressed and made up as bizarrely as ever, smiling grimly.

They looked at and to each other for a moment.

Then the once, and perhaps, future Queen of London stepped forward and embraced Margaret Thatcher, and to the Prime Minister's astonishment, she hugged, albeit awkwardly the purple-haired, eccentrically attired Miriam Prior in return.

"You look very warlike, Prime Minister," her host grinned when at last the two women stepped out of each other's arms.

"The Army would not let me get onto that blasted helicopter unless I was dressed up for the occasion," Margaret Thatcher complained, woman to woman, as if there was nobody listening in. "For a horrible moment I was afraid they were going to make me wear a suit of armour!"

The clearing in which the Westland Wessex had briefly touched down was so crowded that her guardian Royal Marine AWP pressed in protectively from every side.

Miriam Prior glanced at the rolling shoulder-held 16-millimetre film camera of the man at Frank Waters's right shoulder; and recognised the praetorian figure of Major Steuart Pringle of the Royal Marines standing directly behind his principal, his clear eyes watchful. The sixteen-man detachment of AWPs under the command of a grizzled NCO who had flown in at dawn now circled Margaret Thatcher.

In the distance the staccato thunder of artillery drifted on the wind.

"I cannot tell you how delighted to meet you again, Ms Prior," the Prime Minister smiled, her gaze drawn to the ragged outline of the ruins of Parliament behind the other woman.

Miriam Prior turned and followed her look for a moment.

"I was so sorry to hear about Harold's death," Margaret Thatcher continued. "We have all lost so many loved ones and friends. Nothing matters now more than winning the peace."

Frank Waters could hardly picture two women more superficially unalike. They were of an age, give or take a few years, and by rights ought to be traumatised, quivering wrecks after everything that they had been through in the last couple of years and yet they were without a shadow of a doubt the straightest, strongest reeds in this particular field!

Miriam Prior was for a moment, very touched by the other woman's genuinely sisterly tone. She pursed her lips, sniffed back a tear and raised her face to confront the world. So often tempted to try to find a hole in the ground to bury herself, somewhere to curl up and cry, she had taught herself to be stronger. Or rather, *even* stronger and suspected that her guest that morning had gone through very much the same process of self-discovery and 'tempering' in recent times.

"Welcome to our little Kingdom by the Thames, Prime Minister," the Queen of London said graciously.

Frank Waters imagined he detected an undertone of irony in the voice of the peculiarly-dressed leader of the local tribe, and that she was a tad Iceni to the Prime Minister's Roman? As if to say I'll still be here in a month's time but you might be in the wilderness?

Margaret Thatcher seemed oblivious to this.

"I gather that the battle in the east is hard but that it goes well?" She asked, turning to the soldier at Miriam Prior's shoulder.

Brigadier David Willison nodded solemnly.

"So I believe, Prime Minister."

The rebels had allowed 1st Armoured Brigade's spearhead companies to penetrate almost half-way to the Thames before all Hell had broken loose. Now the battle raged either side of the North Circular Road between Woodford and Walthamstow. Attempts to turn the enemy's flank had resulted in a series of ferocious actions along the eastern side of the flooded Lea Valley. As anticipated 1st Armoured had run into enemies well-equipped with light infantry weapons, mortars and several artillery pieces; mercifully, the irregulars had thus far shown little or no great proficiency in the employment of their captured guns or heavier weaponry and proved vulnerable to the ruthless skirmishing tactics of the hardened infantrymen guarding the flanks of the mechanised columns.

Yesterday, low cloud had hamstrung the RAF, today the forecast was for clear skies until the late afternoon. Thereafter, the meteorologists predicted heavy rain overnight, and more of the same tomorrow before another more clement 'weather window' opened on Thursday and Friday.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," Willison declared, 'however, we are confident that we have drawn significant forces north to block our southward drive and engaged and begun to wear down those forces at a

relatively low cost in men and materiel to ourselves."

Presently, a mixed assault force of about a thousand men – made up of an SAS component, several troops of Royal Marines, a company of Paratroopers from 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, and units redeployed by river from the mopping up operations around Stamford Bridge football ground in the west - was being assembled to go ashore at Blackwall just above the East India Docks to 'pinch off' the Isle of Dogs, thereupon, to advance north through Poplar.

The Battle class destroyers HMS Trafalgar and HMS Camperdown, both armed with four 4.5-inch Mark III rifles mounted in two twin turrets, which had so far remained in reserve in the Thames Estuary were tasked to come up river to anchor in the stream at Woolwich to be available to support the initial landing, and later the advance to the north closing the jaws of the vice on the rebels likely to be trapped in the north-south pincer.

It was a good plan; the only question mark was whether or not the forces on the ground were strong enough to carry it through and to link up with the forces coming down from the north. Much would depend on naval gunfire support and clear skies to permit pinpoint close air support in the coming days.

All this the Prime Minister knew but she listened attentively as Brigadier Willison rehashed the preparations as he and Miriam Prior, Frank Waters's BBC crew and the heavily armed AWPs moved across the Palace Gardens, blasted and muddy, to the entrance to the Clock Tower.

Steuart Pringle was worried about snipers; but nothing was going to stop Margaret Thatcher getting a better view of the battlefield and her first real, personal sight of what remained of the great city she planned to rebuild one day.

"When all this is over," she said, turning to Miriam Prior on the stairs as the party slowly ascended to the Clock Room, "you must come to Oxford and join the deliberations of the Home Secretary's London Garden City planning group."

"I'm not interested in talking shops," Miriam Prior replied.

"Neither am I."

"What about Mr Callaghan?"

"We are both committed to reconstruction..."

"The latest I heard was that the Labour Party wants to forget about

London. Well, apart from building a town around the docks for the people who will be working in them; the Labour election manifesto talks about concentrating the ‘means of production’ in the hands of the ‘workers’, connecting the cities of the Midlands and the North with new motorways, and re-building Liverpool. They say London is too big to rebuild, they plan to begin with things that will make a real difference in the next few years.”

They had arrived in the Clock Room.

“Yes, well, we shall see about all that!” Margaret Thatcher snorted derisively. “*If* I have anything to say about it after the 11th of March I will be putting you name forward to Chair the London Garden City Planning Board!”

This momentarily caused the other woman to take a mental backward step. For a second or two she blinked wildly.

“Seriously?” She asked.

“Yes. Being the ‘chair’ of a government committee allows you to bring in your own advisors, to set the tone of future discussions and if one is sufficiently forceful, to influence the thinking and the decisions of ministers. The LGC Planning Board is far too important to be chaired by some chinless wonder from within the Home Office bureaucracy...”

To the north east a pall of smoke hung over that quarter of the horizon. The sound of guns and shells exploding was louder, and now and then a flash was visible for an instant, crimson or yellow.

The women might have continued their discussion but as was not unusual in this much battered and twisted post-October War age reality impinged.

Something whistled through the air.

CLANG!

Whatever it was had hit something hard.

Again: *CLINK!*

Margaret Thatcher found herself on the floor with at least two, possibly more bodies on top of her, face to face with Frank Waters.

Out of the corner of her eye she realised that Brigadier Willison and a pair of AWP’s had likewise bowled Miriam Prior to the floor and were shielding her with their bodies.

“Sorry about this,” Frank Waters gasped.

Margaret Thatcher realised that somebody was bleeding; there was blood, wet and glistening on her right hand.

“Steuart was right about those bloody snipers!” The former SAS man chuckled. He winced as much in irritation as pain.

Somebody was shooting off magazine emptying bursts of automatic gunfire from very nearby; spent casings were rolling everywhere.

The AWPs had already dragged the Queen of London away.

Now strong arms picked up the Prime Minister as if she was weightless and were suddenly manhandling her at what seemed to her breakneck speed down the stairs to safety.

Chapter 40

Wednesday 23rd February 1965
Leinster House, Kildare Street, Dublin

Fifty-five-year-old Sir Ian Morrison Ross MacLennan had been the United Kingdom's Ambassador to the Irish Republic since as long ago as 1959, and he was considered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in England to be the safest of 'safe hands'.

Having joined the Colonial Office in 1933 after graduating from Worcester College, Oxford, he had previously served with distinction as High Commissioner in Southern Rhodesia between 1951 and 1953, in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland until 1955, returning to London for two years as Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office, before undertaking his next High Commissioner stint between 1957 and 1959 in Accra, Ghana during the run up to that nation's independence.

In all his overseas postings MacLennan had demonstrated an uncanny knack of developing close and lasting friendships with men and women who were often instinctively hostile to British interests. Nowhere, had his diplomatic skills been so sorely tested than in Dublin. However, insofar as it was possible for a man representing the former imperial power – a power still distrusted and by many loathed throughout the twenty-six counties – to have built meaningful 'bridges', few men could have done more than Ian MacLennan in the years he had been in Ireland.

Not that many 'bridges' had been built since the October War. In fact, there had been times when Anglo-Irish relations had teetered on the brink of open warfare as the strife in the north worsened and passions burned ever more brightly in the south; and nothing, absolutely nothing had so poisoned the well of Anglo-Irish relations as the ongoing terrorist atrocities committed on the British mainland.

At around the time of the Cuban Missiles disaster Sir Ian and his wife Margherita had been looking forward to their mooted next posting, in Wellington, New Zealand; but that blissful vision had been snatched away from them as had so much else by the October War. Tragically, neither of

their adult children had survived the night of the war; both had disappeared without trace like so many other parents' hopes for the future. Afterwards, there was only duty to fall back upon, no matter how onerous or pointless it sometimes seemed in Dublin, the drably elegant, inimically hostile capital of the Irish Republic.

The British Ambassador had received the Taoiseach's – the Irish Prime Minister's - note requesting an urgent 'meeting' while digesting the overnight telegrams from Oxford over breakfast. The latest bomb outrages perpetrated by the IRA – whose leaders hid in plain sight in the Irish capital, their names well known and their lives rarely inconvenienced by the authorities – might inevitably soon become the awful preface to a complete breakdown in UK-Eire relations. After that what next? Probably, rather than possibly, he suspected a war that would leave impoverished, backward Ireland bankrupt, blockaded, starving and in ruins.

More often than not since the Cuban Missiles War a peremptory 'invitation' to an audience with the Taoiseach or his colleague, the Irish Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, heralded a new denouncement of perfidious Albion's real or imagined colonial malfeasance. Like all fundamentally insecure administrations preoccupied with papering over the deep structural cracks in its own fragile facade of unity, the Fianna Fáil Government of Taoiseach Sean Lemass, was intensely, painfully sensitive to any public suggestion it was not wholly in control of its own destiny. The moment it felt itself under pressure it reverted to type, and the continuing existence of the six northern counties of Ulster partitioned from the island of Ireland back in the early 1920s still blighted everything.

Everybody knew the history; but it was not until an Englishman came to Dublin that he understood what that history *meant*. Under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) Ireland had been partitioned north and south on 3rd May 1921. But the Act had solved little. Under its provisions the entire island of Ireland had become the Irish Free State on 6th December 1922 which ought to have been but was never going to be the end of the affair; because on the 7th December 1922 the Parliament of Ulster had formally opted *not* to join the new Dominion of the British Empire and thereafter the 'Irish Question' had remained malignantly unresolved, a festering canker.

To the majority of undeniably decent, peace-loving Irish folk Sir Ian

MacLennan was, therefore, the living embodiment of Oliver Cromwell's ghost and there was nothing he could say or do to win over hearts and minds; other that was, than to take the slings and arrows constantly flying in his direction with unflappable, unfailing good grace.

Therefore, it had been with a weary sense of 'here we go again' that he had finished his breakfast, bidden farewell to his wife and driven in the company of his customary Irish Army escort the short distance from the Embassy in Merrion Square, to Leinster House, the home of the *Oireachtas Éireann*, the Parliament of the Irish Republic for his 'interview' with the Taoiseach.

He wondered if the Irish Government had learned anything new about the assassination of the Defence Secretary, William Whitelaw. At least three men who had attacked the vehicles carrying Whitelaw and his wife back to Oxford after a day campaigning in the East Midlands. A broken-down Bedford 3-ton truck had partially blocked the Banbury Road, and as the Secretary of Defence's convoy had slowed to negotiate the obstruction, the tailgate of the lorry had dropped and a machine gun had opened fire from point blank range. Other men had stepped into the road firing automatic weapons, Sten Guns. Had the machine gun, a Browning M1919 30-caliber weapon not jammed, Whitelaw's protection detail would have been massacred before it could return fire.

It must have been pure, bloody carnage...

Perhaps, the anti-Irish hotheads whose intemperate speeches were gleefully parroted in the Dublin press were right when they maintained it was no longer a question of if or when war came; it was already going on it was just that the British and the Irish Governments were too afraid to admit it...

The tragedy was that last year UK-Irish relations had, against the odds, been on a modest – albeit very modest - upturn. Following the death of President Éamon de Valera, responding to US pressure many of the sanctions imposed after the IRA's Brize Norton and Cheltenham atrocities had been quietly lifted and subsequently, the Johnson Administration's decision to extend credit lines to Dublin enabling it to underwrite the import of food staples and fuel, had meant that nobody in Ireland had gone hungry that winter. Notwithstanding that the Royal Navy still periodically patrolled in Irish territorial waters, reserving the right to stop and search vessels bound for Irish ports which might be carrying weapons, it had only actually stopped

three ships in the last five months.

Talk of a blockade of the Irish Republic, of grounding all flights in and out of the island, of effectively shunning direct contact with Fianna Fáil had been, in MacLennan's humble opinion, absurdly precipitate and disproportionate and worse, demonstrated a dangerous misunderstanding of the Irish. Nobody needed to tell an Irishman or woman about the tragedy of war; and the last thing most Irish people south of the border actually wanted was a shooting war with their wounded but infinitely more powerful and potentially vengeful neighbour across the other side of the Irish Sea.

The Taoiseach was not alone in his rooms at Leinster House. Frank Aiken, the Minister for External Affairs and Lieutenant General John McKeown, Chief of Staff of the *Óglaıġ na hÉıreann* – a title literally translated as 'Irish warriors' but more prosaically descriptive of the 'Irish Defence Forces' - rose to their feet when the British Ambassador arrived.

Sixty-six-year-old Frank Aiken was no friend of the United Kingdom but if he had ever been such a thing he had long ago ceased to be an unthinking 'Brit hater'. The former IRA veteran of the Civil War and one of the longest serving members of the Dáil, the Irish Parliament, had been a campaigner on the European and wider World stage for de-colonisation, equality, peace and nuclear disarmament before the October War and in common with most old soldiers, he had no appetite for a new civil war in Ireland that might entrench the current sad partition of the island for another generation.

A tall, thin man with a brush moustache Aiken stepped forward and shook Sir Ian MacLennan's hand, greeting him with a solemn nod of his head.

McKeown's presence worried MacLennan.

As did the angry, trouble look on the face of the Taoiseach because it was unlike Seán Francis Lemass to betray his underlying misgivings in the presence of the Ambassador of the United Kingdom.

"Good day to you, Ambassador," the Irish Prime Minister said in Gaelic, quirking a momentary forced grimace as hands were shaken.

Ian MacLennan had not been a Gaelic speaker when he was posted to Dublin; since then he had acquired sufficient of the language to make polite conversation and to sometimes – if his interlocutors spoke slowly and they had Dublin accents – to follow the gist of conversations.

"And to you too, Taoiseach," he replied in kind. His ghastly, very

‘English’ pronunciation rarely failed to raise at least a half-smile even on the lips of even the most partisan of Irish nationalists.

The four men sat in old, creaking chairs.

The British Ambassador looked to the Taoiseach to get the ball rolling.

Seán Francis Lemass had actually been born *John* Francis Lemass in Ballybrack, County Dublin in 1899. He was the second of seven children. As a child his family had called him ‘Jack’. At school he had excelled at mathematics and history but aged fifteen he had lied about his date of birth and joined the rebel Irish Volunteers, enlisting in A Company of the 3rd Battalion, whose adjutant was none other than Éamon de Valera, and he had become ‘*Seán*’.

Arrested after the Easter Rising in 1916 during which he and his brother Noel had fought at both Moore Street and at the General Post Office, the British had released him because of his youth. He had repaid this leniency by spending the rest of his early life fighting the occupying power. Lemass had been one of Michael Collins’s ‘Twelve Apostles’, the men of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA responsible for a series of murderous attacks on British agents operating in the city.

A veteran of the War of Independence and later of the Irish Civil War, Lemass’s life had been blighted by loss. He had accidentally shot and killed his own twenty-two-month-old brother Herbert with a revolver in January 1916; and in 1923 his twenty-five-year-old elder brother Noel was kidnapped and later murdered by pro-Treaty men under the command of Emmet Dalton, a close confederate of Michael Collins.

In those terrible days when true Irishmen routinely killed each other over the convoluted rhetoric of the clauses of a British mandated Anglo-Irish Treaty – over whether Ireland should, or should not be partitioned – still darkly overshadowed later generations. The armed struggle between the Irish Free State and its colonial overlords might be long over - nobody in that room in Leinster House wanted a return to those dreadful days - but the partition of the thirty-two counties of Ireland in the 1920s had settled nothing and they could not pretend otherwise.

“This is a matter of military intelligence, maybe you’d be the best one to speak to it, General,” Sean Lemass sighed, passing a weary, resigned hand across his face.

Lieutenant General John McKeown sat stiffly upright in his chair.

“You will be aware, Sir Ian,” the soldier prefaced, his tone business-like and unapologetic, “that since the unfortunate incidents which occurred last year...”

The British Ambassador coughed.

“I take it that you are referring to the second attempted regicide of Queen Elizabeth and the failed assassination attempt on the life of the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher at Brize Norton, and the cold-blooded murder of the First Sea Lord and over thirty seriously wounded servicemen and their nurses at Cheltenham?” Sir Ian MacLennan interjected dryly.

“Quite so, Sir Ian,” the Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces agreed, sadly. To imagine that the three Irishmen in the room viewed these outrages with anything other than disgust would have been a heinous calumny on their characters. “Since those ‘incidents’ we have, as you know, at the request of Her Majesty’s Government, taken, regrettably, with limited success thus far, measures to limit the IRA’s room for manoeuvre. We have also intensified our intelligence gathering activities and lately, prioritised the establishment of a communications channel to the Army Council of that organisation...”

The British Ambassador bristled with outrage.

“You’re telling me you are talking to these bastards?”

“Yes, sir,” the soldier acknowledged without apology, “at one level, we are.”

“That’s...” The British Ambassador shut his mouth to stop himself uttering a most undiplomatic rejoinder. Suddenly, he was recollecting a meeting he had had with these same three men a little less than a year ago; like then they were uneasy and a little afraid. “If you’re talking to these...*fellows*, why did you not warn us of the recent attacks on the mainland?”

“That sort of thing is not a part of the dialogue we have had with the Council,” Frank Aiken growled. “We are trying to build trust...”

Sir Ian Maclennan had had his fill of doubletalk.

“So that’s what I should tell ministers back in England to say to the mothers and fathers, husbands and wives and children of the countless innocent people the bloody IRA murdered the other day?”

“No, sir,” McKeown retorted. “I would hope that you will tell them that the majority of Irish men and women share their loss and their pain.”

“Fine words, General,” MacLennan sighed.

Sean Lemass rose from his chair, unable to contain his exasperation. Respectfully, the others automatically began to rise to their feet.

"No, no, don't get up, gentleman," the Taoiseach ordered, stuffing his hands into his trouser pockets as he turned to face them. He paused to take a deep breath, then another. Suddenly, he was staring, glaring almost at Ian MacLennan. "God knows you won't believe me when I say this but I deplore with all my heart what my countrymen are doing on the mainland in the name of Ireland."

The British Ambassador wanted to believe that the man was sincere in what he had said. He remained silent.

"And *that* is exactly what my Government has communicated to the Army Council of the IRA," the Taoiseach went on. "We have been frank with them, and in some matters, we believe that *they* have been frank with us. When challenged they freely, proudly – mistakenly, counter-productively in my view, and that of my colleagues in this room - claim responsibility for the recent bombing and threaten an ongoing campaign..."

Ian MacLennan made as if to speak.

"No, they gave no indication of future targets or plans in that respect."

The British Ambassador's anger spiked.

"Then what on earth is the point of talking to a bunch of criminals and murders, Taoiseach?"

Sean Lemass was sombre, resigned.

"I can tear my country apart by going to war with the IRA; start another civil war, or I can try to talk to criminals and murderers in the hope that one day, reason will prevail, Sir Ian. We proceed much in the manner of your own Government in respect of the Protestant Ascendancy in the six counties, hoping against hope that one day *those people* in the North will eventually come to their senses. In the meantime, your Government treats us as if we're all a pack of ignorant, dumb paddies; we are not. Like you we are faced by 'troubles' that are neither of our making, nor amenable to nice, tidy, bloodless solutions. Dammit man, if you and I cannot talk to each other like right-thinking men - and we have known each other for many years - is it any wonder that anything my Government has been saying to your Government on the mainland and *those people* in the North is instantly mistranslated to mean the exact opposite of what was originally said?"

Frank Aiken leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“You should be aware that the IRA vehemently denies any responsibility for or having had any involvement in the assassination of Whitelaw and his wife. They make no bones about how happy they are to see the back of the man but they claim, steadfastly, that *they* had nothing to do with it.”

The British Ambassador blinked, thinking he had misheard the Irish Minister for External Affairs.

“I’m sorry, I don’t...”

“The Army Council of the IRA did not order, authorise, plan or in any way support or facilitate any attempt to assassinate Defence Minister Whitelaw.”

“What’s to say it wasn’t one of their surrogates in England who...”

Aiken scowled and shook his head: “These people would kill anybody who undertook a high profile unauthorised ‘action’ like that. They’d kill the people who carried it out, their wives, and their children. That’s the way they operate. So, for what it’s worth, I believe them when they say they had nothing to do with it.”

Sean Lemass was silent as he caught John McKeown’s eye.

The soldier nodded.

“My intelligence people tell me they hear rumours of the bombing campaign daily,” McKeown explained crisply. “Now and then there is speculation about long-planned sniper ‘actions’. But there is and was nothing in the ‘background chatter’ we overheard in recent weeks, absolutely nothing about an operation like the one in Oxford in which Mr Whitelaw was assassinated. Pragmatically speaking, in my opinion that sort of ‘military’,” he shrugged, “almost ‘special forces’’ type of operation is beyond the present capabilities of the IRA on the mainland. The IRA simply does not have access to the sort of information, basic movement and ‘intention’ intelligence about any major public figure that it would have to have to hand to be able to plan, let alone conduct *that* sort of ‘action’. For what it is worth, on the Whitelaw killing at least, I am personally, and professionally inclined to give the IRA’s ‘disclaimer’ credence.”

Chapter 41

Wednesday 23rd February 1965
The White House, South Broad Street, Philadelphia

Robert McNamara waved cursorily at Henry Kissinger as the US National Security Advisor entered the Oval Office. The President was on the phone; he gestured for the newcomer to sit down and went on listening.

"One of the lady's staffers was wounded, you say?" Richard Nixon checked, frowning. "No? Oh, right... Some guy from the BBC..."

"The Presidents got Cabot Lodge on the line," McNamara explained to Henry Kissinger, his voice pitched low. "He visited the British Embassy this morning to express his sympathy for what they're going through at the moment."

"The bombings, of course..."

McNamara nodded.

"Somebody fired shots at Prime Minister Thatcher on a visit to the ruins of their Parliament." His brow furrowed. "The Brits are refusing to comment on the Irish Government's statement about the IRA not being responsible for the murder of Whitelaw and his wife," the Secretary of Defence sighed. "Terrible thing..."

Kissinger nodded.

Nobody in the Irish community in Boston, or anywhere in New England had voted for Richard Nixon in last year's general election. He was publicly only lukewarm about supporting the aspirations of many Irish-Americans for a United Ireland. Privately, he was indifferent to the 'Irish problem'. Moreover, with US-British relations back on a relatively even keel the last thing he wanted to do was to seem in any way partisan.

Ireland was one of those 'issues' that was best not raised in polite conversation, ignored basically. In the big picture the fate of the thirty-two counties was very small beer.

"You told Sir Peter that CIA backs up the Irish Government's take on this?" Nixon asked, somewhat rhetorically. "Oh, right. No, that's good. No, I agree, we need to come down hard on any talk in Congress about sending a peacekeeping force to Ireland. That is absolutely *not* on the

agenda!”

Henry Kissinger wondered idly if the Secretary of State had realised at the time of his nomination that he was going to be a fig leaf messenger for the President rather than a ‘player’ making and developing US foreign policy?

Probably not; grand old men of the Republican Party like Henry Cabot Lodge II rarely allowed themselves to think beyond the safe envelop of the hubris of a lifetime.

Nixon put down the phone and looked to his lieutenants.

“Your note said you wanted to talk to me about DC, Bob?” He inquired of his Defence Secretary.

Like Nicholas Katzenbach at Justice, and John McCone at the Central Intelligence Agency, McNamara had been invited to remain in the Administration within days of Richard Nixon’s election.

Forty-eight-year-old San Franciscan born McNamara came from Irish stock driven out of Ireland by the famine in the middle of the last century. Having graduated from Berkeley in 1937 he had earned an MBA at Harvard Business School in 1939 and spent a short period with Price Waterhouse before taking up a post at Harvard. At the time he was the youngest assistant professor at the college, where after the outbreak of war in 1941 he had taught US Army Air Force officers how to apply analytical business methodologies to their duties. Subsequently, as a captain in the Office of Statistical Control he had the unenviable job of assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of General Curtis LeMay’s B-29 bombers operating from India, and later the Marianas; needless to say, Lemay had never forgiven him.

However, the war had been but a blip in his brilliant career.

In 1946 he had been recruited by Colonel Charles ‘Tex’ Thornton to join a group of officers from his Army Air Force Statistical Control Division to start up their own consultancy.

Thornton’s group was to become known as the ‘Whiz Kids’, the men who saved the Ford Motor Company. The great car maker had been on the slide; the Whiz Kids, asking questions which nobody at Ford had ever asked before, guided it through massive ongoing reorganisations based on intricate financial analyses, planning in previously unheard detail and precision.

McNamara had risen steadily through the car maker’s management structure in the 1950s, identifying quality of build and ‘safety’ as key design

considerations in the production of a range of smaller, inexpensive models that had transformed Ford's profitability by the end of the decade, eventually becoming the first President of the company from outside the Ford family in November 1960.

Initially, Jack Kennedy had considered offering him the Treasury Department but then his first choice for Defense, sixty-five-year-old Texan Robert A. Lovett – Harry Truman's last Secretary of Defense between 1951 and 1953 – had declined to serve, and after thinking it through, McNamara had accepted what he knew to be a poisoned chalice. JFK had wanted to re-organise the giant, hugely disparate US military machine and he had hoped to save money doing it. But for the October War McNamara might actually have begun that root and branch reform of the many-headed hydra of the US military-industrial complex.

But that was then and this was now.

The World had changed, and the mandate of the man in charge of the Department of Defense had been turned on its head; nevertheless, Henry Kissinger could think of no better man to have in the driving seat.

Kissinger had never subscribed to the ill-informed view that JFK had gathered the 'best and the brightest' into his Washington DC reincarnation of some latter day Arthurian Camelot, but if JFK's Administration had had a 'star', McNamara was it. Oddly, McNamara – possibly because he was so close to JFK and Bobby in age – was one of the few senior members of the Kennedy Cabinet to actually socialise with the brothers, and if the 'Capitol Hill' gossip mill was to be believed, even now he remained close to Bobby.

The reconstruction of the nation's capital, Washington DC, was one of Robert McNamara's 'smaller' projects.

"I recommend that we set a date of not later than May 1st next year to remove the Government back to the capital," McNamara said without the remotest hint of a dramatic flourish. "Works on the Capitol Building, the Pentagon, the former State Department complex and of course, the White House, will be completed by the end of this year, Mr President. My people have already begun to draft a provisional outline plan to guide detailed studies as to how the transfer of the House, executive functions and the various departmental entities may be accomplished over a six-month period while business as usual is conducted here in Philadelphia up to and until the formal 'transfer day'. As I say, all this is achievable by 1st May next year."

Richard Nixon stared at McNamara.

"As soon as that?"

"Yes, sir."

Across the country there had been mounting criticism about the profligacy of the resources being thrown into the reconstruction of Washington DC while Seattle, Galveston, Texas City and south Boston lay in ruins.

"That's good news, Bob."

Henry Kissinger realised the President was looking at him, challenging his National Security advisor to trump his Secretary of Defense's good news.

"I wanted to update you on the papers I put across your desk for consideration while I was in the British Isles and the Middle East, Mr President," he prefaced, managing Nixon's expectations. "First, did you have any questions about my outline conclusions?"

Richard Nixon remained behind his desk, McNamara and Kissinger were in chairs opposite him. The President steepled his fingers a moment; he was a well-organised man and he had a note book open on his blotter. Now he glanced to it.

"What will the British do if we formally refuse to transfer submarine-launched missile technology to them, Henry?"

The former Director of the Harvard Defense Studies Program was tempted to remind the Commander-in-Chief that he did not have a crystal ball. Declining that course of action, he contemplated every word of what he was about to say with immense care.

"There are two possibilities," he warned, thinking aloud. "One, that the socialist Labour Party wins the upcoming election. Although James Callaghan, its leader and the majority of his senior colleagues, believe that the United Kingdom ought to have its own nuclear deterrent, many of their supporters hold contrary views. If a Labour Government decided to retain a deterrent it would do it as cheaply as possible, probably by retaining the existing RAF V-Bomber Force. An incoming Labour administration would also drastically cut the United Kingdom's spending on defence and might conceivably abandon plans to build up a significant nuclear-powered submarine fleet."

"These 'Labour guys' are the ones the CIA says are odds-on to win the election?" The President queried.

“Yes. CIA also believes that given the internal frictions within the British Labour Party that Callaghan might not actually be able to govern effectively. For example, the party might fragment over the defence question. One wing of the Party wishes to ‘nationalise all the means of production’, the other doesn’t and so on in which case...”

“You said there were two possibilities, Henry?”

“If the socialists cannot form a coherent government one wing, that loyal to Callaghan, might form a new National Government with the Conservatives but not under Margaret Thatcher’s leadership; the consensus is that if she loses the election she will be thrown out by her Party. The important point is that a ‘national government’ might pursue foreign and defence policies similar to those of the current Thatcher regime. In that event, if we do not share technologies with the British they might decide to go it alone.”

“You mean they’d develop their own missile systems for their own Polaris-type boats?”

“Yes, possibly.”

“Could they even do that?”

Robert McNamara stirred.

“Yes, Mr President. Not quickly but by the end of the decade, certainly, yes. My reading of how the British might approach things is that they are thinking – at least the present administration in Oxford – of focussing on areas in which they are intrinsically strong in terms of scientific and technical research, and where they currently have underused skills in their war-damaged economy and industrial base. We’re talking about focussing on aerospace projects, shipbuilding, specifically their much upgraded and expanded submarine project based in the north of England and at the new facility at Rosyth in Scotland which is situated close to a pre-existing large radar and telecommunications research complex at Edinburgh. Once they, the British get things back on track a lot of the structural problems holding back their industry before the October War will no longer apply. The areas of England relatively lightly damaged or untouched by the bombing in October 1962, are those containing much of its pre-1962 industrial capacity. CIA estimates that there will be sufficient ‘slack’ in their economy to permit a limited dual track approach to reconstruction and economic recovery driven, in part, by investment in their defence technologies sector.”

Richard Nixon mulled this.

“You’re telling me they might be better off in a few years than they might otherwise have been but for the Cuban Missiles War?”

“Not in so many words, Mr President. That would be something of an over-simplification of the proposition. All I am saying is that if they do this right then in say, ten years’ time, the United Kingdom might well be one of the most technologically advanced, productive industrial economies in the World. Whereas, prior to 1962 the British were over-burdened by the costs and strategic dislocation of their retreat from Empire, and their industry was over-manned and suffering from a lack of investment, it may be that the United Kingdom emerges leaner, compelled to modernise, and without any of the major impediments which previously were dragging down its economy.”

Nixon was still none the wiser.

“What are we saying; we ought to give them the technology they’re requesting to stop them inventing it themselves and getting ahead of us in the key areas of a future arms race?”

“No,” McNamara smiled wanly. “Just that that might be a pragmatic way to go with the Brits; trying to shut them out hasn’t worked that well the last couple of years.”

The President accepted this without further comment.

Henry Kissinger stirred.

“It may all be academic, anyway. In Britain one party - the Labour Party - is standing on a platform that is looking to transport the country back to 1945 in the name of ‘fairness for all’. The other, the Conservatives, well, Margaret Thatcher at least, is talking about making ‘great leaps forward’, and ‘releasing the potential of the people’. At this stage it is impossible to distinguish fact from hyperbole. Diplomacy, like politics, is the art of the possible, Mr President,” he shrugged. “I think our best option is probably to wait and see what happens on the 11th March.”

Chapter 42

Wednesday 24th February 1965
Hôtel de Ville, Vichy, Allier Department, France

The *Hôtel de Ville* had been the headquarters of the collaborationist Vichy Government of the Second World War. Now it was the headquarters of an anti-fascist coalition that was every bit as despicable, and probably, as doomed.

In the light of the waning crescent Moon the gothic spires of the old building seemed like something out of an old horror movie as Major General Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev marched across the Place de la Ville towards the white stone steps leading up to the colonnaded main entrance to the building.

The booted feet of the three soldiers - Akhromeyev and his two Spetsnaz bodyguards rang dully on the stones underfoot.

Even their footsteps sounded angry.

If Akhromeyev had been in any doubt a week ago that he was working for idiots the events of recent days had removed what residual remnants of ambiguity remained. He was working with idiots, charlatans and cowards who obviously had less commitment to the Revolution in their entire bodies than he had in the tip of the fourth finger of his left hand!

Yuri Andropov had blustered about the ‘Bucharest solution’ but that had cut little or no ice with First Secretary Comrade Jacques Duclos, or his people back in the mountains around Clermont-Ferrand, and none at all forty-five kilometres north in the embattled, hungry city blighted by the shame of its painfully recent history.

There had been no retaliatory strikes after the Red Air Force’s bombing of Basra back in July but that was thousands of miles away from the British home islands; any attempt to repeat the dose here in France would surely drive that witch Thatcher to unleash the hounds of Hell on the Motherland. If the British could wipe out two-thirds of the old Troika – supposedly impregnable beyond the Urals – with ‘conventional’ iron bombs, where in Russia was safe?

Everybody in the Soviet Union knew that – the massively strengthened

and upgraded air defence systems both sides of the Ural Mountains notwithstanding – if the British attacked again they would come with a dagger to the heart, not the wasteful, indiscriminate bludgeon of Curtis LeMay's Strategic Air Command. The British were mad dogs; just in case anybody had not worked that out before, then what had happened in Iraq and the Persian Gulf last year ought to serve as an object lesson. In comparison the Americans were loud-mouthed bullies with no real appetite for a proper fight; even sorting out the Korean 'affront' to their dignity might yet break their tender hearts!

That at least was the hope of the High Command in the Sverdlovsk-Chelyabinsk enclave around which the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was to be rebuilt. Party First Secretary and Chairman Alexander Nikolayevich Shelepin, who had ruthlessly purged the old leadership – and their families – in last July's coup, had decreed that henceforth the Motherland would pursue a policy of 'separate development' and 'consolidation'. Red Dawn had become Red Sunrise; the Revolution would be carried to the handful of surviving capitalist citadels by stealth not by the threat of the naked force of arms.

Demonstrably, that former policy had failed disastrously.

The future was of war by other means, by proxies in Africa, in the Middle East, Asia and the Americas, and in taking advantage of the unimaginable chaos enveloping Europe from the Bay of Biscay to the burned-out cities of the Ukraine.

Of course, the leader of the futile 'mission' which had brought Sergey Akhromeyev to a city that was about to fall to one of the competing 'armed bands' ravaging the bare, wintery country to the north and the east, Yuri Andropov, was by now long gone, on his way by to the Motherland pre-occupied with the farrago of lies he hoped would save his miserable skin back in Chelyabinsk.

It had probably never occurred to Andropov that his master had sent him to France to be humiliated, and likely, assassinated by some over-zealous Krasnaya Zarya lunatic.

Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin, the wily old diplomat who had stood up to Adlai Stevenson in a famous clash at the United nations just before the Cuban Missiles War had, unlike Andropov, been officially summoned back to Russia for 'consultations'. Right now, he and Andropov would be

travelling the perilous road down to Marseilles to meet the plane the Troika was sending to take him home. Alexander Shelepin, the dark prince of the Motherland, clearly had a use, a need for a man like Zorin!

Of course, there was always the possibility that Shelepin had already ordered Duclos's people to put a bullet in the back of Andropov's neck yet? Or maybe Duclos's bodyguards would give the bastard a second dose of the treatment he had got at the hands of Nicolae Ceau ș escu's Securitate interrogators in Bucharest? Just to see what they beat out of him about the workings of the mind of the new Troika in Russia before they put him out of his misery.

Akhromeyev did not care either way.

'*Go to Vichy and find out what is going on*.'

Jacques Duclos was a practical man; he did not want a bunch of highly trained killers with questionable loyalties billeted anywhere near his headquarters. His working assumption must have been that Akhromeyev and his men would all be dead in a few days.

Akhromeyev and his men were now brigands, mercenaries far from home. After dumping their transport south of the city, they had marched past abandoned barricades directly into the centre of Vichy yesterday evening and been well...*ignored*.

The whole place was like a ghost town.

Nobody challenged him as he strode into the *Hôtel de Ville.*

"Where is he?" He demanded angrily as he shouldered into the cigarette smoke fogged City Commissar's Office.

The fat man behind the big desk was exactly where the Russian had left him that morning - before he inspected what the locals laughingly called the 'front lines' to the north and east of the valley of the Allier River - looked up cold-eyed.

The City Commissar, before the October War a mid-ranking apparatchik in the regional French Communist Party, a plumber by trade, was one of those non-entities who like scum rising to the top of a pond had leap-frogged his opponents to the Commissar's chair only because of his incidental affiliation with Red Dawn. Until a couple of years ago he had been a 'drawing room' anarchist, a true-believer in a Revolution and an ideology that he neither understood nor really expected to practice in his lifetime. Krasnaya Zarya had collected disaffected, idle underachievers like him with

grudges against the world in general like moths to a fire. In the troubled post-Algerian War Fifth Republic of Charles De Galle, whom most French people either loved or hated there had been plenty of space for little men, malcontents like him to play at being big men in their 'political lives'.

The 'Commissar' had made it abundantly clear that he did not want or like having 'an outsider' like Akhromeyev on his turf, and that he had no use for him or his troopers, or for the seven extra FI men who had accompanied the Russians north from Clermont-Ferrand.

'We have no spare food for useless mouths...'

Most of Akhromeyev's men were veterans of the 'mopping up' operations at home and in the Balkans rooting out dissident rogue Red Dawn groups preying on the surviving civilian populations. Here in France such 'bandits' controlled and terrorised the countryside and raided towns and villages at will.

Anarchy!

The reign of terror in the Auvergne, inside and around Clermont-Ferrand almost seemed like an island of sanity. Farther north there was no law, everything was a mess from what Akhromeyev and his men had learned talking to the 'locals' and the refugees who tramped hungrily down the cold roads of the wooded valleys of the Livradois.

The story which was emerging confirmed Akhromeyev's worst fears. The raiders had come from Germany at first, small parties, probing, reconnoitring the ground in the spring of 1963; by the autumn armed columns had penetrated as far as the outskirts of the ruins of Paris, and wintered around Verdun, established camps in the Ardennes and around Nancy. Disease had swept through those camps but last summer there had been new, larger incursions as survivors from the east searched for undamaged, 'clean' lands to plunder. Along the Channel coast a chain of communes around intact ports from the Belgian border all the way to Normandy, had repelled the first waves of invaders and become natural havens for the people fleeing from their 'unsafe' inland communities.

Akhromeyev had no real way of knowing how much he had learned was rumour, speculation, or blatant lies, misinformation or scare-mongering. However, most of what he had discovered made sense. There was no French Government, no French Army or Air Force; only regional warlords and 'City Commissars' like the drunken slob in front of him.

It seemed entirely logical that survivors from the carnage and devastation of Germany, Central and Eastern Europe would inevitably gravitate to wherever there was food, and hope; and that there would be no shortage of military hardware lying around waiting to be scavenged in the badlands.

In the western and southern parts of France, unscathed from the Cuban Missiles War, some semblance of normal civil society had survived a while, before splintering for the want of a centralised authority with the capacity to enforce basic legal and moral norms. Although the initial probes from the east had faltered in 1963; when the raiders returned the next year, they discovered the gates untended, open and they had begun to pour into eastern France. There was some anecdotal evidence that the Alps had protected Switzerland, a hungry armed camp guarding its mountain passes; the French had had no such natural physical barrier between them and the barbarian hordes, and neither the will nor the means to stem the tide even here on the margins of the Massif Central. That the enemy was already on the move before the winter was over; apparently unstoppable wherever he pressed at the borders of the Front Internationale in the south, and – it seemed – over-running or besieging at will the disparate coastal communes of the north told Akhromeyev that it was only a matter of time before France ceased to exist as anything other than a name on a map.

It was hardly surprising that anybody who could get out of Vichy had already gone. The town stank of defeat, resignation. If the populace had not already drunk its cellars dry or carried off its wines and spirits, everybody would have been as drunk as the ‘City Commissar’.

The Commissar’s bodyguards had made a half-hearted bid to stop Akhromeyev’s two troopers following him into the room. His men knew the score, they had been betrayed, abandoned and unless they stuck together they were dead meat.

“Fuck off!” One of Akhromeyev’s minders spat, raising the muzzle of his AK-47 threateningly. The trooper was a big man, hardly inconvenienced by webbing festooned with grenades and spare magazines for his Kalashnikov assault rifle and Makarov pistol. The latter sat on his right hip like a very old, very good friend, in exactly the way the hunting knife with a double-edged thirty-centimetre-long serrated cutting blade hung from his belt. Local idiots who had crossed his men had quickly discovered that anybody suicidal enough to get into a fight with any of Akhromeyev’s

troopers, suddenly found themselves confronted by a vicious array of other, hand to hand butchery tools previously concealed about their persons.

The City Commissar's men backed off.

"I asked you a fucking question?" Akhromeyev reminded the Frenchman behind the desk.

The man's dilated pupils and the empty bottles on the floor spoke to the fact the man, and the majority of his cronies, was as near as makes no difference to insensible. From what the Red Army officer had seen thus far getting blind drunk was the customary response of senior members of the military wing of the FI's leadership cadre when something went wrong.

Akhromeyev had been informed that an emissary from the armed band in possession of the villages farther up the Allier Valley had been taken prisoner and was currently being held somewhere in the *Hôtel de Ville.* He planned to interrogate the 'prisoner' before the Commissar's men 'had their fun with him'.

It was probably too late; apparently the prisoner had been 'captured' that morning and seven or eight hours was a long time when you were in the hands of psychopathic imbeciles.

"The *prisoner* is safe, Comrade Akhromeyev," said a woman's voice in casually enunciated Russian from behind his shoulder.

The woman's voice was tinged with no little impatience.

The Red Army man swung around.

"I am Vera Bertrand," a handsome woman in her forties or early fifties dressed – unlike everybody else in Vichy in nondescript dungarees or shoddy former French Army uniforms – in a cotton blouse and dress that emphasised her bust and hips, said coolly. She wore a stylish short jacket over her off cream blouse; her hair was dark, bobbed to her shoulders, flecked here and there with streaks of grey and her eyes were grey-green. "Or," she shrugged, "I have been for most of the last twenty years."

Akhromeyev struggled to get a grip of his temper.

"Comrade Bertrand?"

"No *Madame* Bertrand. The drunken *simpletons* running this town are 'comrades'," she observed sourly, "Monsieur General."

The woman was in no hurry to answer his question.

"They surrendered Vichy twenty-four hours ago," she declared contemptuously, eying the dissolute City Commissar slumped at his desk.

“Fucking Red Dawn,” she added. “Funny how it was the same useless fuckers who were the first to kiss Nazi arses that turned out to have been working for the Revolution ever since the liberation!”

Akhromeyev’s eyes widened momentarily.

“What do you mean? Surrendered?”

“They let the enemy at the gates walk in. The deal was no looting, rapine or reprisals if ‘the garrison’ rolled over and let the bastards tickle its belly.”

“What are you talking about?” The Russian demanded.

“You’ll understand soon enough, Monsieur General.” The woman had been apprising him thoughtfully, by no means disliking what she saw. “You aren’t like these,” she gestured at the drunken City Commissar, “oafs,” she decided, ignoring the rising anxiety of Akhromeyev’s two bodyguards. “If you play your cards right there may even be a place for you and your men in the 207th Cavalry.”

Akhromeyev decided he needed to go back to the beginning, start anew.

“Who *are* you, Madame Bertrand?”

“She’s a fucking brothel keeper!” The drunken City Commissar slurred.

Angry contempt blazed in the woman’s eyes.

“After the war all the local bigwigs who’d sucked up to the Germans fucked off back to their country chateaus,” she spat like a viper striking. “Somebody had to take charge. Things were fine until these,” she waved at the dirty, unkempt man behind the desk, “so-called Red Dawn *militiamen* ran back into town from the north a couple of months ago.”

Akhromeyev was tempted to despair.

“Who is in charge here?” He demanded, afraid that he had made not one but probably a string of bad mistakes in the last twenty-four hours. Since nobody had seemed to be in charge he had worked on the assumption everything was falling apart. This was clearly not the case.

“I am,” the woman smiled like a cat licking its lips. “In a manner of speaking, a brothel keeper. Most of Comrade Mendel over there’s,” she sneered dismissively at the City Commissar, “*fighters* ran away days ago. If my people hadn’t been dug in on the high ground around Creuzier-le-Vieux, Vichy would have fallen days ago. There was a battle – just a few gunshots, really - when the first tanks rolled down towards the River Allier. *He* wanted *my* boys to fight to the death. While he got drunk, obviously and *his* friends inflicted themselves on the town’s women; *his* people wanted to demolish the

only bridge strong enough to support an M-48 or an M-60 north of the town but it' would only have been a matter of time before the Yankees and the Germans outflanked my boys in the hills, and then," she shrugged, "well, we'd have been even more fucked than we are now if we hadn't come to an *accommodation* with them!"

The woman shook her head.

"Who do you think let you walk in here like you own the place, Comrade General?" She looked to her Red Dawn counterpart swaying drunkenly in his chair, his eyes rolling. "That cunt ordered his 'followers' to shoot you on sight. *That* order came straight from Clermont-Ferrand. Idiots!"

Akhromeyev was struck speechless.

"Follow me," the woman directed brusquely, turning on her heel.

The soldier noted that Madame Bertrand walked with a limp, favouring her left side. He also noted what looked like old scar tissue from an infected wound on the back of her neck as her hair swished, this way and that. She wore a musky scent that almost but not quite over-rode the dank, sweaty, sewer stench of the *Hôtel de Ville* and the rest of Vichy. With his two Spetsnaz bodyguards at his back Akhromeyev obediently tracked the woman, making no comment as she led him through the building, past armed men sleeping – or more likely insensible with drink - on the cold floor, to the stairs to the first floor. Upstairs the corridor was guarded by soldiers in shabby US and German Bundeswehr uniforms, *sober* men hefting a mixture of French Army carbines and Belgian long FN FAL assault rifles.

On Madame Bertrand's approached a sentry opened the door to a room half-way down the eastern side of the building and stood respectfully aside.

Akhromeyev had worked out by then that he had put his head in the noose and that it was only a matter of time before the trap door snapped open beneath his feet.

The room into which he and his now suspicious, jumpy bodyguards had been directed was laid out as mirror image of the City Commissar's Office on the ground floor; except that the man behind the big desk in this room was clean, clear-eyed and dressed in the combat fatigues of the United States Army.

And he was pointing a Browning forty-five pistol at the Russian's belly.

"We thought you were going to be late for the party. Please order your men to lay down their weapons, sir," the other man growled lowly in English.

Madame Bertrand translated urgently.

For several tense moments Akhromeyev was literally too astonished to speak. He stared at the *American*. He was a big man, well fed with neatly crew cut hair, dark brows and grey eyes. A few smudges and creases apart, his uniform was parade ground ready and the man radiated calm command.

On his left breast a stencilled canvas badge sewn into the fabric of his camouflage smock read: *Krueger, P*. above *Colonel, 207C*.

Akhromeyev trawled his memory for details of the US Army's order of battle in West Germany in the autumn of 1962. The 207th Cavalry had been under the command of the US 2nd Armoured Division in Germany, and based if his recollection of these things was to be trusted, somewhere in Bavaria...

"Tell your men to lay down their weapons and to lie on the floor with their hands behind their heads, Comrade Colonel."

Akhromeyev swallowed hard.

"Put your weapons," the Russian barked. "On the ground! Now! Lie on the ground face down with your hands behind your heads as soon as you've put down all your weapons!" The two troopers hesitated. "Now!"

It was as the two disgruntled Spetsnaz abandoned their Kalashnikovs, pistols, knives and knuckledusters and sulkily went to ground on the dirty carpet that the first long burst of automatic gunfire reverberated around the *Hôtel de Ville*.

Chapter 43

Wednesday 24th February 1965
Yacht ‘China Girl’, Sausalito, California

Darlene had called her sister-in-law up on deck to witness the unfolding commotion on the quayside. Gregory had left one of the gangways ‘stowed’ and one ‘down’ only after the local cops had said they would guard the landward end of the one that was ‘down’; then, a little reluctantly, he had gone off to work. He had been guilty about that but Darlene had assured him that things were ‘just dandy’.

“I think I recognise *her*,” Miranda said tentatively as the women watched the pantomime. A lot more cops had turned up all of a sudden and the twenty or thirty newspaper, radio and TV men had suddenly turned their attention landward, circling like hyenas around a new kill.

Darlene followed her gaze.

“She looks kinda familiar,” the shorter woman conceded.

The crowd parted as if somebody had suddenly produced a Tommy Gun and an elegantly dressed, frowning young woman strode purposefully towards the dock end of the one available gangway.

Darlene was rocking Jackson in her arms.

She handed the baby to Miranda who, after an awkward moment determined that the best thing to do was to carry on gently rocking the baby rather than hand him straight back to his mother. Meanwhile, Darlene had headed off down the gangway to meet the pretty, obviously very bossy brunette who had started berating the cop barring her way.

“Might you be Mrs Darlene Sullivan?” The woman inquired, peering past the large, thickset frame of the unmoving officer in front of her. “My name is Gretchen Brenckmann, I have been retained by the ACLU,” she thought better of it, “the American Civil Liberties Union,” she explained, “and...”

“I know what the ACLU is, ma’am,” Darlene explained tartly.

“Sorry, of course you do. I’m not myself, I thought I’d be fine flying out to the West Coast but I’m still getting used to being pregnant. Could I please come onboard and talk to you, and Miss Sullivan, please?”

Miranda heard this and was a little taken aback.

This is just getting weird!

Darlene had half turned.

"You want to talk to this lady, Miranda?"

Miranda nodded.

While all the excitement had been going on Jackson had expressed his indifference to it by evacuating his, thankfully, tiny bowels.

Darlene patted the shoulder of the policeman guarding the gangplank.

"Officer McManus," she said pleasantly, "I think we can let this lady through."

When the cop had first taken up his post that morning she had brought him a mug of coffee, and cookies, chatted awhile to him while she soothed Jackson's post morning feed wind. Discovering the cop's name, establishing that he had three school age kids and that his wife was a teacher at a kindergarten, she had been about to bring him another coffee when the 'excitement' had kicked off. The weirdest thing was that a couple of years ago she would have been afraid to talk to a cop, the very idea of going up to a man in uniform and saying 'hello' would have seemed utterly bizarre; Gregory had taught her – or maybe, reminded her - that if you were nice to people most of the time they would be nice back to you.

It had been a truly liberating a discovery.

"If you're sure," the man concurred, cautiously.

Darlene patted the big man's arm again.

"It'll be fine. It's real good to know you're just outside."

Gretchen had watched this with flustered interest. Taking a red-eye flight out of Philadelphia to San Francisco had been dumb; her husband, Dan, had said as much but as usual she had known better.

Argh....

I never learn!

Now she was feeling exhausted, a little faint and was afraid she was going to throw up at any moment. The only thing that had saved her thus far was that it was still the early hours back in Pennsylvania and she was not due to commence retching up the contents of her, mercifully, empty stomach for a couple of hours yet.

Her ACLU minder, a tough ex-Ranger had been grabbed by the cops the minute he got out of the car from the airport. She had ordered him to 'keep

cool' and pressed on through the crowd alone regardless.

Another blunder...

Gretchen almost stumbled negotiating the steps down into the saloon. She wrinkled her nose, her stomach churning.

"That's just Jackson," Darlene said, retrieving her baby son from Miranda. "He needs his diaper changing. Ain't that just like a man!"

Gretchen sat down before she fell down.

It was some seconds before she registered that the woman she had flown over two thousand miles to meet had settled across the table from her and was studying her closely.

But not for long because Miranda Sullivan got up and returned with a tumbler of water for Gretchen.

Gretchen had forgotten what she had done with her attaché case, groped around for it. Found it by the leg of her chair and sipped cool water which tasted like nectar.

"You two just carry on, I got to see about Jackson!" Darlene called from another compartment somewhere to Gretchen's right, towards the boat's stern.

"I've never seen you at the ACLU office in Philadelphia?" Miranda prompted.

"I've never been there," Gretchen admitted, "although, I've clerked for His Honour Judge Thurgood Marshall a couple of times."

"Oh, right." That explained where Miranda had heard the name 'Gretchen Betancourt-Brenckmann'. She was sitting three feet away from the woman who had defended those crazies in the Battle of Washington Tribunal and among others, the 'Wister Park Two', some FBI guy who had gone bad on the Agency and a kid who had been caught up in the riot. She was supposed to have got them a plea bargain with the Department of Justice but the FBI was as mad as Hell about it. "Sorry," she grimaced, "my head hasn't really been in the game the last few days."

"That's understandable," Gretchen sympathised. "Just before the Battle of Washington I was the target of a malicious leak. The FBI spread a story that I was having an affair with the Deputy Attorney General. I had to go into hiding for several days..."

"Were you?" Miranda asked. "Having an affair with Nick Katzenbach?"

"No, no way."

Miranda was good at spotting choir girls at a hundred paces; it was reassuring to know that she had not completely lost her mind.

“Sorry. I guess you get ticked off with people asking?”

The other woman was viewing Miranda as if for the first time, as if she had got her second wind.

“People don’t ask so much these days. I got bust up pretty bad just after that and then when I was back on my feet I got married. That pretty much killed the last rumours.”

Miranda nodded.

The two women listened to Darlene talking lowly, fondly to her son and now and then humming a lullaby.

“How many months?” Miranda inquired.

“Two-and-a-half to three, they say. Doctors are useless and I’m learning as I go along,” Gretchen admitted, pouting with momentary vexation.

“Everything in the papers is true,” Miranda confessed.

“Okay...”

Darlene returned, and gave Gretchen a long, hard look.

“You sure you’re okay, darlin’,” she inquired, needing to be convinced. “You was awful pale just now?”

“I’m fine, really.”

“You never said what you wanted?” Darlene reminded her, gently matter-of-fact.

Gretchen took a deep breath; hoping to get her second wind.

“I think, and so do a lot of other people at the ACLU, and most of those reporters out there think, that while Miss Sullivan was in New York last year with Doctor King that she was the subject of an illegal bugging and wire-tap operation involving Government agencies.”

Darlene did not see why this was a problem for anybody other than her sister-in-law, and her frown said it louder than words.

Gretchen explained.

“Neither the Department of Justice, nor the Attorney General of New York, or any Judge competent to act in that jurisdiction issued a warrant authorising such tapping or bugging of Dr King or *any* of his associates. That means that the electronic surveillance was illegal in the City, and the State of New York. Therefore, if it transpires that a State or Federal agency undertook such illegal activities then criminal offences will have been

committed. Likewise, if State or Federal agencies, or persons in the employ of those agencies, authorised, instigated or actually commissioned the leaking or passing of any part of the contents, or worse, copies or originals of the actual surveillance tapes or transcripts to an unauthorised third party – for instance, a newspaper – they too will have committed a criminal offence..."

Miranda gasped.

She *got it* immediately.

"The ACLU is going after the FBI, isn't it?"

"Yes and no," Gretchen said hurriedly. "I was first put onto this by a contact at the *Washington Post.* All this is very sensitive. Doctor King's interview with Walter Kronkite yesterday has done little to calm emotions..."

Miranda thought she was going to start crying again.

The man she loved had confessed all to the nation on prime time national, syndicated television. With his wife at his side, tears trickling down her cheeks, he had honestly, and truthfully, recounted the whole affair.

...It was my fault.

It was my pride that has led to this downfall...

Miss Sullivan is blameless in all this...

...I shamelessly took advantage of her trust...

I pray for God's forgiveness...

...No, I shall not be standing down from my church.

God will guide me...

...Wickedness lives within my soul.

I have hurt a good woman...

He probably meant Coretta...

"Does it matter?" Miranda asked, wanting to curl up and cry.

Gretchen was horrified: "Yes!"

Darlene was still frowning.

"How so?" She queried, her brow furrowed.

"Doctor King cheated on his wife. That's bad but it isn't against the law. Miss Sullivan had an affair with a married man, that's not illegal either. That was their choice, a choice they were perfectly entitled to make under the laws of the State of New York. But whoever spied on them and then gave, or sold recordings of them, of their affair, and of their 'pillow talk', to *The New York Tribune* and thereafter to *The* New *York Times* almost certainly broke a whole slew of laws proscribed under the State and Federal criminal codes of

the United States."

Darlene was about to object but Miranda put a hand on her elbow and she sat down beside her sister-in-law.

"That's not it," she murmured to her, resignedly. "Is it, Mrs Brenckmann?"

The ACLU would not have sent Gretchen out to the West Coast just because they wanted to pick a fight with two New York newspapers; or even because the reputation of Martin Luther King junior had just been traduced and possibly fatally holed below the waterline.

"No, potentially this is...*huge*."

Miranda swallowed hard as her mind started working through what the other woman had said to her. Who exactly had ordered the tapping of the phones and the bugging of the room at the Warwick Hotel?

She met Gretchen's stare.

The ACLU would have approached Doctor King first; he had chosen to bare his guilt before the nation and banished the lawyers as if they were defiling the temple of his atonement.

So, she was all the Movement had left to fight back with.

"You're after whoever authorised this?"

"Yes," Gretchen agreed. "We plan to follow *this* as far as it goes. To the very top, if it comes to it."

"What do you mean; to the top?" Darlene asked, really not wanting to know the answer.

"To the top of the FBI," Gretchen replied quietly, "and if the evidence leads to the White House, then to the people around the President."

"Oh, shit!" Miranda groaned, rising to her feet and scuttling towards the bathroom.

Chapter 44

Thursday 25th February 1965
Coventry and Warwick Hospital, Stoney Stanton Road, Coventry

The Lord Mayor of Coventry, Alderman Thomas Whiteman, wearing his gleaming chain of office had escorted the Prime Minister and her party to the scene of last Saturday's bomb outrage. As in Glasgow and Birmingham there had been two 'bombings', an explosion inside a crowded public house, *The Town Wall Tavern*, and a second shortly afterwards as shocked survivors, the police and ambulance men gathered in the grounds of the nearby Belgrade Theatre.

Margaret Thatcher had blinked back tears of despair and simmering anger as she stood outside the wrecked nineteenth century public house, and later the shrapnel scarred facia and blown in windows of what had been – along with its new Cathedral - one of the symbols of Coventry's post-1945 rebirth.

Now and then she felt her friend's finger tips touch her arm or elbow in support. Otherwise, Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, the wife of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, kept in the background.

'The Belgrade Theatre was the first civic building of its type built in England after the war,' Alderman Whiteman had explained solemnly. 'It was only opened four years before the Cuban Missiles Crisis.' *The Town Wall Tavern* in Bell Street dated to 1816.

Coventry had escaped being targeted in October 1962 and was at the beating heart of the undamaged industrial Midlands, the vast well-spring of the United Kingdom's accelerating economic recovery. Ironically, Birmingham, Coventry and other former world-beating cities of the Industrial Revolution's breakneck Victorian flowering, and the foundation of the early twentieth century wealth of the nation had all been lurching towards decline in a changing, modernising World at the time of the October War. Now these same cities were the great, re-invigorated commercial and industrial powerhouses beginning to spark hopes for a second huge post-war boom in twenty years, tooling up and gearing up to become the workshops of if not the Empire, then the Commonwealth. French, German and Italian

competitors had been destroyed in the cataclysm, previously cheap American – in October 1962 the pound sterling was equivalent to $2.80, last autumn in the absence of functioning currency controls it had recovered to as high as 57.53 cents before dropping again below the 50 cents level with the announcement of the General Election - and the supply of Asian components and finished manufactures had completely dried up. At home the mantra was ‘reconstruction’, and in the wake of the horrors of the last two years previously unmotivated and rebellious work forces were compliant, interested solely in preserving their jobs and feeding their families. It was too early to think or dare to talk – certainly not loudly - about possible boom years to come but the mood of cities like Coventry had been, for the first time since the October War, veering towards well-founded optimism; which was probably why the IRA had targeted the city.

The Coventry and Warwick Hospital straggled along Stoney Stanton Road about a mile north-north-east from the city centre. It had been badly damaged in 1940, and completely rebuilt since the Luftwaffe had levelled the city centre and spread random devastation across great tracts of the surrounding districts. At this distance from the post-1945, rebuilt centre many houses survived from the 1920s and 1930s or earlier, interspersed with the newer, characterless post-war builds. The Germans had wrecked historic Coventry but not the spirit of the city; the IRA had murdered over a hundred men and women and filled the city and the county’s hospitals with terribly injured people, but they would not, and could not destroy the spirit of the Coventry either.

Margaret Thatcher felt a complete fraud to be cheered so deafeningly wherever she went. She had not come to Coventry to proselytise, to insult the city’s grieving people with ‘electioneering’. She had come to Coventry as the nation’s political figurehead to demonstrate her solidarity with it in its hour of need. That afternoon her caravan was scheduled to move on to Birmingham, and tomorrow, Glasgow to pay similar tributes and bow in homage to the innocent fallen of a stupid, pointless conflict with an enemy she despised and had vowed to eradicate. But revenge, justice perhaps, would have to wait; today, was a time for honouring the dead and comforting the injured.

The bombings – the nation-wide death toll had passed three hundred and fifty overnight, the tally of the wounded over eight hundred – and the

assassination of Willie Whitelaw and his wife on a public street in Oxford, had rocked the country onto its heels. However, the Prime Minister sensed that far from daunting the British people, it had hardened their resolve. After all they had all been through there was a national will not to be knocked off track, to not give in to the terrorists.

At the Coventry and Warwick Hospital she shook hands, held hands, paused, sat at bedsides and marvelled at the courage of the victims. She asked people their names, inquired if they had children and if so if they were being 'looked after'. Several of the men and women she met, several dreadfully ill it seemed to her, had actually asked after her health!

She had hardly known how to reply.

She had escaped the 'Westminster incident' of a few days ago unharmed – one or two minor bumps and abrasions notwithstanding, the result of Frank Waters's and Steuart Pringle's instantaneous reaction to the first of the half-dozen rounds which had whizzed and ricocheted around the Clock Room of Big Ben – from a rebel sniper's attempt to assassinate her.

The former SAS man had got to her first, a split second before the Royal Marine commander of her personal bodyguard, placing their bodies between her and the gunman and dumping her on the floor beneath them behind the nearest three feet thick masonry wall...

Several times that morning Margaret Thatcher found herself darting a look at Frank Waters: his left arm was in a big white sling, smiling grimly as he marshalled his ever-attendant three-man BBC crew, at pains to keep them 'out of the lady's way'. When he noticed her glance at him he grinned toothily, and she lowered her eyes. Oddly, having him close at hand, guarding her made days like this if not better, then in some way bearable.

"I was never really in any danger," she assured one man who had asked after her health. The poor fellow had lost an eye and an arm and yet he was worried about her! "I was in the safe hands of my faithful Royal Marines, and of course, Colonel Waters..."

Steuart Pringle was still a little miffed that the – older, theoretically less spry – former SAS man had got between the sniper and his charge a fraction of a heartbeat ahead of him. It was *his* job to take *any* bullet aimed at *his* Prime Minister! Now some fly by night bloody interloper had got in *his* way!

Margaret Thatcher had tried to assuage his feelings.

And probably said exactly the wrong thing: 'Sir Steuart,' she never knew

how to address the commander of her bodyguard who, strictly speaking was 10th Baronet Pringle, and therefore Major *Sir Steuart* – Pringle, 'I know I could not be in safer hands than those of you and Frank...'

Frank...

Whatever happened to *Colonel*?

And now her wounded admirer, for Colonel Francis St Waters, VC, was nothing if not her 'admirer' she had belatedly realised, had doggedly risen from his hospital bed shrugging off the objections off the surgeon who had removed the deformed bullet – which had ricocheted off at least two walls, and spinning end over end, causing a one inch wide entry wound, had 'nicked' his left clavicle and come to rest against the top of his scapula - to be with her when...she needed a friend most. There was something almost poetic, chivalric about his devotion to duty, and to *her*...

The man was putting a brave face on it but there had been blood everywhere as they had half-carried, half-walked him to the field dressing station on the Victoria Embankment. Everybody kept telling her the bullet had missed 'everything vital' but the poor man's shoulder – front and back because they had had to remove the offending foreign object from the back - must still be a horribly sore mass of stitches and, she prayed, healing wounds. She had felt awful allowing the AWP's to whisk her away before *Frank's* wound had been examined and attended to...

Completing her schedule at Westminster 'as planned' had been a debt of honour. Brigadier Willison's engineers and a small army of Miriam Prior's followers had largely cleared out the rubble from the former, now roofless chamber of the House of Commons so that she, as Prime Minister, could symbolically briefly reclaim the Mother of Parliaments for the British people.

Standing at where the despatch box would have been, surrounded by soldiers and the Queen of London's raggle-taggle clan within minutes of the latest attempt on her life she had delivered a short, heartfelt rather than finely crafted speech.

'*You, the people have reclaimed this hallowed place. Today we stand on this hallowed ground because the people of London, the peaceful survivors who were the first to explore the ruins came first to this place to make a sacred statement about the future of us all!*'

As she spoke she knew that even a year before she would have been incapable of connecting, empathising with the majority of the men and

women in the old, cold, windy shattered Commons. She was a different person back then when the weight of the premiership had weighed on her like a crushing millstone. So much had happened in the last year. So much had gone wrong. So many people had died. Yet *they* were still fighting, Britain had discovered it was *great* in countless small ways and that the future need not be darkly dystopian. What they did now was for their children, and for generations to come.

'*Parts of this land lie in ruins; but others, many others do not. The true measure of our survival is that we have never lost hope. Even in our darkest hour we never lost sight of the light!*'

The strangest thing she had learned in the last year was that real strength came from admitting that one did not have all the answers. Once one admitted that one was fallible, one could learn from one's mistakes. Funnily enough, it was often easier to allow a crowd a glimpse of one's inner self than it was to look another human being in the eye and to be...*oneself.*

'*I have made a lot of mistakes since I became your Prime Minister,*' she had confessed. '*I was too angry for too long. There was a time and a place for the Angry Widow – believe me when I say that I am still angry, bloody angry – but if we are to build a new World that we can be proud to pass on to our children and grandchildren, we must put our anger aside. By all means hold onto it like an old friend but we cannot let it rule our counsels. If we neglect the better angels of our nature we will doom ourselves to new cataclysms, and we will have failed those future generations.*'

She had not known whence the words came from.

They were not the words she had planned to speak.

'*That is the thing that you have helped me to learn.*'

The clapping, shouting, hands patting her back had completely disorientated her for some time before she re-gathered her wits.

'*If I am still your Prime Minister in two weeks' time I will not try to take the country back to where it was in October 1962. Back then we were in decline, riding for a fall. We have proved as a nation that we are perfectly capable of standing on our own two feet. We have survived. Now we must prosper. Not as before, class set against class but united...*'

In the car driving away from the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital Margaret Thatcher steeled herself for what was to come. In Birmingham there would be more maimed men and women in hospital beds, horrific

pictures of the aftermath of the outrages, wrecked buildings, a street of blown in windows. And again, tomorrow morning in Govan on the banks of the Clyde, where workers had been butchered by a giant bomb in a stolen lorry as they spewed out of the Fairfield Shipyards at the end of the day shift...

Most of all she was dreading the funeral of the Whitelaws at a church on her late Minister's estate at Gartshore in Lanarkshire tomorrow afternoon. Willie Whitelaw's death still seemed, horrifyingly, unreal. She kept expecting to turn around and find his broad, reassuring, hangdog presence at her side. Willie had been a rock this last year. Oh, she had heard the rumours that some of the back woodsmen wanted him to 'have a go' for the leadership of the Party; but Willie was far too much of a gentleman to stab her in the back. Like Airey Neave, she had come to trust Whitelaw implicitly, and now he was gone.

"They love you," Pat Harding-Grayson murmured distractedly.

She and her husband were in many ways unlikely friends and allies of the thirty-nine-year-old leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party. Pat and her husband had never made any bones about being lifelong socialists; it was just that in the circumstances they had come together, none of that had seemed very important. They had been at Balmoral the day dissidents attempted to murder the Royal Family; Margaret Thatcher and the Foreign Secretary's wife had managed the emergency field dressing stations after the attack while the then Prime Minister, Edward Heath, had marshalled the surviving members of the Black Watch to defend the castle from further assaults until help arrived. Ever since that day their relationship had been one of a worldly wise elder sister tactfully overseeing her capricious, often impetuous, brilliant and charismatic younger sister.

The Prime Minister blinked out of the circle of her premonitions.

"Jim Callaghan and the others, even Airey, I think, believe the election is about politics but they are wrong. It's about hope." She shook her head. "All the experts say *we*," the Conservatives, "will lose by somewhere around two votes to one. That *we'll* be lucky if we have a hundred and fifty MPs in the new House of Commons," she went on, untroubled. "Personally, I think it will be a lot closer than that, but," she shrugged, turning to meet her friend's look for the first time. "Who knows?"

In the week before the election the leaders of the three main 'mainland' parties; the Prime Minister, her Deputy, Labour Leader James Callaghan, and

the Liberal Party's – which had held only six seats in the pre-war Parliament of 1959 - Jolyon 'Jo' Grimond, had each been granted ninety minutes in which to make their respective cases by the BBC, un-moderated by commentators or pundits on both the radio Home Service, and on the BBC's single television channel. This latter was possibly only available to around three-quarter-of-a-million people; whereas the radio – in theory – was accessible to everybody in the United Kingdom.

Nicholas Ridley, supervised by Airey Neave had been working on Margaret Thatcher's great 'peroration' for the last fortnight even though she had told them that she would 'jolly well' write it herself.

Her closest colleagues in the Conservative Party would have been appalled to discover that thus far the most important speech in her, and her Party's history, was actually being drafted by a lifelong upper class 'leftie', Pat Harding-Grayson.

For the moment it was the two women's 'little secret' and the longer it stayed that way the better. Margaret Thatcher's closest political 'brothers' were preoccupied with shoring up the 'Conservative' vote and distracting the probably, small number of undecided electors, from the ludicrous promises of milk and honey emanating from the Callaghan-Jenkins-Healey wing of the Labour Party.

Airey in particular was also very keen – a little preoccupied in fact – with painting the face of their opponents as being (Michael) 'Footist: Communist-leaning, scrap the Navy, Army and Air Force and leave the country defenceless!' A vote for Labour was a 'vote for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament!'

The escalating rhetoric was getting on the Prime Minister's nerves. She and her allies had been through Hell and back standing shoulder to shoulder with Jim Callaghan and his people; now she was being egged on to treat them like lepers and traitors!

It was too ridiculous!

Chapter 45

Thursday 25th February 1965
Camp David, Catoctin Mountains, Maryland

The two Marine Corps Sikorsky SH-3s helicopters had been waiting on the pad at Andrews Air Force Base to whisk the President and his entourage away within minutes of SAM 26000 putting down after the hour-long flight from Philadelphia. Had the weather been clearer the plan had been to prescribe several wide, relatively low – down below five hundred feet – orbits of Washington DC to view the massive works on the ground, before completing the thirty-minute 'hop' sixty miles north west to the mountain retreat in Frederick County of all Commander-in-Chiefs since FDR's time.

But today the weather was downcast, like the mood of several of the men and women accompanying Richard Nixon on his planned long weekend at his new Administration's first 'summit'. Low clouds had hung across the mountains and the rain sleeted angrily as the big helicopters disgorged their passengers onto the sodden ground, while the soaking wet Marine Corps Band played 'Hail to the Chief'.

Many people later remarked that the President had been in a sunny mood that morning, discussing plans to build a swimming pool at Camp David – a project he had first conceived in his second term as Ike's Vice President – and clearly looking forward to his 'inaugural stay' in the Catoctin Mountains.

Not everybody was as big a fan of the old WPA - Works Progress Administration, an organ of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 'New deal' – 'camp' built in 1935 to house government workers, FBI agents and their families waiting for permanent housing in the DC area back in 1935. FDR had adopted the 'camp' in 1942, looking for somewhere secluded where he could get away from the Washington milieu and conduct the secret meetings that eventually won the 1945 war.

'Camp David' was actually the unofficial name of *Naval Support Facility Thurmont*, staffed and run by the US Navy and the US Marine Corps, and while everybody appreciated the 'security' of the backwoods 'retreat' many found the place stifling, too cut off from reality and the feral cut and thrust of Administration business in the political hot house atmosphere of

Philadelphia.

The previous evening thirty-eight-year-old H.R. 'Bob' Haldeman, Richard Nixon's White House Chief of Staff, had tentatively suggested to the President that it might be a good idea if he – Haldeman – stayed behind in Philadelphia to 'manage the news' that weekend. An editorial in *The Washington Post* had trailed a major feature it was 'putting the finishing touches to' for the Saturday edition of the paper. This in itself was unusual, newspapers did not as a rule trumpet a possible forthcoming 'scoop' so far in advance, and Ben Bradlee – a former Kennedy family insider – the *Post's* managing editor was too wise an operator to lay down a marker he did not intend to cash in at a premium...

...NYPD and New Jersey detectives have joined forces to close in on the 'contractors' responsible for installing electronic 'bugging' devices in rooms at the Warwick Hotel on West 54th Street New York, and two other addresses where senior members of the Southern Civil Rights Movement stayed in November and December 1964 whilst lobbying delegates to the Manhattan Peace Process...

That was it, a teaser.

Other papers had got hold of the story this morning but significantly, neither *The New York Tribune* nor *The New York Times*, who had broken the 'King Scandal' with such salacious delight a couple of weeks ago, had carried it, or covered the police investigations into the affair. This and the unsettling whispers starting to do the rounds in Philadelphia had set Bob Haldeman's threat antennae ringing. All through last year's campaign, the post-election transition and from day one of Richard Nixon's Presidency, he and his close friend from their UCLA days, John Ehrlichman, had been their candidate's 'great wall'. Right now, Haldeman was beginning to ask himself if they had built that wall high enough.

Haldeman was a Los Angelino whose father had helped bail out the Richard Nixon Presidential Fund back in 1952. Raised in a family of Christian Scientists he had gained a reputation for being a 'straight arrow' in his youth, and deep down inside he had never stopped being the 'Eagle Scout' he had been as a boy. Via UCLA and Harvard, he had fetched up working for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, taking leaves of absence to be an 'advance' man on Richard Nixon's 1956 and 1960 campaigns. His first experience actually managing a campaign had been a

near disaster; Nixon's misbegotten attempt to wrest the California Governorship from the Democrat incumbent Pat Brown. Haldeman had learned from that experience. He always learned from experience, that was one of his hallmarks.

Even as he stepped out of the second Sikorsky SH-3 and trudged leadenly across the spongy grass towards the chalets half hidden in the woods he knew in his heart that it had been a mistake, a bad mistake, to leave the Philadelphia 'Oval Office' manned by a skeleton staff.

It was a comfort knowing that Jim Hagerty – who had been Ike's Press Secretary and could be relied upon to field practically anything which came up over the weekend – had remained behind in Philadelphia, but even so...

Haldeman had wanted Nelson Rockefeller to be included in the planning sessions that weekend. Not so that he could contribute, obviously; just so that he would be seen to be at Camp David. In the event the Governor of New York had decided he had more important things to do in the Big Apple and the President had not wanted him 'mooning around' distracting everybody. And besides, the President was still upset about how so many commentators were remarking how 'presidential' Rockefeller had looked during his recent 'good will' trip to the British Isles.

The Brits had loved him; particularly the allegedly 'impoverished' Oxford and Cambridge 'women only' Colleges which had been particular beneficiaries of his legendary philanthropic largesse.

The White House Chief of Staff might not have been so worried – well, been less vaguely uneasy – about his personal involvement in the 'King Scandal' if he had believed the President was taking recent developments a little more seriously.

'If this thing ever blows up in anybody's face – which it won't - it will be somebody at FBI who takes the heat for it," Nixon had declared airily, with copies of *The New York Tribune* and *The New York Times* on his desk in the Oval Office. Immediately, he had changed the subject. 'Did you guys know that LBJ was planning to put Thurgood Marshall forward for the Supreme Court if he got re-elected?' He had guffawed in an uncharacteristic moment of wry good humour.

Everybody had heard the rumour that Lyndon Johnson saw the appointment of the first Afro-American Justice to the Supreme Court as the keystone of a long-term rapprochement with the Southern Civil Rights

Movement. LBJ had had a lot of plans; for a new welfare settlement and a massive Government funded health care system. It all sounded like something straight out of Eastern Europe, socialism by the back door, to Haldeman and the Republican grass roots.

'Director Hoover isn't the sort of guy to take a thing like this on the nose, sir,' Haldeman had put to his boss.

'The whole damned thing was his idea!' Nixon had retorted, as if that absolved anybody else of culpability.

Haldeman had never had a problem getting a dig in at one's opponents – opportunities permitting – but that sort of thing was always best done not in anger, or out of hubris, but coldly after long and careful consideration. Going after Doctor King – whom J. Edgar Hoover and the new Commander-in-Chief regarded as a Red stooge, an 'enemy within' – so soon and so *spontaneously* would not have been the White House Chief of Staff's first, second, or twenty-second choice. The Administration had its hands full as it was. Heck, Korea needed to be 'sorted', nobody trusted those mad SOB's in Wisconsin to keep their part of the 'peace bargain', the military re-mobilisation had to be funded somehow without breaking the Treasury 'bank', and right now they needed to set the South on fire like they needed another war in the Middle East!

Haldeman's feet sank so deep into the muddy earth that cold water slopped into his shoes. He bit back a curse. After the election he had started keeping a diary; partly because he needed to keep track of all the different things going on, secondly, for posterity. Despite the frustrations and the problems of the moment, he was living through times of momentous global change at the very heart of the Administration of the most powerful man in the World.

That was a heck of a thing...

The potential 'trouble in New York' would go away. In a month or two everybody would have forgotten about it, moved on. Richard Nixon had walked into the White House with a road map for restoring America's global reach and influence, curing the ills that beset the Union and a determination to build a new, peaceful World order.

People said Nixon was indifferent to 'home policy'; which was untrue. Wiser men realised that the fate of the United States lay not within its borders but in the worlds beyond. America was perfectly capable of healing itself;

now was the time for the US to resume its march towards its manifest destiny. ‘America First’ was not about looking inward, retreating into the isolationist bubble of the 1920s and 1930s that had led to World War and the partial collapse of the continental economy; ‘America First’ was nothing short of a call to arms to build a new hegemony out of the ruins of the pre-Cuban Missiles World.

The trouble was that Bob Haldeman was not a ‘big picture man’ like his Commander-in-Chief. He was the guy who had to fit all the itsy-bitsy little pieces of the jigsaw together.

Maybe, the others were right when they said whatever Ben Bradlee had up his sleeve was just another Democrat ‘spoiler’ that nobody would remember seven days from now.

The trouble was that he had been around long enough to know that wishing for a thing was not the same as getting it. The whole ‘New York Thing’ was a hostage to fortune that they really, really did not need this early in the life of the Administration...

Chapter 46

Friday 26th February 1965
Verdala Palace, Malta

Rachel had not returned to the Governor's Residence until it was fully light that morning and gone straight to 'her room' on the same landing as Daniel French's 'personal rooms'. Locking her door, she had stripped off her clothes and slipped beneath the blankets, sleeping the sleep of the...damned.

That morning the nightmares came at a rush and she awakened in a cold sweat with the bed sheets in chaos.

The dreams came and went – fever dreams, looping bloodily – with the wide, staring eyes of her attackers and victims interchangeable. The look on Galen Cheney's – her last 'mark', none of the bad guys were actually 'people' – ruined, gory face as she began to cut him was not about to go away any time soon. Nor did she want it to; the lunatic had had it coming to him. If there was such a thing as a just and merciful God – self-evidently there was not; look at the things *His* adherents had done to the World in the last two or three years, and before that throughout history – she would not have had to be in that burning corridor cutting pieces, highly personal and meaningful pieces, off one of the twitching, fitting carcass of one of Lucifer's right-hand men. If some over-enthusiastic Marine had not half-brained her with the butt of an M-16 she would have carried on cutting for the rest of the day. As it was Galen Cheney had died in hospital, presumably heavily sedated and unaware that his butchered manhood was lying discarded on the floor of the Wister Park Embassy...

Even I think I sound like a crazy woman when I think like that!

Maybe I am...a crazy woman.

Rachel stared at the ceiling, knew it was futile to try to get back to sleep. She went through to the marbled bathroom attached to her 'suite'. Imperial Viceroy's entertained in style these days, all 'mod-cons' provided for his guests. She ran a bath, and sat in it a long time waiting, hoping for her hands to stop shaking.

Dick White thinks I'm too old for this, she decided. That was why he had given her this 'quiet little job' to do. The Director General of the

Combined Intelligence Services had seen enough burned out agents to recognise the signs. If she dared to look in the mirror she saw all the tell-tale signs in her own eyes.

Back in the streets of Mdina last April she had been so angry after the Russians had murdered Margo Seiffert that for a while, she had not cared if she lived or died; later she had re-found herself, remembered that she still had a job to do. By the time she arrived at that lethal denouement in Julian Christopher's headquarters she had been as cold as ice.

At Wister Park in Philadelphia she had lost it.

The only thing which had mattered was the killing; anyhow, anyway regardless of the odds, the risks. She had not even realised she had been shot until she regained consciousness in hospital a day later. She had been insane; if Peter Christopher had not walked in when he did and started berating her Philadelphia PD and Marine Corps guards the killing would have begun again.

She lay back in the bath.

The tub was too small for her to really stretch out, relax although the warm water felt good embracing her aching body.

She smiled.

She had thought Peter Christopher was such a schoolboy that first time she had met him at that nice little bar overlooking the Tagus in Lisbon. He had been fretting about getting back to his ship, afraid he would be sent back to London, never guessing for a single minute what fate had in store for him.

Lady Marija had seemed as innocent, and perhaps, she still was; she however, had always been more attuned to the cruelties that life inflicted on the unwary. Eighteen short months ago Rachel had watched Marija leading the Women of Malta in their campaign of peaceful resistance and civil disobedience against the British rulers of the archipelago. When the women were with her they were fearless; without her they were...lost.

Now she and her Prince Charming were in America; and together last July they had given Lyndon Johnson an excuse not to go to war with the Soviet Union, Britain, or anybody else...

Rachel pinched her nose with the forefingers of her right hand and sank beneath the water.

She missed her friends in America; Marija and Peter, Rosa and Alan Hannay. They were so sane, the only people in the United States who were

unafraid of her in the wake of the Wister Park ‘unpleasantness’...

Eventually, she re-surfaced, sucked in air.

Once Paul Boffa had got used to the idea that she meant him no harm last Saturday night it had become clear that he regarded Joe Calleja as more than just a friend, almost as a brother. He had been a mine of information about Joe’s haunts, habits and likely enemies.

There had recently been a vicious, short-lived ‘arm wrestle’ for control of a key Workers’ Committee within the General Workers’ Union, the biggest trade union on Malta and the only union in the Admiralty Dockyards, the Archipelago’s single largest employer. Whether by accident or design, Joe Calleja had aligned himself – and the prestige of his George Cross – with the losing side and the GWU, which was, to all intents, the trade union wing of the Maltese Labour Party, had it seemed, ostracised the Hero of the Battle of Malta.

Underlying the in-fighting in the GWU was the issue of the influx of skilled workers from the United Kingdom, and the growing resentment of a – small and vocal - section of Maltese society with the ‘privileges’ being ‘bestowed’ upon the newcomers and their families. Actually, other than free transportation to the Mediterranean, usually on a cramped and slow cargo ship, and an initial ‘settlement grant’ of between fifty and one hundred pounds sterling depending on how many dependents a man had, there were few ‘privileges’ for the outsiders. Families were accommodated in barracks-style huts, often three or four to a building and workers from England often found themselves shunned by their new work mates – a bad thing - in an intrinsically hazardous working environment where a man’s safety in the docks relied on everybody watching out for everybody else.

Joe Calleja had been the natural choice to bring the new men under the umbrella of the GWU and had been so successful that he had begun to build up a power base among the immigrants. This and the fact that he was one of the most recognised men on the Maltese Archipelago had obviously been too much for the most paranoid man in Malta.

Namely: the Chief Minister of the Archipelago.

Given that Dom Mintoff regarded the Maltese Labour Party and the General Workers’ Union as his personal fiefdoms; anybody who rocked the boat, or in any way threatened him or his prestige, was, by definition, ‘challenging Malta’ and these days, any whiff of opposition to ‘the Dom’ was

– in the tradition of organised crime families down the ages in this part of the World – viewed as treachery.

Others had ended up facing face down floating in the waters of the Grand Harbour for much less; but Joe Calleja was the darling of the Maltese people and honoured and respected by the British. He could not just be beaten into a pulp and dumped in the sea. No, memories of the summary justice handed out by the authorities – specifically, Air Marshal Sir Daniel French – against Maltese collaborators and those Soviet paratroopers known to have committed atrocities against civilians during the Battle of Malta were still very fresh in everybody's minds.

So, in his own heavy-handed, typically vindictive way the Dom was trying to send out the message that 'if you offend me nobody is safe' without actually provoking the Governor to clamp down hard on his 'operation'.

After the Battle of Malta around eight hundred Soviet prisoners had been held in prisons and open-air cages across the archipelago before, in June, being shipped back to the United Kingdom. There were rumours that since they were not 'Prisoners of War' and no arrangements existed for the exchange of prisoners, they had been put to work in the quarries of Portland.

Rachel's right arm ached from the sore knuckles of her hand to her shoulder. The bigger of the two goons who had been following Joe Calleja had had a very thick, hard skull.

The 'toughs' had been waiting for their man on the sea wall of Pieta Creek, hanging around in the shadows near Sammy's Bar, a Royal Navy drinking dive dug into the low cliff across the road from the Creek.

They had followed Joe as he and a couple of 'new' matelot friends had staggered out of the bar and turned left down the road towards Msida Creek.

One of the heavies had walked into one of the Navy men, a kid really, who had gone down in a heap on the pavement like a sack of potatoes.

Rachel had considered watching to see what happened. Joe was getting quite a reputation for 'punching his weight' in the docks. Then she thought better of it. He was drunk, the Dom's boys were sober and sooner or later reinforcements would turn up.

Screaming usually got everybody's attention long enough to get up close and...*physical*. It wasn't until the bigger thug was bleeding on the ground and his companion was circling her that she remembered the Beretta in her hand bag.

Her scream had brought a couple of men out onto the street.

No, the gun is going to be hard to explain...

By then Joe was on the floor with a bloody nose and both the matelots were on the ground next to him.

She feinted left, the tough guy tried to move with her to keep out of range of her feet and hands. Bright guy. He almost saved himself a lot of pain before his balance betrayed him, he strayed too close and she felled him with a kick to the groin and a bone-cracking elbow to his rib cage as he doubled up. He lay retching, curled in a foetal ball as the crowd gathered around them.

'Call the Police. These men,' Rachel spat, doing her best to sound panicked and a little drunk, 'tried to rape me!' She half-turned, seized Joe Calleja's arm. 'This brave man and his English friends, they saved me!'

Several of the men frowning and swaying outside Sammy's Bar must have seen a little, or at least the final act, of the brief fight but nobody spoke up to correct or query her claim. When a man had had a few drinks he usually saw whatever he wanted, or expected to see, and not many Royal Navy ratings were going to tell their crewmates that they had just witnessed a slightly built woman in her thirties beat the shit out of two big, rough-looking locals.

Separating Joe from his 'friends' was a lot less straightforward than putting two of the Dom's heavies in hospital; life was like that sometimes. Finding coffee to sober him up was impossible. Much later she rented a room overlooking Msida Creek – the sort of room locals tried to rent out by the hour – and left him to sleep it off.

Heading back to the scene of the recent excitement she quizzed a pair of working girls about what had happened after she and Joe had departed.

More toughs had shown up with a couple of pet local cops who had argued about something with the leading Rate in charge of the three-man Royal Navy shore patrol now standing guard outside Sammy's Bar.

The girls knew the name of one of the cops.

'Adama, Sergeant Joseph Adama."

He was a pig with a history of harassing the girls unless they bought him off. If they did not have money he was not slow suggesting alternative means of settling debts. He worked out of the station in Paola, near the prison. Neither of the girls envied Mrs Adama. The man gave them the creeps...

One of the girls confirmed the name she already had for the bigger of the Dom's thugs, the one whose head had jarred her arm putting him down.

'Max Renzi,' he was one of the Dom's top enforcers, known as 'the Sicilian' in the docks.

Both girls had seen everything.

'How'd you do that, lady?' One had asked.

Rachel had not answered.

Instead, she gave each woman more cash than they normally earned in a good week and told them to keep away from Pieta Creek for a few days.

It was mid-day before Rachel emerged from her room.

She was supposed to be a guest of the Governor, a friend of a friend out from England, whom most people assumed was Sir Daniel's mistress. She had glided effortlessly into character as the somewhat ditzy, gauche, naive housewife who was completely out of her depth in the Palace but desperately, painfully eager not to cause anybody offence.

"We wondered where you had got to yesterday evening, Mrs Beard?" Captain Lionel Faulkes, the Military Secretary of the Governor of Malta observed at the lunch table. He had stood as she entered the dining room and moved to hold her chair for her.

"Oh, dear," Rachel gasped, "I visited some people I knew in England. At the Pembroke Barracks. It was so late I stayed over in their spare room, I do hope nobody worried on my account."

It seemed that the Governor had accepted a long-standing invitation to spend a day or so at sea 'with the Fleet' as a guest of the Eagle's Wardroom and was not due back until that evening. Part of her cover was that she and Daniel French should behave impeccably towards each other in front of witnesses. Rumours of infidelity and 'funny goings on were the glue that held any good legend together'.

"Of course not," Lionel Faulkes agreed. He was in on the secret. He knew everything that went on in Malta; it had never occurred to the Governor to keep him out of the loop. "There was a nasty incident down by Pieta Creek last night, I hear?"

"Oh, really? How awful!"

"One of the locals sustained a fractured skull, they say. A brawl with several chaps from the base in Msida Creek; I wouldn't care to pick a fight with any of those chaps myself," the man guffawed.

Rachel broke a rather tired looking bread roll and began to nibble as a steward arranged a bowl of soup before her; potato and leek from its steamy aroma.

“I really am trying very hard not to break too many skulls,” she said lowly when she was alone again with the Governor’s most trusted staffer. “But sometimes...”

“Quite,” the man agreed. He hesitated. “This thing needs to be resolved sooner rather than later. The scope for embarrassing the Governor is,” again, he paused, putting down his spoon and viewing the woman over his soup, “approaching the point where frankly, the thing – in my humble opinion - is not worth the candle.”

Rachel did not ask him if Daniel French had asked him to have this little ‘word’ with her. That was not the Governor’s style; Faulkes was just trying to protect him.

She daintily chewed a small crust.

Allowed herself a resigned sigh.

All this would be so much easier if she could just kill the people causing the problem. It was not as if she did not know who needed to be liquidated. Cap them, and one or two of their associates, just to muddy the waters and move on. Simple, all the loose ends nicely tied up.

Strictly speaking nobody had actually forbidden her to go down that route... It was just, well, this was Malta and the bad guys seemed so...*comical* that actually killing people was...*disproportionate* no matter how irritating they had become to the...*authorities*.

“What you’re trying to tell me is that there’s a bigger picture here and Sir Daniel doesn’t want this episode turning into a kind of Maltese Greek tragedy?”

“Quite,” Lionel Faulkes concurred, wondering why he was not feeling more reassured than in fact, he did.

Chapter 47

Friday 26th February 1965
Bellerive-sur-Allier, Vichy

When Sergey Akhromeyev had asked Vera Bertrand about the scars on her leg – especially the through and through bullet wound on her left hip – and what looked like a knife wound on the back of her neck that had gone bad, she had smiled, taken a long drag on her cigarette and settled back onto the pillows.

'Colonel' Paul Krueger had had the Russian and his men 'escorted' across the river to be 'debriefed' while he and his polyglot American-German and French tribe of military survivors, misfits and camp followers 'cleaned house' on the Vichy side of the Allier River, and got down to the serious business of looting. This morning there were fires burning in the town and the occasional distant burst of automatic gunfire still whispered across the shallow valley. The tribe of the 207th Cavalry assimilated those it needed, those who might be of use to it, hungry mouths were routinely driven into the wasted countryside or shot, as was anybody who might be a threat to the 'greater good'.

They were in the dusty bedroom of a chalet on the hillside overlooking the flood plain of the Allier; with the old disused racecourse to the left and the Pont de Bellerive straddling the river to their right several hundred metres distant.

"The Germans caught me in 1944," the woman said, as if that explained everything. "The British betrayed us all. *We*, the wrong type of Marquis because De Galle wanted his own people to have all the glory," she sighed, took down another lungful of smoke, exhaling with a shiver. "The bastard ran away in 1940 and hid behind Yankee and English coat tails for four years until the Fascists were on the run. Such a brave, brave man, such a strong man," she sneered. "Four years before the Cuban Missiles War he rode to the rescue of the Fourth Republic by declaring its end. Vive la France! Welcome to the Fifth Republic! Vote for me and I shall never surrender in Algeria; the day after he walked into the Élysée Palace he gave Algeria away to the same men who had been killing good Frenchmen and women ever

since 1945!”

Akhromeyev stood at the window, shirtless, staring at the smoke rising over Vichy. Below him there were three American M-48 tanks parked on the Bellerive Hippodrome, their tracks had ripped up the turf of the old racecourse into acres of mud. The guns of the tanks were trained on the spires of Vichy but their crews were gathered around tents and awnings from which the grey wood smoke of cook fires drifted.

“Why hasn’t Krueger killed us all?” He asked.

“Maybe he still will.”

Akhromeyev pulled on his tunic.

She had asked him how long it had been since he had had a woman. A long time; his whole family had disappeared, died in the war of October 1962 and he tried hard not to think of his wife’s face.

Madame Bertrand had not complained or remarked in any way about the angry violence of their initial coupling. Subsequently, their fucking had been cold, a release not pleasure and then they had slept and not awakened until a few minutes ago.

“No,” Akhromeyev grunted, turning, “Krueger understands that sooner or later he will run into somebody stronger and better organised than he is. That’s why he needs my boys; to stop him running into more trouble than he can deal with. As for me, I’m a threat to him. There’s no place here for me.”

The woman went on smoking.

“Where will you go?”

She had only known the Russian a couple of days – less, barely thirty-six hours – but she had recognised on first sight that he was not about to become an *écorcheur* or a *routier*, some modern day mercenary member of an armed band ‘flaying’ or ‘ravishing’ the land like the ‘free companies’ had in France’s dark medieval past.

Paul Krueger, the pre-war M-60 tank driver who had appointed himself ‘captain’ of the 207th Cavalry and wreaked a trail of mayhem and misery all the way from Southern Germany to the borders of the Auvergne might fancy himself to be some latter day Fifteenth century Rodrigo de Villandrando, the infamous e*mpereur des brigands – Emperor of Pillagers* – and *L'Écorcheur*, the *slaughterer*, actually he was a psychopath with his own private army of heavily armed men who had lost their sanity in the aftermath of the war. Ideology, faith, human decency meant nothing to Krueger and his animals.

Yet, if she could have seen any way of 'travelling' the same road as the 207th she might have walked it, and peeled off sympathisers to her cause, now and then, one by one along the way. Except with Krueger that was impossible. Despite the facade of civilization, the rule of the jungle determined a man or a woman's fate minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day in his 'free company'. Overnight he might have ordered her execution, or torture, or gang rape, or all three in no particular order. Like what she had heard of the Front Internationale in the Auvergne the terror was random; it could strike at any time and there was never any warning.

She had been *useful* to Krueger in brokering the unopposed advance of the monster's tanks into Vichy, and in identifying the few civic and military leaders who had remained, attempting to hide in the much-depleted general population. And enough of her girls had stayed – too afraid to venture into the surrounding country alone – to provide 'entertainment' for the conquering heroes.

"North," the Russian growled, musing aloud as he ran the options through his mind. He knew what lay to the south; the FI and a firing squad if he was lucky. North lay chaos but within that chaos there would be opportunities, such were the realities of war.

"What about your men?"

"You don't honestly think they'd fight for Krueger?"

"No, never. The only reason he let us keep our weapons was because he had lost control of his people after they found the city virtually undamaged. It will take the idiot another couple of days to get his rabble back under his command. If we go now we can disappear into the landscape. All my boys are good at that sort of thing."

"What about my girls?"

Akhromeyev blinked as if he did not understand the question.

"If *we* leave them here they'll all die."

"Everybody dies," the Russian retorted, intrigued by her use of the collective pronoun 'we'.

Vera Bertrand sat up in bed, her long dark, grey-streaked hair partially concealing her nakedness. The Russian had discovered that she wore clothes that exaggerated her figure, 'plumping' her out somewhat, and that beneath her 'finery' she was if not slender, then shapely in a full-figured sort of way. She was curved in all the right ways, notwithstanding her old injuries and

from the way she sometimes held herself, he guessed a litany of other trials and tribulations in the years since.

“I don’t know you very well, Comrade General,” she said with a shake of the head, “but I know enough to know you’re not an animal like those bastards across the river. For all I know you might actually still believe in the Revolution. You’d certainly never throw your hand in with a bunch of maniacs like the 207th. Tell me I’m wrong?”

Akhromeyev stepped away from the window.

“You’d slow us down. Limit our tactical options.”

“We’d wash your clothes, cook your food, forage for food, and make sure you didn’t blunder into any traps anywhere within twenty or thirty kilometres of here. My girls can get in and out of villages and towns unnoticed. Tactical options!” She scoffed wearily. “You men are full of shit! Besides, don’t you think your men deserve a little ‘comfort’ now and then, General?”

Akhromeyev suspected the woman had been thinking this through since before they met; possibly as soon as she heard he had arrived in Vichy.

“Who else do you want me to take along for the ride?”

“You’ll need a doctor, somebody who can repair vehicles, fix broken guns, a translator other than me,” she half-smiled, ‘a spare in case I fall over and break a leg, or something.”

Anybody who could not keep up the pace would be left behind, with a bullet behind the ear because a living straggler was a danger to them all.

Akhromeyev had moved back to the window.

The woman joined him, followed his gaze towards the tanks parked on the racecourse.

“What are you thinking?”

“Most of Krueger’s people, and all of his baggage train is still over on the Vichy bank of the river. Take down the bridges, the one we can see ahead of us,” he said, thinking aloud as he nodded at the Pont de Bellerive, “and the one up river and it’ll give us several days before the ‘Colonel’ can come after us in force. If he bothers at all...”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Before the man could answer she corrected his faulty appreciation of the ‘tactical situation’.

“Anyway, the next two bridges upstream were demolished to keep

Krueger on the east bank of the Allier. Those tanks, their crews and mechanics, and a handful of guards who'd rather be over the other side stealing and fucking everything in sight is all that Krueger has sent across the river so far."

The Russian's scrutiny was suddenly hard, unrelenting. His eyes had narrowed a fraction because everything had just changed and suddenly, he was thinking straight, like a soldier again.

"You're sure about that?"

"Unless we didn't hear fifty or sixty vehicles and two or three hundred rampaging soldiers marching under this window last night while we were fucking," she said impatiently. "The bastard is psychotic about splitting his forces. If he had any chutzpah, or any real staff college military training, he'd be in Clermont-Ferrand by now!"

Akhromeyev mulled this unhurriedly.

The woman's bid to encumber his boys with surplus 'baggage' would not have been his first choice; but the notion was not without its merits. However, once he checked out a few 'details' running away might not actually be the best 'tactical option'.

There was no need to make a snap decision; he could afford to ponder a little longer before he bet his and his boys' life on a hunch.

"Put your clothes on," he told the woman, the ghost of a smile forming on his pale lips. "*We* have work to do."

Chapter 48

Saturday 27th February 1965
The White House, Broad Street, Philadelphia

Fifty-five-year-old James Campbell Hagerty had come onboard the 'Nixon Team' late in the day, little more than a fortnight before the Inauguration. Even though – perhaps because – he had known the then President-elect since the 1940s he had hesitated, thought long and hard about picking up again the reigns as White House Press Secretary which he had held with such aplomb during both of Dwight Eisenhower's terms. In the end it had been a 'duty call'.

He had been ready to answer one last call to duty; if only for a few months, maybe a year while Nixon's people got their feet under the table and recruited somebody 'more like them' to manage the White House's dealings with the Press.

Hagerty came from Irish-American stock, his family having moved to New York when he was still only three. Graduating from Columbia College in 1934 he had worked as a reporter for *The New York Times* for several years before being recruited as Press Secretary to Governor Thomas E. Dewey in 1943 ahead of Dewey's tilt at the Presidency in 1944. He had been with Dewey again in 1948, by then he had been in so deep with the GOP that he had been the obvious man to run Eisenhower's Press office in 1952. Thence, he had stepped, more or less seamlessly – as one would have expected an old pro like him – into the role of White House Press Secretary for the next eight years. He was the man who had introduced television cameras into White House briefings and become, by the middle of Ike's Presidency, among other things, his personal liaison man with the Senate where he and Lyndon Johnson had got to know each other inside out.

Hagerty had become a vice president of ABC within days of leaving the White House in January 1961; and it had been very tempting to politely decline Richard Nixon's invitation. Ike had trusted him, been happy for him to 'front up', to speak as openly and as honestly as circumstances permitted and to sometimes, horror upon horror, *apologise* when the Administration had erred in some minor respect. Moreover, even during Ike's time, Hagerty

had acquired a reputation for supporting civil rights initiatives and unlike many in the Republican Party he was pragmatic, rather than ideological, about what 'needed to be done in the South'.

Basically, he was a 'Rockefeller' Republican on many of the areas of policy that Richard Nixon took an at best neutral, and at worst, hostile stance. He was not therefore, an ideal 'fit' for White House Press Secretary in the new Administration and he was old enough, and wise enough to know it from day one.

The trumpeted *Washington Post* 'feature' was not the kind of slam dunk kick in the guts he had feared it might be, but...

Like an old sailor who feels the weather changing in every tiny shift of the wind, who reads the subtle shades of greyness of the roiling ocean alert for danger and understands that a glassy millpond calm was often the precursor of a hurricane, he could feel the political climate subtly altering around him.

If the election had happened a month later LBJ might still be in the White House; the mood of the American people had been changing in those last weeks of the race and like a great ship on the ocean that national sea change had continued after the election. There were an awful lot of Americans who had been scratching their heads within days of the result asking themselves 'what the heck have I gone and done?'

All the East Coast newspapers had tuned into this already and it was only a matter of time before the big networks caught up. When that happened life in the White House was going to get 'bumpy'.

Now the *Washington Post* had got its claws into the Administration.

At the moment Ben Bradlee was still only probing at the outer perimeter of the Administration's freshly constructed, untested defence works, rather like a matador dancing, cape in hand in front of a bull not as yet enraged but Hagerty sensed – it was no stronger than that at the moment – that the Editor of the *Post* might actually have a rapier in his free hand. Presently, the blade was concealed behind his back but any second it might flash in front of his victim's face...

This morning as he tried to communicate his 'misgivings' to John Ehrlichman – Bob Haldeman did not or could not come to the phone and his request to speak with the President had been tersely, unequivocally rebuffed – at Camp David, Hagerty had realised with a sinking heart that his short

tenure in Richard Nixon's White House was going to be even more short-lived than he had anticipated.

'Duty' was one thing; self-immolation in the cause of a man who would not even come to the goddammed phone when there was a crisis was another thing!

Back in the 1950s he had been the media's friend, ally and in return he had operated a relaxed, collegiate Press Office. True, there had been bad days; like the shooting down of Gary Powers's U-2 spy plane over Russia at a time when Ike was trying to finesse US-Soviet relations onto a less tense footing, but generally, he had been happy to field whatever came up. Naively, he had expected the Nixon White House to work the same way; that the President would respect his 'feel' for the prevailing public mood, be willing to accept guidance from him about what was and what was not, likely to curry the favour of the American people, and most important, listen to his counsel as to how to avoid inflaming the ever more powerful and vociferous ranks of the printed, voice and television broadcast media. Thus far the President had been an aloof, indifferent figure who apparently, expected him to 'keep the home front quiet' while he got on with 'Presidential stuff'. Or that at least was what Bob Haldeman had told him, for he had had precious little actual face to face time with the new Commander-in-Chief.

Hagerty used to routinely lower the temperature of briefings by telling self-deprecatory anecdotes: '*One day I sat thinking, almost in despair; a hand fell on my shoulder and a voice said reassuringly: cheer up, things could get worse. So, I cheered up and, sure enough, things got worse.*'

Or advise anybody who got het up in the Press Office: '*If you lose your temper at a newspaper columnist, he'll get rich or famous or both*'.

"Look, John," Hagerty interjected, determined not to lose his temper. He was getting too old for this; arguing the toss with college boys and advertising guys twenty years his junior. Sometimes, he found himself feeling like he was dealing with a bunch of spoiled kids. "It's not even what Ben Bradlee says in black and white. The man's far too shrewd to go throwing wild allegations about..."

"He's going after Hoover!"

"That's because the brainless SOB's working for the old monster paid the 'contractors' who set up the bugs in the Warwick Hotel," Hagerty took a deep breath, "and feloniously broke into the private homes in which they had

been informed might host members of Doctor King's party when it visited Philadelphia, *through normal FBI accounts*, the records of which will become public property at the end of this budget year!"

"That was dumb," Ehrlichman conceded, still not seeing the problem. "Hoover needs to clean house."

"How the Hell does the Director do that in the middle of a news firestorm like the one we're about to be engulfed in any time soon?"

"Come on, Jim," the younger man guffawed complacently, "Hoover's untouchable. He's the perfect 'cut out'. Heck, that's the only reason why JFK and LBJ kept him at the Bureau."

"John," Hagerty persisted, drawing on his two decades of managing – or at least co-existing with – the unforgiving grinding machine that was the American 'news machine', once a newspaper and radio-driven predator, now increasingly a TV-dominated beast of unimaginable rapacity, in one last plea to sanity. "Hoover doesn't understand what he's unleashed. He got careless, his people were always careless. *He's* not untouchable, *they* aren't untouchable. None of *us* are untouchable. The World has changed; Ike isn't President anymore, and nobody would put up with JFK's antics today. I've been talking to lawyers the last couple of days about how bad this gets; trust me, *you* ought to be talking to lawyers, right now."

Ehrlichman was silent for a few seconds.

Bob Haldeman's voice broke in.

"Hi, Jim," he called with false bonhomie.

That was the trouble with Nixon's people; even when they were actually making the right noises you knew, you just knew, they were not reading from the same mood music sheet or thinking any of the thoughts that you were.

"I've seen Bradlee's column. It could have been a lot worse..."

No, the men closest to the President had not thought this through. It was time to spell it out.

"What happens if J. Edgar Hoover finds himself appearing before a Grand Jury under oath, Bob?" Hagerty asked bluntly. "Or more likely in the short-term, deposed by a Special Prosecutor?"

"Only the President can appoint..."

Jesus! These people had shit for brains!

"No," Hagerty explained with exaggerated patience like a father trying to communicate with a wayward son who has not got used to the idea that

school books are not just things you carry around, you have to read them, too. "The United States Attorney General, or for that matter, his Deputy, can appoint a Special Prosecutor at any time."

"Oh, right... Are you sure about that, Jim?"

"That's not the worst of it," the veteran Press Secretary went on, "what happens if one of the aggrieved parties, that is, either of the parties whose privacy and constitutional rights have been flouted by the wire-tapping and bugging, seek redress against a named individual, Federal employee or a member of the Administration?"

"Hey, that's not going to happen. Martin Luther King is in a big enough world of pain as it is..."

Is this guy being deliberately obtuse?

"I wasn't thinking about Doctor King, Bob. I was thinking about Ben and Margaret Sullivan's girl. I met her a couple of times before the October War at fundraisers. She's smart, cute as Hell and very articulate and she's just hired Gretchen Betancourt-Brenckmann as her lawyer!"

"Claude Betancourt's daughter?"

"Yes," Hagerty confirmed, praying that the penny was dropping at last.

"Doesn't her husband clerk for Chief Justice Earl Warren?"

Hagerty suspended his disbelief that the President's Chief of Staff was asking him a series of only half-rhetorical questions he either knew the answer to, or *ought* to have known the answers to, and was so disconnected with reality that he needed somebody else to 'spell it out' because clearly, all the President's men at Camp David were in denial.

"What happens next might look like this," the older man sighed, really not believing for a moment that he was having to tell Bob Haldeman any of this, "is that Miranda Sullivan files a complaint against the FBI in New York alleging that the Bureau, and or it's 'senior officers' abused her constitutional rights. At the pre-trial hearing, or deposition, whichever occurs will be at the discretion of a circuit judge, she alleges that the FBI was acting as the agent of the White House..."

"She can't prove that!"

Hagerty would have been happier if Bob Haldeman had said something along the lines of: 'That's a lie!'

"She doesn't have to prove it," he grunted irritably. "Look at all this from Nick Katzenbach's perspective. He's Hoover's boss and he sure as Hell

didn't authorise any of this tomfoolery. In fact, I'd be astonished if he isn't sitting on a notarised statement duly witnessed, etcetera, of a meeting in which he specifically forbade Hoover and the FBI to spy or in any way harass Doctor King. Ask yourself what Katzenbach is thinking this morning?"

The President ought to have already talked to the Attorney General about this shit!

"Katzenbach's a Cabinet member," Haldeman retorted, as if this resolved everything; abracadabra, and the problem disappears in a puff of smoke...

"Katzenbach is the country's senior law officer. His responsibility is to guard the constitution, rule of law, not the President's arse!"

Jesus, why am I having to tell these morons this?

Was this what you got when a bunch of advertising guys took over the White House?

"Okay," Haldeman countered, turning stiffly distant. "Katzenbach will do what he has to do to keep the lid on this. He'll make sure he's bullet proof. It'll all come back to some mid-ranking FBI fall guy. I don't see why the White House has to get involved..."

Hagerty gave up.

"I have to talk to the President, Bob."

"That's not possible..."

The man who had loyally fronted for Thomas Dewey in the forties, and Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s decided to try one last time.

However, as he heard himself say the words he knew this was his last 'duty call' on behalf of the Nixon Administration.

"I need to speak to the President *now*, Bob," he re-iterated very, very slowly, very nearly syllable by syllable.

Haldeman hesitated.

"No, that's not going to happen, Jim."

Hagerty shook his head in sadness.

"In that case will you please notify the President that on his return to Philadelphia he will find my resignation letter on his desk. Good day to you, Bob."

Hagerty thought he heard Haldeman saying something profane as he sadly, reluctantly replaced the telephone receiver on its cradle.

"God help us," he muttered to himself as he retrieved a sheet of White House-headed paper. "Because nobody else will when this gets out..."

Chapter 49

Saturday 27th February 1965
Verdala Palace, Malta

"What on earth are you doing in here?" Air Marshal Sir Daniel French demanded in a hoarse whisper as he shut the door to his bedroom behind him. "You shouldn't be here! And how the Devil did you get in?"

Rachel had been flicking through the pages of the book she had found on the Governor of Malta's bedside table '*The Code of the Woosters*' by P.G. Wodehouse. A man in Daniel French's post, beset with meddling from Oxford and constantly playing off the competing vested interests of the armed forces, the civil authorities and the sensibilities of the Maltese, deserved a little light relief in his bedtime reading matter. She felt a little guilty for having so wantonly magnified his troubles.

She was sitting on the end of the double bed – Colonial Governors were expected to take their memsahibs with them abroad – in the best of Sally Beard's dowdy frocks, barefoot, her arms and shoulders, a little sun burned, scandalously revealed and her hair unrestrained, tumbling almost to her shoulders. She rested the open book in her lap.

"Did you know that all the locks on this floor are single action?" She asked, smiling nicely, trying very hard not to be overly vampish.

"You broke in?" The man had been unbuttoning his collar and loosening his tie as he entered the bedroom. Now he halted in mid-stride, the colour rising in his cheeks.

"I picked the lock," she confessed.

"Look," Dan French murmured, starting again. "What are you doing in here?"

"I'm your mistress, remember?"

"No, you are *not*!" The Governor of Malta objected, lowly. "That's all a fictional nonsense. For reasons beyond my ken I went along with it but that makes it no less of a sham."

Rachel was unmoving, serene just outside the circle of the man's nervous anxiety. He began to pace, she watched.

"I plan to have a confidential word in the Dom's ear," she announced

with a sigh that could have been disappointment or anticipation. “But that might not be enough to sort out our *little* problem.”

Dan French stopped pacing.

“No?”

Rachel shook her head.

“The General Workers Union and the Maltese Labour Party are more or less the same thing,” she prefaced. “Which I’m sure you already know, of course. However, you may not be aware – officially - that they operate very much in the fashion of a sprawling, not terribly well co-ordinated or disciplined, and shockingly unimaginative organised crime family.”

“Sicily is only sixty miles away,” the man remarked. “The long tentacles of the Mafia inevitably touch the Maltese Archipelago. It’s never been a big problem.”

“Anyway,” Rachel continued, “Joe’s problems are all to do with a power struggle in the GWU which has triggered one of the Dom’s periodic bouts of paranoid insecurity. The rumours about Samuel Calleja’s treachery never really stopped circulating, it’s just that Mintoff and his cronies have louder voices than most. If I wasn’t your *mistress* I’d liquidate the Dom and move on, but...”

“NO!” Dan French snapped. “I won’t have anything of that sort on my watch!”

Although Rachel hated making a good man hot and bothered; sometimes there was no alternative. She was beginning to feel like Bertie Wooster when he was accused of stealing Sir Watkin Bassett’s prized silver cow creamer in the middle chapters of *The Code of the Woosters*, and like P.G. Wodehouse’s dim-witted bumbling hero no matter how wronged she believed herself to be, she knew that she had, in some way, only got herself to blame.

“Oh, and while we’re on the subject,” the man went on, building up a head of steam now, “what the Devil went on outside that dive at Pieta Creek the other night?”

“Sammy’s Bar?” Rachel ascertained innocently.

“Yes, dammit!”

“I stopped two of the Dom’s thugs beating up Joe Calleja.”

“And you broke your cover!”

“No,” she corrected him, “I did that when the Dom and his wife came to dinner at the Residence. What I did the other night was look after Joe,

exactly as I promised Lady Marija and his mother that I would."

"Somebody could have been killed!"

"Only if I had meant to kill somebody," Rachel reminded him tartly.

"I give up," the man groaned, raising his arms in surrender. "This is insane." He had backed away until his buttocks encountered the dresser. "What do you plan to do next?"

"*You* must get Joe off Malta. Once he becomes the young pretender in exile Mintoff will posture and whine but stuck here on the Archipelago what can he do but wait for the return of the prince to claim his crown."

The man nodded tersely, said nothing.

"If Marija returned to Malta now," Rachel went on, "Mintoff and his people would do their best to undermine her, too. Obviously, she cannot return until she is older, stronger. Joe is only twenty-four years of age; he is a young man still finding his way. If he was married he would be less vulnerable, at least to 'personal' attacks, but he is not married nor is he likely to be in the foreseeable future, and the Dom will use that against him also if he stays here and then sooner or later, *you*, the British authorities will be asked to look into the friends he keeps," she shrugged, "and it will all become *very* nasty."

Dan French frowned.

"We don't entertain *those* sort of scurrilous rumours," he said quietly.

"No," Rachel agreed patiently, "but Malta is a Catholic place. The people are deeply conservative. When a boy of Joe's age, a hero, is not married to a good Maltese girl people start asking questions; they already have, just not very loudly so far and the Archipelago's papers aren't about to print hearsay, not quite yet. The desecration of Samuel Calleja's grave, the infighting in the GWU, the heavies trying to intimidate Joe is only the start. Malta is a small place. It is smaller than the Isle of Wight and has three or four times as many people on it but that still only means it has a population about the same size as Coventry. Everybody who is anybody knows everybody else, all about them and eventually, they gossip. For anybody of Joe or Marija's age being in the public eye in Malta is like walking a tight rope while people are throwing rocks at you. Marija might have learned how to keep her balance before she went away; but Joe got to be famous accidentally, before he had any idea what he was getting himself into."

The Governor of Malta was nodding thoughtfully.

“The big picture,” Rachel smiled tight-lipped, “as Lionel Faulkes reminded me the other day, is not what goes on today, tomorrow or in a year or two, it is making sure that we don’t leave banana skins all over the place for people like Joe and his sister to slip on when their turn comes to take on the likes of the Dom.” Her smile had become fixed. “Which is why I don’t plan to kill anybody on *your* watch, Governor,” she promised before adding a caveat, ‘well, unless somebody tries to kill me, obviously. A woman in my position always reserves the right to defend herself.”

The man moved away from the dresser to stand over her.

“What if Joe won’t leave Malta of his own volition?”

Rachel placed *The Code of the Woosters* on the covers and slowly, lithely rose to her feet.

“After this is over I want a different life,” she announced, avoiding eye contact. Her mouth quirked a smile as she looked up. “I honestly don’t know if that is possible. But...”

“You should return to your room.”

“I know,” she murmured leaning towards Dan French. She half-expected him to flinch, turn his face aside.

He did neither and their lips brushed.

“It is a very long time since I slept with a good man, Daniel French,” Rachel breathed, her accent littered with the lisping Polish vowels of her girlhood. “I think,” she whispered, the fingers of her right hand resting on his heart, “that you and I are very tired,” she shrugged, lowered her gaze a moment, “but right now I think I would very much like to be your mistress.”

Chapter 50

Sunday 28th February 1965
Vichy, France

Vera Bertrand had been petrified when she discovered that running away was the last thing on Sergey Akhromeyev's mind.

'Are you insane?'

The Russian had given her a bleak look and then to her surprise, smiled broadly.

'No. It is winter," he said shaking his head. "My boys will survive if it snows; your girls and most of the men you tell me we must bring with us into the," he had shrugged almost Gallically, 'country, will die if the weather turns bad. So, *we* shall do something else.'

Before she could interrupt he had gone on.

'If we run away the 207th Cavalry will come after us. We have no heavy weapons, they have many. I don't like the odds. So, we must do something about that. We'll start with the tanks parked on the race course. Once we've got our hands on them we'll take the rest of Bellerive before we cross the river and liberate Vichy.'

'You are insane!'

Akhromeyev had viewed her for several seconds.

'I am a stranger in a strange land. One day I will learn to speak French but never as if I was a native.'

Vera had scowled, not knowing where this was going.

'I have seen your scars. I know your old injuries pain you more than you will admit. How long do you think you will survive *on the run*?'

'I have survived worst things!'

'I don't doubt it. But that was when you were younger. The first thing you learn in the Army, any army anywhere in the World, is that you must confront what is before you. *Not* what you might wish was before you. A good officer learns to deal with what is in front of him, and then he moves on. Wishful thinking gets people killed; so, I try not to indulge in it.'

Vera had still been confused.

'Colonel Krueger would have had me and my boys liquidated if he could;

second best is sending us off on a wild goose chase in the countryside. That way he's rid of us and he avoids a fight in which half the town would be wrecked and many of his men killed.'

The woman had begun to catch up with him.

'The second thing officers in any army in the World learn is to do whenever possible, precisely what one's enemy hopes one will not do. I have twenty-four 'real' soldiers; how many do you think Krueger has?'

'A lot more?'

'No, I think not. He went to a lot of trouble to make sure I saw every one of his men on the streets the other day. I didn't see many 'soldiers'. And besides, if what you told me about the way the 207th was deployed around Saint Germain des Fosses, well over half his people must still be billeted outside Vichy where there's still food.'

Of course, the Russian's master plan had gone wrong.

More than once but it had not mattered.

By dawn the next day it was all over.

The crews of the M-48 Patton tanks on the race course had been captured without a fight and had had no qualms about firing on their 'comrades' across the River Allier in Vichy.

Under cover of a sporadic barrage from the long rifles of the captive tanks Akhromeyev had led fifteen of his 'boys' across the Pont Bellerive, locked up Vera's 'girls' in a basement for safe keeping with a score of townsfolk she had identified as being 'vital' to the commune, and got on with killing anybody who got in their way.

The 207th Cavalry's resistance was, after an initial gunfight, well, pathetic actually...

A couple of Akhromeyev's men had been shot, one had since died of his wounds and several others were walking wounded. In the town perhaps fifty of Krueger's men had been killed.

Now the 207th Cavalry's surviving 'officers' were lined up in front of the palely Gothic Town Hall; Krueger, his second-in-command and six other men. It was probably no coincidence that Krueger was the only one visibly uninjured. He had been proudly defiant, talkative when he was captured. Now he was angrily silent.

Akhromeyev stood before him a while, looking into the eyes of the man whose execution he would personally conduct in a few minutes. Then he

moved on to the tall, rangy man in his late twenties or early thirties whom Vera had claimed was Krueger's second-in-command.

The other man's let arm was in a bloody sling.

He swayed as the drizzled began to turn to rain beneath the leaden overcast.

"Do you speak Russian?" Akhromeyev asked him.

"Da," the other man spat back.

"What is your name."

"Sébastien Betancourt, Mon General!"

"Who are you?"

"A soldier of fortune like you."

Akhromeyev sized up the other man. He had fought like a lion until a nearby grenade explosion had briefly stunned him into submission.

"And you speak Russian?"

"I was at the Sorbonne on the night of the war. I taught modern languages. English and Russian. I woke up the morning afterwards with a house on top of me. Regrettably, there was no sign of the young lady I was 'pleasuring' when the bomb went off. C'est la vie."

Akhromeyev did not plan to keep his boys hanging around in the rain overlong.

"Would you shoot him if I ordered you to?" He inquired, nodding towards 'Colonel' Krueger who visibly blanched, not needing to understand Russian to catch the gist of the exchange.

"No," the tall, angular man standing in front of Akhromeyev said. "That's your job."

The Russian nodded, glanced down the rest of the line.

"My 'boys' vetted the others earlier. Madam Bertrand's girls pointed out the ones we didn't need to feed," he explained, knowing Betancourt and the rest of the men in the line would have heard the gunshots and worked out the rest for themselves. Akhromeyev had no intention of killing for the sake of it, or just to 'make examples'. The 207th had treated the people of Vichy harshly, with unnecessary and gratuitous cruelty; that was the responsibility of Krueger's 'officers and NCOs' and if he had to mete out a little more exemplary justice to punish the guilty, so be it. "I know about Krueger, what about these men?"

"You do what you have to do to survive, Mon General," Betancourt

groaned.

Vera Bertrand stood a little apart from her girls. Men and women had emerged from the cellars of Vichy and Bellerive; many now hovered uncertainly in the farthest corners of the square. Most of the 207th Cavalry's survivors sat or squatted on the wet flagstones – perhaps forty of them, beaten and bedraggled, many wounded – numbly awaiting their fate.

Akhromeyev came to a decision.

"Madam Bertrand, if you would be so good as to translate for the benefit of your countrymen and women!"

It had been a long day and her bones were very, very tired. The man waited for her to limp to his side.

"MY NAME IS SERGEY AKHROMEYEV! I WAS AN OFFICER IN THE RED ARMY!"

His parade ground bark carried to all corners of the square below the Town Hall; the woman's translation was partially lost on the breeze.

"I AM STILL AN ARMY OFFICER! I AM NOT A BARBARIAN LIKE THESE ANIMALS!"

He had pulled out his Makarov pistol before sweeping his arm along the line, past Krueger, Betancourt and the other surviving 'officers' of the 207th Cavalry.

"MY MEN ARE NOT ANIMALS THEY ARE SOLDIERS! I COMMAND, THEY OBEY! IF YOU ELECT TO STAY IN VICHY WE WILL PROTECT YOU! THERE WILL BE NO TERROR! THERE WILL BE LAW AND ORDER! FOR THOSE WHO BREAK THE LAW THERE WILL BE SEVERE PENALTIES! BUT THERE WILL BE NO TERROR!"

He turned, waved Krueger to take a step forward with his pistol.

'THIS MAN PERSONALLY MURDERED UNARMED CIVILIANS AND RAPED WOMEN! HE ALLOWED HIS MEN TO RUN WILD IN THE TOWN! MANY WERE MURDERED, MANY WOMEN WERE RAPED! THIS MAN IS A WAR CRIMINAL AND HE MUST PAY FOR HIS CRIMES!"

He snapped back the breech of the Makarov.

"Get on your knees," he ordered Krueger.

Vera Bertrand translated.

The other man did not move.

Akhromeyev shot him in the right knee and as he began to crumple to the

ground in the left knee. Wasting no time, he straddled the now prostrate moaning, twitching man and fired two shots into the back of his head.

The square was silent bar the pattering of the rain.

Akhromeyev holstered the Makarov.

He gestured at the prisoners.

“Get everybody under cover! Take care of their wounds!” His hard eyes scanned the square. “From this moment forward, we are all in this together! We live or we die together!”

Chapter 51

Sunday 28th February 1965
Harehills, Leeds

Denis Healey had got back from William Whitelaw's funeral in Lanarkshire chilled with fever and spent all of Saturday in bed as the ague worked its way through his system. Once struck down by the 'War Fever', or as the Americans called it 'Plague' – a sudden onset influenza which carried the old and the young away with, according to epidemiological studies now being published, in outbreaks eerily reminiscent of the Spanish Lady pandemic of the 1918-1921 era – a victim was periodically beset, or perhaps, just vulnerable to short, sharp repeat 'attacks' that mercifully, grew marginally less pernicious with each recurrence. Presumably, this was because as time went by survivors developed an immunity of sorts but nobody really knew for sure. In any event, Healey recognised the immediate crisis had passed when he awakened that Sunday morning with his fever having peaked overnight.

The most frightening aspect of the 'fever' was that not everybody who was exposed to it actually became sick the first, or the second, or sometimes on any of the subsequent occasions they were surrounded by an otherwise infected population. It was as if the pathogen, bacilli or virus specifically targeted some and left others untouched. Denis Healey's wife Edna was one of the lucky ones, as was the Prime Minister.

The incidence of sickness was also significantly reduced throughout the Armed Services, especially among those who had spent lengthy periods of their career before, and after the October War on extended tours of duty at sea or overseas. Recent speculation by virologists postulated that this group's apparent immunity might stem from having been exposed to low levels of tropical infections before the war, or the fact that they often received multiple inoculations against the diseases prevalent in the areas of the World to which they were to be posted. For example, most servicemen whose duty carried them to equatorial zones were required to take anti-Malarial drugs and whatever other prophylactic or preventative health measures were readily available to reduce their chance of contracting infection. Another theory held

that servicemen – other than in combat situations, which tended to be a minority of the time – lived in inherently more ordered, disciplined, and essentially ‘cleaner’ environments than the majority of the civilian population of the Home Islands.

In years to come anybody who unravelled the mystery would probably win a Nobel Prize!

Now that the postal system had re-established a ‘nationwide’ coverage – parts of Kent, the Greater London Area, Liverpool and several other bombed places and districts excepted – a stack of correspondence had accumulated while Healey and his wife had been ‘on the road’. Now they began to work through the backlog, he wrapped up in bed and she sitting in a chair next to him, opening and speed reading each item of correspondence before deciding which one to pass on to him.

The house around them was cold; its roof had been damaged – mostly ripped off - on the night of the war and not properly repaired until last year. By then the water and frost had got into the attic and the Healeys only kept the place because it was somewhere for them, and Party colleagues to break their journeys to the north, or to stay over if they were in Leeds. Their primary family home remained in Alfriston, in East Sussex, where their teenage children, Jennifer, Timothy and Cressida still lived with Healey’s younger brother Terence, and his family. Such family arrangements were relatively common, a consequence of the destruction and non-habitability of so many buildings – between thirty-five and forty-five percent of the entire housing stock – after the war.

In truth what passed for Denis and Edna Healey’s ‘domestic life’ had been a chaotic whirl of never-ending movement, ever since he had recovered sufficiently to again fully participate in political life in Oxford last spring. Edna had split her time between acting as her husband’s secretary, housekeeper and reluctant ‘political’ wife in Oxford, and Alfriston trying as hard as possible to be the mother her children needed in times such as these.

Electioneering was pure Hell.

Edna had always loathed accompanying her husband on the stomp from hustings to hustings. However, duty was duty, and sometimes it was inordinately onerous, made worse by the fact that whatever his other qualities – her husband’s double first Baliol brain notwithstanding – neither he nor she really had the ‘personal touch’. Whereas Michael Foot or Margaret Thatcher

could walk into a hall and literally, ‘light it up’, Denis for all that he was overflowing with blustering good sense, rarely inflamed the appetites of his audiences. Undoubtedly, he could argue with force and carry the debate but that was not the same as ‘exciting’, let alone ‘converting’ the undecided and those were the key things that ultimately won elections.

“Bloody Michael Foot,” Denis Healey groaned weakly. He brandished a letter – one of those covered with a minute, precise scrawl on *both* sides. “This chap has seen a transcript of Michael’s speech at Cheltenham and he’s gloating about how he ‘wiped the floor with the PM’!” He shook his head. “Stuff and nonsense!”

The few non-partisan witnesses to the Cheltenham ‘electoral joust’ reported that the few diehard ‘Footites’ apart the packed audience had ‘switched off’ while Michael was speaking and ‘come alive’ when ‘the lady’ responded. Incontrovertibly, it was she who had wiped the floor with the great hero of the left – contrary to the account of Healey’s somewhat delusional correspondent - somewhat in the manner of a woman scorned...

“Do try not to upset yourself, Denis,” his wife counselled, extracting the contents of another letter. She glanced at it and put it to one side. “More of the same,” she explained. “I do wish people wouldn’t so insist on preaching to the converted at times like this.”

They had planned to spend yesterday and today out and about in the Leeds East constituency that Denis Healey had held since 1955. Those plans were history; if he was well enough to travel they were due in Wolverhampton where Jim Callaghan was going to give his speech to the nation, scheduled to go out on the BBC on Saturday 6th March, a week before the election, a ‘trial run’.

The BBC had allocated Liberal Leader Jo Grimond the 4th March, and the leaders of the two main parties had tossed a coin to decide who should go first over the next two days. Or rather, their surrogates had tossed the aforementioned coin; Airey Neave had called heads and promptly nominated the evening of the 5th for his leader’s final national appeal to the nation.

Around noon Edna Healey turned on the radio.

Neighbours had brought around a pan of soup and several chunks of black bread, rightly suspecting there was little to eat in the house. These days everybody was so svelte their clothes were hanging off them as if their shoulders were coat-hangers.

"...both Royal Navy warships damaged by shellfire from shore batteries near Boulogne and Calais respectively have docked safely at Dover. HMS Cavendish, which suffered two direct hits was the most badly damaged vessel. However, her commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander Dermot O'Reilly, a veteran of the Battle of Malta told reporters on the quayside that despite the disabling of one of his ships gun turrets that 'we will be ready for sea again as soon as we patch a few holes'."

Denis Healey shut his eyes.

Even as the election campaign rumbled across the drab cities and wintery shires of what was left of England treacherous undercurrents were twisting and transforming the political map of the British Isles.

And now there was another fly in the ointment.

People were fleeing across the English Channel; fleeing for their lives, drowning in the cold grey, turbulent waters of one of the most dangerous stretches of ocean in the World. Nobody had seen it coming, last year's influx of refugees – although large – had been a measured, calm affair with French men and women seeking a better, more peaceful place to live where there was work, the rule of law, a functioning public health and transportation system and a Government that took responsibility for feeding *all* its people.

It seemed that civil society had broken down in Northern France, dreadful tales of anarchy across the Channel vied with election news for the attention of readers and the BBC seemed intent on bludgeoning the populace with harrowing pictures of bodies in the water, and tales of fishermen and Royal Navy ships plucking distraught and starving children out of the sea...

The Admiralty wanted troops on the ground in France to secure the ports. The Navy's attitude was straightforward: the French are coming anyway, whatever we do, so can we please get ourselves organised and stop hundreds, or untold thousands of men, women and children drowning?

The First Sea Lord had gained access to the Prime Minister and she had over-ruled the objections – albeit objections of the salutary variety – of several other members of the Cabinet.

In 1940 it had been 'Operation Dynamo'; a quarter of a century later it was 'Operation Safe Harbour'.

Given that the Prime Minister had a famous penchant for denigrating foreigners – particularly Americans – that verged on xenophobia on occasions, her unqualified support for Operation Safe Harbour had severely

rattled many of her Cabinet colleagues.

'How in good conscience can we sit back and watch as yet another disaster unfolds and do *nothing*?'

Love her or loathe her, the woman was a force of nature!

People were losing track of how many assassination attempts she had survived. Every time she was in harm's way there was always somebody – last week there had been a queue of men – desperate to selflessly put their bodies between the killer and their quarry.

What had she done as soon as the dust settled at Westminster?

'Is anybody hurt?'

Then she had carried on as if nothing had happened even though she must have been fearfully knocked about by all those Royal Marines jumping on top of her.

People had been getting used to seeing her being interviewed by her pet BBC man, that old rogue Frank Waters. Now they were getting to see him bandaged up; the man who saved *The Angry Widow*!

It went without saying that the last thing Denis Healey wanted was for people to start taking pot shots at his old and very loyal friend, Jim Callaghan but well, Jim for all his solid, no nonsense unflappability simply could not compete with the livewire blond bombshell who had been at times in the last year, the most unpopular woman in the World. *She* was full of energy and optimism; Jim was steadfastly preaching the gospel of 'things will gradually get better', oh, and eventually, 'we may get around to doing something about making the land-owning classes pay their fair share...'

That sort of thing might wash with the Party faithful but how many of them were there these days? In political life it was always a mistake to employ 'loudness' as the true gauge of any given constituency. Yes, Labour Party rallies were 'better' than their Tory counterparts but then big popular rallies had never been the Conservatives' 'thing' outside the Party Conference season. How much were a few well-covered 'Cheltenham events' worth in comparison with the daily litany of marches, galas and workers' festivals organised by the Labour Party?

Underlying every assumption, the ineluctable logic of the 'bomb damage' maps foretold the downfall of the Conservative Party in Parliament; crudely put, a lot more potential Tory voters had been killed by the Soviets than Labourites, and the Party's candidates were dutifully reporting a

groundswell of support in all the normal places. The Trades Union Congress – the TUC - was rock solid behind Jim Callaghan, its leaders constantly exhorting their members to throw out the 'war mongers'. Healey despaired, the fools did not understand that every time they compared Margaret Thatcher to Boadicea she took it as a huge compliment, and *her* Party closed ranks at her back.

Jim Callaghan had been typically phlegmatic about Michael Foot's Cheltenham 'CND Manifesto'; Denis Healey had been – and still was – livid. The last thing they needed was for a well-meaning dilettante like Foot to paint the entire electorate a great big picture of the fracture lines in the Party. It was incidental that the motley collection of public school educated underachievers, land-owners and the sons of the minor aristocracy not bright enough to gain meaningful employment standing behind Margaret Thatcher – knives in hand, raised to strike – were as much, if not more of shambolic than the post-October War Labour Party. At least the Tories could agree, unambiguously, on the desirability and the necessity to defend the country with nuclear weapons 'if it came to it'!

At least a third of Healey's 'comrades' wanted to scrap the British bomb, to do away with the Navy, most of the Air Force and to turn the Army into a low paid work gang to build roads and railways! Another third of the Party was at best 'ambivalent' about 'defence' and supported the CND wing's call for an inquiry – a kangaroo court by any other name – to establish who ought to be pilloried for letting the October War happen and 'putting on trial' the people who had usurped the power of the people in the last two years of the 'emergency'.

The internal rifts had got so bad that the Callaghan loyalists, Healey at the top of the list, were beginning to suspect that they had more in common with many small 'C' Tories than they had with most of their 'comrades'.

If the Labour Party did not win the election with a big majority – over a hundred seats, minimum – there would be blood on the floor within days. At local meetings stalwarts were already licking their lips, goading their candidates to be ever more radical. After two years of misery the heart and soul of the Party in the constituencies and within the Trade Union movement wanted their pounds of flesh.

Listening to the BBC did nothing to settle Healey's spiritual dyspepsia.

"...*Elsewhere, speaking in Ebbw Vale to the Regional Conference of the*

National Union of Mineworkers Labour's Michael Foot was cheered to the rafters, receiving a five-minute standing ovation after promising his audience that after the election new Workers' Councils would be formed to run individual mines..."

"That's not Party policy! Where was that in the Manifesto?"

"Calm down, Denis," his wife soothed. "You'll do yourself a mischief if you get worked up about things before you're a little stronger."

Denis Healey moaned.

"We need to be talking to everybody," he complained feebly, "not just the people who already agree with us..."

Chapter 52

Sunday 28th February 1965
McDermott's Open, Cherry Hill, New Jersey

"What is this place?" This Miranda Sullivan asked as she got out of the car which had picked up the two women at Philadelphia International Airport, as she surveyed the mansion before her.

"One of Daddy's hideaways," Gretchen Betancourt laughed. The flight from the West Coast had been half-empty and she and her client had had a marvellous chance to chat.

They were both daughters with elder brothers, the children of rich and famous parents; albeit their adult lives had taken utterly different courses. Miranda had gone through a wild child phase, experimented with drugs and by her own admission very nearly 'fucked up my life', before fighting her way back, finding a niche with the NAACP in San Francisco, stumbling across a Christian faith and as if it was pre-destined, fallen in love with a married man.

Gretchen had recounted her own history. Her outrageous, wholly unrealistic ambitions, and the overlong 'warding off the frogs' phase while she waited for her very own Prince Charming.

'I ought to have figured that Dan was the one for me on the night of the war,' she had confessed when the women swapped their stories of the night.

Gretchen's tale had nothing on Miranda's drug-fuelled fever dream of sex, being chased out of a house by a drug dealer with a Navy Colt and regaining consciousness in a downtown San Francisco PD lockup. Gretchen had sat on the doorstep of her parent's country retreat in Connecticut comforting her future husband who was afraid his whole family was gone.

'That must have been bad,' Miranda had empathised on hearing of Gretchen's Battle of Washington injuries. She had sighed when she heard how Dan Brenckmann had finally discovered her in the emergency ward at Bethesda Naval Hospital several days later.

'I thought I'd met *the* one,' Miranda had admitted. 'That was before the war. But then we had a big fight and I got him signed up on a tour to the North West. He was in Bellingham the night of the war...'

It wasn't until that moment that she had realised who Gretchen was actually married to.

'Your husband is Dan Brenckmann, right?'

'Yes...'

'He's got a brother in the Navy, right?'

'Yeah, and Sam, he's a musician...'

Miranda must have blushed bright as a beetroot.

'What is it?'

The story about how Sam Brenckmann had met his now wife Judy on the night of the war was retold at a rush.

The women had looked at each other breathlessly.

'Talk about six degrees of separation,' Gretchen had smiled. She had deliberately steered clear of the subject of Martin Luther King junior.

'I love him. I always knew it would end badly,' Miranda volunteered. 'The baby thing is too weird. During my 'wild' phase I took a lot of drugs and well,' she had shrugged, momentarily little girl lost, 'I got the clap. Then I got an infection down in all the places a woman doesn't want to get that sort of thing. And basically, after that I thought I was too messed up to have kids, so did the Doctors my Aunt Molly took me to, so I didn't worry about it. I told *him* I couldn't have children. He's a great man but he's just a guy, so he didn't ask any questions and I didn't think about it again until I missed the first period...'

'Does *he* know?'

Miranda shook her head hurriedly.

'No. I honestly wouldn't know how to tell him, it was making me sick just thinking about telling him...'

'What were you going to do?'

"I don't know. I still don't know.'

Gretchen had worked out that she and Miranda were – within a week or so - pretty much as 'knocked up' as each other; which was truly surreal...

She came around the car and joined Miranda in front of the big house.

"Daddy gave me and Dan the lease of this place as a wedding present," she said. "It was much too big for us; we have an apartment in the city now. We rent it out. At the moment it's empty. Don't worry if you see men patrolling in the grounds, they work for Daddy."

Miranda had belatedly realised Gretchen's 'Daddy' had been JFK's

father's attorney. Given that her husband worked for Chief Justice Earl Warren it was a stretch to try to remember if she had ever met anybody quite so well connected. She got the impression that Gretchen had never had any of the problems she had had accepting how lucky she had been to be born into wealth.

The driver and one of the bodyguards who had met the women at the airport followed them into the mansion with their cases.

"McDermott's Open?" Miranda asked.

"Named after the first man to break par to win the US Open," Gretchen said brightly. "I wanted to be a golfer when I was younger." She involuntarily flexed her left arm. "One day when I've done the having children thing I'll get them to dig around inside my shoulder and fix whatever's stopping me swinging the way I did before the Battle of Washington!"

Miranda did not doubt it for a moment.

"You must think I'm pathetic," she observed as the women went into a chapel-like morning room furnished like a homage to another age.

"Why?" Gretchen honestly did not know what the other woman was talking about. That happened sometimes, her mind was too literal and she did not get the joke.

"I messed up my life and now I've sabotaged the Civil Rights Movement..."

"Nonsense! You got your life back together and fell in love with a," Gretchen paused. She liked to think her attitudes were the stellar opposites of the rednecks 'down south' but actually, she had never had any black friends and simply could not imagine having a black boyfriend, let alone a lover. "*Man*," she decided uncertainly, 'whom we all admire.'

"A black man," Miranda grinned. "In Georgia or Alabama or Mississippi, I'd get stoned in the street for that. In Virginia I'd get arrested if I tried to marry a black man, I certainly wouldn't be allowed to live with him. It's probably the same in the Carolinas, and Louisiana although they say some neighbourhoods in New Orleans nobody cares. I guess that's what it's like in Memphis and other places in Tennessee. Jim Crow is alive and well in our Great Country," she concluded ruefully.

"Is it really that different on the West Coast?" Gretchen asked, genuinely curious. It never ceased to amaze her how little she actually knew

about her own country outside of New England.

"I can worship with Terry Francois, you may know of him, he's the President of the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP, and my African-American friends in the Fillmore District, my parents wouldn't approve of my having a black boyfriend but it wouldn't be a capital offence. If I was going with a Chinaman or a Hispanic, well, that would be different. Everybody is prejudiced in their own way, that's why you have to keep on fighting back as hard as you can."

Gretchen showed Miranda around the house.

"It's strange," Miranda thought aloud as the women descended the staircase back down to the ground floor after completing the grand tour, "but now that I think about it, I've probably got more black friends in San Francisco than I've got white or Hispanic. Apart from Uncle Harvey and Aunt Mollie, Gregory and Darlene are the only 'white' people I hang out with."

Miranda was to be the prisoner of the big house for at least the next week. Gretchen and another ACLU attorney would depose her testimony and file a joint complaint on her behalf and that of the ACLU in Manhattan.

'Things will hot up then,' Gretchen had cautioned. 'You'll be okay here for a few days abut sometime next week we'll fly you up to Connecticut, to Wethersfield. It's where Bobby Kennedy and the Russians held talks last year before everything went crazy. Anyway, the Press won't be able to get anywhere near you there...'

'I'm not going to go into hiding. I've not done anything wrong!' Miranda had protested.

Secretly, Gretchen had already made provisional plans to spirit the other woman north across the border to Canada if things really got out of the control. Once the FBI and the Administration realised how much trouble they were in there was no telling how dirty this thing could get. If Hoover or the White House had believed this was just going to 'go away' overnight reports that Attorney General Katzenbach had been sounding out potential 'big hitters' to act as a Special Prosecutor ahead of yesterday's W*ashington Post* 'intervention', ought to have set alarm bells ringing.

'I'm sorry,' she had apologised to Miranda Sullivan.

The other woman had chewed her bottom lip for a moment.

'No, it's okay. I just guess that God works in mysterious ways.

Everything happens for a reason, a purpose...”

Gretchen felt horrible leaving Miranda rattling around the big house on her own – albeit with several bodyguards – to return to Philadelphia. However, there was no alternative. There were people she needed to talk to and to say that all Hell was breaking out around the Administration hardly did the furore justice.

The leaked news that James Hagerty, the White House Press Secretary, had resigned and that senior Administration members were refusing to comment on rumours that any minute now a Special Prosecutor would be appointed to investigate the circumstances of the ‘King Scandal’ and the FBI’s alleged involvement in it, was emblazoned across the front page of that morning’s *Washington Post*.

The big questions on everybody’s lips were: Who had authorised the illegal wire taps and bugging? And how far up the chain of command did the buck stop?

Blanket denials from President Nixon’s spokespersons, at Camp David where the suddenly embattled Commander-in-Chief and his family were attempting to ride out the storm, had done absolutely nothing to dampen down the firestorm.

The only senior member of the Administration who had attempted to make a dignified, ‘presidential’ intervention in support of the President was Nelson Rockefeller, who had invited a small number of press and TV men into his headquarters in the Rockefeller Center.

‘*I personally find it inconceivably that any member of the Administration could have had a hand in sanctioning such a disgraceful flouting of the constitutional rights of Dr King and Miss Sullivan. In the circumstances it is entirely appropriate that any possible FBI involvement in the matter be investigated with all due rigor. If implicated in this affair any Federal elected official or employee should be subject to the full strictures of the law!*’

When asked if the Director the Federal Bureau of Investigation had his full support tellingly he had replied: ‘*There has been no diminution in my admiration for and support of Mr Hoover as a result of recent events*.’

In other words, ‘*I still think J. Edgar Hoover is a mendacious little shit of the first water!*’

The Vice President had been less cryptic, but hardly unambiguous in his

backing for the Commander-in-Chief.

He simply confirmed: '*Personally, I have seen no evidence which implies the President knew anything about this matter*.'

Chapter 53

Monday 1st March 1965
Hertford College, Oxford

Forty-nine-year-old General Sir Michael Carver, the Chief of the Defence Staff tucked his cap under his arm and stepped into the Prime Minister's lair. From a distance people often mistook the tall, angular man for a distracted Oxford Don displaced from one or other of the requisitioned colleges. Arguably, there had never been a more cerebral man in the position he currently held, that of his country's most senior military commander.

The architect and victor of the Battle of Southern Iraq – a series of actions some historians were already likening to a 'modern Cannae' – was a scholarly, detached man never more comfortable than alone in his own thoughts.

Margaret Thatcher had heard the soldier's name once or twice, but never actually met him until April last year. Knowing that he was a stranger to her, the late Willie Whitelaw, who had also served with immense distinction in Hitler's War, had forewarned her of the measure of the man.

'Carver's related to Wellington on his mother's side and some say he actually looks a bit like the Iron Duke; although I'm sure Michael Carver would be mortified by the suggestion. He was at Winchester College; and detested it by all accounts. Afterwards, he went on to Sandhurst - that would have been around 1933 - allegedly, he hated that too at first. Legend has it that he almost went to New Zealand to train for the priesthood. Whoever talked him out of it deserves a jolly big medal!'

Willie Whitelaw had quite enjoyed retelling Michael Carver's story; in fact, in his enthusiasm he had made something of a meal of it.

'In 1934 Carver passed out top of his class at Sandhurst. He won the King's Gold Medal, the Anson Memorial Sword, the prizes for economics, military history and military law, and won a five-year Army Scholarship. From which you may gather that he was something of a star!'

Michael Carver had never been a very conventional soldier.

'No sooner had he left Sandhurst than he got into a set to with Percy Hobart. Hobart was the man who quite literally wrote 'the book' on British

Army armoured warfare tactics in the years before the Second World War. Frankly, if a few more people had read 'the book' it would have saved us an awful lot of trouble in that war. Anyway, legend has it that old *Hobo* Hobart was so exasperated that he felt moved to have a man to man chat with young Carver about *insubordination*. Hobart was a one off, he really was. The story goes that he told Carver that *the secret of success in the Army is to be sufficiently insubordinate*!'

It seemed that Carver, bored with Army life had very nearly resigned his commission in 1938.

'He's not a very clubbable chap, not a fellow who really enjoys mess life and I think he must have been bored stiff in the pre-war Army. To make things worse some chinless wonder sent him to Egypt as the transport officer at a camp near Heliopolis. Still, not long after that the war came and Hobo Hobart brought the 7th Armoured – you know, the chaps that ended up being called *The Desert Rats* – to Egypt and suddenly Carver was in the thick of things; as he was thereafter throughout the Second War. Like everybody else he traipsed up and down the North African coast for a couple of years until Monty arrived to sort things out, afterwards he was in the thick of it in Italy, and Germany of course. By the end of the war, still just thirty he was a brevetted Brigadier in command of 4th Armoured Brigade. When the war was over, like everybody else who stayed in the Army he reverted to his substantive rank, captain. A lot of good men just went back to Civvy Street because of that; but Carver stuck it out even though it took him the best part of fifteen years to work his way back up to substantive brigadier. That was when he got command of the 4th Brigade in West Germany in 1960. I think everybody knew he was a coming man all along. He'd held key technical posts with the Ministry of Supply, been head of exercise planning at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe, and held senior staff posts in East Africa and so on. Oh, and he was Director of War Plans between 1958 and 1960.'

Whitelaw had finished by telling her that: 'Everybody in the Army, or who has ever met him, including the people he has upset and there are a lot of those, think Michael Carver's the cleverest man they've ever met.'

In her personal acquaintance with the man the Prime Minister had never had any cause to doubt that last assertion.

"I bumped into Frank Waters outside, "Carver smiled severely. "He

seems very much on the mend, Prime Minister."

That was about it so far as 'making conversation' went with the Chief of the Defence Staff; which suited Margaret Thatcher down to a tee.

"Yes, he's marvellously resilient," she agreed.

"Just so," Carver murmured. "I have reservations about the planned ground deployments to France," he went on, not beating about the bush.

Margaret Thatcher frowned.

The decision had already been made; well, she thought she had already made it and communicated it to the Chiefs of Staff. This she felt bound to remind her principle military advisor.

"Quite so, Prime Minister," the man concurred. It transpired that 'new intelligence' from France mandated that the initial commitment of ground and sea forces had been overly 'conservative'.

"I have requested that the 2nd Battalion of 3rd Para," the Chief of the Defence Staff continued, "be landed at Le Havre, and that reinforcements be put ashore at Boulogne, Dunkirk and Calais. Our presence on the ground at Dieppe is sufficient at present. Moreover, after discussions with the First Sea Lord I have endorsed his decision to 'beef up' the gun line off Boulogne. HMS Hampshire is making best speed to join HMS Devonshire on station at this time. The entire Channel Fleet has now been mobilised to support Operation Safe Harbour. All commanders at sea and on shore have been directed that their primary mission is the evacuation of as many refugees as possible, weather conditions in the Channel permitting."

The Prime Minister had ushered the CDS to a chair by the window. It was a dark, stormy day and the low-beamed old Don's room was gloomy, claustrophobic and beginning to chill now that the coals in the hearth were nearly consumed.

When she felt the sting of the cold on her face, or in her hands, or the still numb ache of it in her bones Margaret Thatcher accepted it as a sign of grace. So long as she was Prime Minister the coal ration for a Cabinet Minister's family would be exactly, and not one ounce more or less, than that of a working man's family. If *her* people had to shiver they would *all* shiver together.

"I wish we could spare more resources," Michael Carver sighed. "However, operations in the London Corridor, although now winding down have proven, as you know, a tad more problematic than we had hoped."

Operation Poplar, the opening of a north-south route through a relatively lightly damaged ‘corridor’ to the London Docks had so far cost the Army over a thousand casualties. Nobody had had time to speculate how many rebels had died...

“It is now clear,” Carver observed, “that the people resisting our forces were a loose coalition of criminals and the dispossessed, rather than an alliance bound together by some over-arching ideology. I don’t discount the possibility that there may have been and still are Red Dawn agent provocateurs and fifth columnists among the ranks of the ‘rebels’, but my people on the ground are increasingly confident that we’ve broken the back of our ‘opponents’. Obviously, we may still face a guerrilla campaign of sorts but our forces now control the north bank of the Thames, a widening ‘corridor’ down to Poplar from the north, and our detachments on the South bank are meeting very little resistance as they push deeper into the ruined areas.”

“Is it too early to declare an unconditional amnesty across the whole Greater London Area, Sir Michael?”

The man thought about it.

“Should the Home Secretary propose it,” he reflected, his mind weighing the matter like Holy writ, “neither I nor my Staff would find reasonable objection to it, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher had no appetite for interning people simply because they happened to be in the ‘combat zone’. As many as a hundred thousand, possibly tens of thousands more, had been living, existing in the ruins of Greater London at the outset of military operations. Nobody believed the active ‘rebels’ had numbered in excess of four or five thousand ‘effectives’ before Operation Poplar, and although estimates of the opposing forces had risen as high as ten thousand once the fighting started, that still meant that the vast majority of people in London had been living peacefully and deserved to be treated accordingly.

“Right,” she decided, “we will declare an unconditional amnesty providing all firearms are surrendered to the authorities.”

The Chief of the Defence Staff moved on.

“You will know that HMS Dreadnought has now returned to her base at Faslane in the Gare Loch,” Carver continued. “Admiral Collingwood reports that while the submarine was passing west of the Hebrides she was shadowed

by another vessel, presumed to be an American ‘Thresher’ class ‘boat’. The shadowing submarine broke off contact when she was challenged by HMS Alliance, a conventional submarine, North of Rathlin Island.”

“Challenged?”

“By the sending of a brief message using sonar ‘pings’, Prime Minister. Essentially, a polite ‘warning off’; subsequently the shadowing vessel made no reply but turned away and retreated at high speed.”

The Chief of the Defence Staff moved on.

“Orders contingent on the result of the forthcoming election have been communicated to Admiral Collingwood in respect of HMS Dreadnought’s immediate operational deployment, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher nodded.

Peter Carington, standing in for the late William Whitelaw as Secretary of State had made carefully argued representations to her about delaying the departure of the Dreadnought for the South Atlantic until after the result of the forthcoming election was known.

‘Let this be a statement of intent by your Government, Prime Minister,” he had suggested, “rather than a stick by which an incoming Labour Administration may rap us over our knuckles when Parliament reconvenes in March.”

Reluctantly, she had accepted his advice.

One way or another they would all be living in a new world on the morning of Friday 12th March 1965...

“There has also been,” Michael Carver continued, “an increase in air activity at the limits of our northern early warning perimeter. Our radar stations in the Shetlands and on Orkney have detected targets approaching on courses consistent with US Strategic Air Command re-introducing failsafe and other long-range operations into its ‘playbook’. You will be aware that 19 Squadron equipped with Lightnings has been transferred to RAF Leuchars...”

“I don’t need any kind of incident with the US Air Force right now, Sir Michael,” Margaret Thatcher avowed with quietly unequivocal intent.

“No, Prime Minister. I have been assured that the RAF have taken that edict onboard.”

“Good.” The activation – or rather, the re-activation – of the first two squadrons of the RAF’s wonder fighter, the English Electric Lightning,

capable of climbing to sixty to seventy thousand feet faster than a speeding bullet, flying at twice the speed of sound and capable of engaging enemy aircraft many miles distant at the touch of a button with heat-seeking missiles, was a fulsome testament to the ongoing, ever-quickening pace of the recovery of the nation's technological and industrial base.

The English Electric Lightning was the most complicated machine the British people had ever put into the air and to keep it flying it required the sustenance and tender loving care of a functioning modern state. A flying marvel it might be but without its special fuel, a veritable army of highly-skilled engineers and technicians and the availability of thousands of components it was just so much junk sitting on the tarmac. That two full – strength squadrons of these magnificent, world-beating aircraft were now operational, and another being formed, was nothing short of a triumph of the British bull dog spirit!

British aeronautical engineering design and science had been second only to – by a short head – that of the United States before the war and in her vision of the future it would be again. Getting a couple of dozen Lightnings back into full operation fettle was just the start!

"Talk to me a little more about France, Sir Michael?"

"I suspect that our worst fears are about to come to fruition," the man confessed sadly. "This time last year we hoped that the communes that survived the war would eventually adhere, one to another, and that gradually a new, or re-born French state would emerge. What appears to have happened is that external raiding and the cumulative deleterious effects of the war have worn down and dislocated things so badly that society, civil organisation has irretrievably broken down. In the south similar processes seem to be eroding the command of the communistic regimes which had previously controlled everything south of Orleans. I am moving towards the view that what we are witnessing may be the complete disintegration of a modern state into a condition of anarchy. A latter day return to the Dark Ages, no less, a thing which has already happened from the Low Countries to the Ukraine, and now sadly, the contagion is slowly, surely spreading from the Germanies all the way to the Atlantic coast of France."

There was a knock at the door and a Royal Marine brought in a tea tray. He withdrew with clumping feet and the Prime Minister busied herself with the tea pot.

“Fortunately, we have the Channel between us and that contagion,” the soldier observed. “In the south the Spanish have the Pyrenees as their great wall to halt the encroachment of the ‘darkness’. Sooner or later we may have to contemplate closing our southern coasts against ‘contagion’ from the continent. But for the present that would be premature.”

Michael Carver took a reviving sip from his cup.

“The weather over the Channel is filthy again today, somewhat inhibiting RAF ground support missions. However, the Navy’s big ships will go as close inshore as required to support landing and evacuation operations. HMS Cavendish, one of the ships damaged the other day has re-joined the squadron off Dunkirk. The First Sea Lord is personally running the show from Dover.” He had been ticking items off a mental list. “And all bases in the south of England are being readied to accept and to process refugees in co-ordination with the Ministry of Supply. As for home security, I believe that the Home Secretary has already briefed you on the hunt for the Coventry, Birmingham and Glasgow bombers, Prime Minister?”

Margaret Thatcher nodded.

The manhunt was in the hands of the Regional Administrations responsible for the individual cities, a combined Police-Army operation. Scores of suspects had been arrested; as for the investigation into the killing of the Whitelaws, maddeningly there were no developments. As yet the two dead assassins remained unidentified and the third man, critically wounded in hospital, had still not recovered consciousness.

Before the October War Scotland Yard’s fingerprint archives might have been consulted, the Yard’s files studied but those resources had been consumed in the flames – or more correctly, were buried somewhere under the ruins - likewise the criminal and case records previously in the keeping of the Liverpool and those of numerous other constabularies in bombed districts.

“What,” Margaret Thatcher inquired, “is your assessment of the IRA’s claim that it had nothing to do with the murder of the Whitelaws, Sir Michael?”

The man put down his cup and saucer.

He rubbed his chin.

“I do not think that the Irish Government would have reported the claim to us if they did not believe it to be substantially,” he hesitated, “*plausible*, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher had not expected a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ answer; however, the Chief of the Defence Staff’s actual reply, was in many ways more helpful. She did not believe the IRA but insofar as it was possible to know such things she had no reason to believe that the Irish Taoiseach, Sean Lemass had ever actually lied to her.

Despite her public prognostications on the subject she knew that there was only so much Lemass could do about the IRA without plunging his own country into civil war. Moreover, his possible assassination by the IRA in such an internecine struggle was unlikely to install a more Anglophile man in his chair. On his side, Lemass would know – hopefully - that having re-established peaceful relations with the United States, she was not actively looking for an excuse to punish the Republic for the sins of its criminals; they had moved on beyond that.

The man had no reason to lie.

The IRA had told Sean Lemass they had nothing to do with Willie Whitelaw’s death and the Irish Taoiseach, advised by his own security people, who were a lot closer to the Army Council of the Irish Republican Army than anybody in the employ of either MI5 or MI6, had presumably given the IRA’s statement due credence.

“Just a few numbers, Prime Minister,” the Chief of the Defence Staff concluded, knowing that the lady’s scientifically educated, barrister’s mind liked specifics. “Within twenty-four hours we will have the equivalent of five infantry battalions ashore in France at Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk principally, and tasked to nullify coastal batteries around Dieppe. Some four thousand five hundred men in all will be ashore, including around three hundred naval personnel and Royal Air Force spotter and air support directors. At sea the Navy is deploying seven destroyers and frigates, and about twenty smaller craft. The Admiralty has requested HMS Trafalgar and HMS Camperdown, presently supporting Operation Poplar, be released for duty in the Channel. I have vetoed this but the situation is being reviewed on a daily basis. All available Channel steamers docked at Dover, Portsmouth and Southampton are being brought into service to take refugees directly from the harbours we are presently in the process of securing. Many of these vessels have been mothballed or laid up but volunteer and Royal Naval crews are taking them in hand as swiftly as possible. Thus far French forces on the ground in Boulogne and Calais have been co-operating fully with our people.

At Le Havre and Dunkirk lawless elements have been interfering with our work. Our forces have given them short shrift."

The Chief of the Defence Staff sat back and waited for the one question nobody could answer.

"How many refugees do we think may have gathered in the French Channel ports, Sir Michael?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "Many tens of thousands, certainly. My people on the ground are speculating that we are witnessing a spontaneous flight, or migration to the coast of possibly Biblical proportions. Conditions in Northern France are appalling; men, women and children are dying along the roads, food supplies have run out and there are armed bands, gangs stripping those fleeing of all their belongings, murdering at will, abusing the women most abominably. Some people are comparing it to what happened in 1940, the roads are clogged with people fleeing the fighting but I suspect what we have today is of an order of magnitude worse. In 1940 the Germans bombed the refugees to block the roads but they never systematically preyed on them, or deliberately drove them before the panzers. What is going on now is...*inhuman*, Prime Minister."

In a way Margaret Thatcher was a little surprised that the disaster unfolding on the southern shores of the English Channel had not yet become a major election issue.

As yet only a small number of *her* opponents, both within her own and in the Labour Party had begun to whisper, whine, and complain behind their hands about the likely 'flood' of refugees 'stealing' the food from the mouths of British children; demanding in low voices that the Government should pull up the drawbridge and leave the French to their fate.

The Labour Party had said very little 'officially' and her closest advisors were urging her to avoid stoking the fires by condemning the heartless men who would watch innocent men, women and children drown in the Channel...

Margaret Thatcher rose to her feet, shook Carver's hand.

"Thank you for your frankness, Sir Michael. We shall do *whatever* we can to help the French, little though it may be. If the worst comes to the worst we will pull out every stop available to us."

The Chief of the Defence Staff thought about this for a moment.

"You may rely on me in this matter, Prime Minister," he said quietly.

Chapter 54

Tuesday 2nd March 1965
RAF Pantelleria, Central Mediterranean

"You have the controls, sir," declared the aircraft's captain, a chatty newly promoted Flight-Lieutenant who had fallen in love with Malta.

Guy French had jumped at the opportunity to sit in the 'second seat' of one of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft based at RAF Luqa. The 'Hercs' were a little bit pedestrian in comparison with his last 'ride'; although in fairness not a lot of kites really compared to a beast like a Handley Page Victor V-Bomber. A C-130 was a big lumpy four-turboprop aircraft the size of a Comet 4 but designed to operate off relatively short runways. They were perfect for the regular shuttle runs to re-supply and to transfer personnel around between Malta and the bases on Pantelleria and Lampedusa, and to cart cargo and the mail up to the US Sixth Fleet at Messina and Naples. In between the 'island runs' the small flight of three aircraft – remarkably all three were serviceable practically all the time – flew training and reconnaissance missions and occasionally took VIPs or urgent replacements to RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus. That was a fair old drag, a lot of flying hours because whatever its other admirable qualities, the C-130 was no speedster.

The Malta C-130s of No. 47 Squadron, Transport Command were from the batch of Hercs transferred to the RAF in the autumn by the United States as an earnest of President Johnson's commitment to ensuring future good relations with the United Kingdom. In comparison with the Squadron's other aircraft type; the cantilever-winged, fixed-undercarriage Blackburn Beverley, sitting at the controls of a Hercules was like dying and going to heaven. The C-130 was a modern aircraft and the Beverley, for all its fine attributes, was not and crews selected to fly the new American aircraft tended to walk around with involuntary smug smiles on their faces.

For Guy French a chance to sit in the right-hand co-pilot's seat of one of the big birds was a distinctly 'cushy' route back onto flying operations. The Flight Surgeons back in England, and in Malta, did not think his body was up to withstanding the potentially high 'G-loadings' associated with flying fast

jets, medium bombers like the Canberra, or any of the small number of surviving V-Bombers. In fact, the medical fraternity was somewhat undecided as to whether he ought to ever fly again. They were particularly concerned about his damaged ear drums; had he fully regained his sense of balance? In an emergency could he tell up from down? Worse, given that all the blood vessels in his eyes had burst when he ejected into a supersonic airstream eight months ago, what price his 'depth perception'.

But then he had always known the only way he was ever going to get back onto 'ops' was if he persuaded the medicos, or if not them then some sympathetic senior officer – other than his father who had made it quite clear he was not going to bend *any* rules or regulations for him, or anybody else when it came to pre-judging his fitness for flying duties – who was prepared to 'give him a chance' to prove himself.

Guy French had been enjoying the trip, sucking in the familiar atmosphere of a flight deck. His pilot's words caught him completely unawares.

"I have the controls, skipper," he mouthed before he thought about it and suddenly the big transport aircraft was in his hands and it was as if he had never been away.

They had flown down to Lampedusa early that morning, taking advantage of a window in the weather – typical short, sharp easterly gales blowing through – to drop off several Royal Marines and ground crew, and to pick up six men and a pair of nurses rotating back to Malta, before taking off again for the one hundred mile 'hop' up to Pantelleria. Guy's pilot had brought the Hercules to a roaring halt less than four hundred yards from its first contact with the tarmac; lifted it into the air a couple of hours later after a take-off run of less than eight hundred yards.

Now they were ten minutes out from Pantelleria.

"Just pop the kite on the runway and I'll look after the throttles after that," the aircraft commander, a man perhaps two years his junior in age, suggested conversationally. "Don't be afraid to plonk her down, she's got such a bloody great big wing that she wants to flare out forever!"

Guy French had flown an Avro Vulcan to the Baltic on the night of the October War, then De Havilland Comet airliners for Transport Command for the best part of a year, before converting to Handley Page Victors with 100 Squadron in the weeks before the Second Battle of the Persian Gulf. All

those types were fast, fiendishly complicated machines each with their potentially murderous vices and breath-taking saving graces, each entirely different in every way from the C-130. In that moment his mouth went dry and suddenly he was asking himself if he still had what it took to safely put *this* aircraft, its crew and its passengers on the ground on an airfield that was completely new to him.

"I have ILS," he reported, hearing the shortening tones of RAF Pantelleria's beacon in his headphones.

For a few seconds he was operating on auto-pilot; his hands moving as if from muscle memory.

Magically, his stage fright passed.

It was as if he had never been away.

"Pantelleria Control this is SLOWBOAT ZERO-ZERO-ONE incoming, do you copy?"

He waited.

Repeated his call.

"We have you on approach to land on LEFT TWO-SIX. Visibility is ten miles. Wind force four due east near as damn it. No other traffic in the circuit at this time. Over!"

Guy French smiled. It was a quiet life manning the tower out here on one of the islands; SLOWBOAT 001's visit was probably the high point of the day.

"Approach on LEFT TWO-SIX," he confirmed with what he hoped was something of his old insouciance.

Out of the corner of his eye he recognised the familiar silhouettes of two US Navy destroyers anchored off Pantelleria's small port on the northern tip of the island.

He thought about Heidi...

After today's excitement he would have some good news to put in his next letter. A week or so ago she had gone ashore briefly at Naples and visited Pompeii.

'A bunch of ruins,' she had explained. 'It rained and we all got wet!'

Now Heidi was onboard the USS Independence. That was a change of plan, Sixth Fleet was in the process of a 'tactical re-configuration' which would see the USS Coral Sea relieve the Independence so that the big carrier could join the fight in the Sea of Japan, transiting via the now re-opened Suez

Canal, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean to add its mighty ‘heft’ to the ‘big push’ that summer in Korea after a spell in dry dock in Kobe. Heidi had expected to be on her way home to the United States by now but ‘that’s the Navy for you!’

It was not that he had in any way ‘got over Heidi’; more that he had come to terms with the new reality. Their lives had touched, twice now, and he was an extraordinarily lucky man. She was pursuing her dream, and he his; whenever he started feeling sorry for himself he reminded himself of all the fine fellows he had known who had died on the night of the October War, or on that famous raid on the bunkers at Chelyabinsk – which it now seemed had decapitated the Soviet regime at a key stage of the Iraq War – and in that last battle over the Persian Gulf...

He was the luckiest man on the planet.

His path had crossed that of Heidi Takawa not once, but twice and she was out there, somewhere in the World. Sometimes one just had to have a little faith.

The big transport sank down over the azure blue Mediterranean, approaching the narrow sliver of tarmac on the elevated plateau – some six hundred feet above sea level, between the port to the north and the great, extinct volcano rearing nearly three thousand feet high to the south. The ‘pilot notes’ for RAF Pantelleria warned of ‘wind shear’ when the weather was coming from the east. He would have to watch for that.

The Hercules bucked and fell a hundred feet into a hole in the air as it passed over the coast, sinking fast towards the still small, faraway runway.

“Flaps!”

“Wheels down!”

The aircraft juddered and he felt the reassuring clunk as the undercarriage locked.

The man in the left-hand seat confirmed that he was watching the instrument panel like a hawk.

“IAS good!”

“Angle of approach, good!”

He added: “There’s plenty of runway here, no need to burn up the brakes!”

“Roger, easy on the brakes!” Guy French chuckled in confirmation.

The first time he had landed a Vulcan it was more like a controlled

crash. That was more to do with not being able to see a damned thing from the cockpit of Avro's great flying batwing. Today he had no excuses.

A bump, a momentary squeal of rubber on concrete and the Hercules was rolling to a gentle halt, the thunder of her turboprops spooling down to a comparative whisper.

"Turn left onto taxiway ZERO TWO LEFT!"

Five minutes later Guy French was shutting off the engines as the aircraft sat at its appointed hardstand.

Two Hawker Hunter interceptors stood at QRA – Quick Reaction Alert, ready to scramble – at hardstands on the western edge of the base, a miscellany of other small, propeller driven aircraft were dispersed around the perimeter.

There were newly erected radar stations on the highest points of the three islands guarding Malta's south-western approaches, a handful of fighters based here and on Lampedusa. The ease with which the Soviets had put Luqa out of action at the beginning of the Battle of Malta last April no longer allowed the RAF to put all its eggs in the one basket. Hal Far, the second, smaller field on the main island had never been re-commissioned for fast jets; and even C-130s had trouble getting in there if the wind was from the wrong direction. So, dispersing aircraft to Pantelleria and Lampedusa had made sense even before the Egyptian invasion of Cyrenaica and Libya had further muddied the strategic waters of the Central Mediterranean.

Even before the October War Libya had been a chaotic protectorate of the Fascist regime in Italy inexorably sinking into a largely tribal civil war. Colonel Nasser's invasion had done little to calm tensions.

The new treaty with Egypt still left a nasty taste in the mouth. The whole Suez fiasco had been an attempt to unseat Nasser and shackle Egyptian military expansion. That Nasser's conquest of Libya should have been facilitated by his old Imperial overlords – who had prevented the dregs of the old Italian regime in Tripoli receiving succour from their homeland – as Egyptian tanks had motored virtually unopposed along half the southern shore of the Mediterranean somehow went against the grain. The invaders had rolled straight over the weak Italian-led forces and tribal irregulars in their path with clumsy, unhurried ease on land; over the same deserts that the Afrika Korps and the Eighth Army had fought over and travelled two decades before.

Throughout the conquest of Libya, the US Sixth Fleet had – much to everybody's relief - ignored the impassioned pleas from the US's former allies in Rome to intervene.

"Right!" The aircraft commander declared. "We ought to be in time to grab a bite to eat in the Mess!" As the two men walked towards the Nissen huts and sheds near the control tower, the only buildings above ground on the base, the younger man mentioned, casually: "That went jolly well. Why don't you take the left-hand seat for the flight back to Luqa? The next time some bloody medico tries to ground you can just show them your log book, sir."

Clearly, Guy French's companion did not see why anybody entitled to wear the ribbon of the Victoria Cross on his left breast ought to have to prove anything to anybody.

The man himself was less sanguine.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak in case he bawled his eyes out.

Chapter 55

Wednesday 3rd March 1965
Department of Justice Building, Broad Street, Philadelphia

Dwight Eisenhower had appointed fifty-seven-year-old Minnesotan Warren Earl Burger to the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit as long ago as 1956. He was regarded within the Republican Party as a conservative. Judicially, he believed a judge ought to apply the text of the law as it is written rather than attempt to interpret legislation with reference to prior court rulings. He was a formidable legal figure, a man touted by many for nomination to the Supreme Court in due course.

Burger had grown up on the family farm outside St Paul and as a young man he had worked on the construction of the Robert Street Bridge over the Mississippi. Several deaths had occurred during the building of the bridge, a thing accepted by most as 'par for the course' but Burger had asked, to no avail, for nets to be strung beneath the works. Those had been formative days for the son of a travelling salesman and railway inspector set upon making good in the wider world.

He had paid his way through Law School by selling insurance from Mutual Life, obtaining his degree *magna cum laude* in 1931 at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law. After the Second War he had dipped his toe in politics, supporting Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen's run at the GOP Presidential nomination. In 1952 he had been instrumental in swinging his State's delegation behind Eisenhower, for which his reward had been to be appointed US Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Division at the Department of Justice, where the relatively unknown Midwestern newcomer had rapidly established his national reputation among his peers.

Nicholas Katzenbach, who had served as US Deputy Attorney General in the Kennedy Administration, and Attorney General under Lyndon Johnson and now, for six weeks since the Inauguration, Richard Nixon, had entered the meeting room ahead of the greying, distinguished-looking man whom he had spent most of the previous day 'interviewing', and subsequently briefing on the onerous task he had asked him to undertake.

The two men sat down behind the wall of microphones.

The room they were in had once been where the board of a railway combine had gathered for over half-a-century; opulently wood-lined, with one end closed off by a big table behind which Katzenbach and Warren Burger now sat; the rest of the long, high-ceilinged 'hall' was filled with a milling, burbling crush of newspaper, radio and TV equipment, men and women.

The mood of the hastily organised press conference was akin to that of a pack of hungry wolves in the moment before they were unleashed upon a sacrificial lamb; or perhaps, of that of frantically circling sharks who had smelled the blood in the water.

The Attorney General leaned towards the microphones.

He spoke with a measured dignity apparently without nerves, or hesitation, his tone not so much resigned as regretful that things had come to such a sad pass.

"Thank you for all coming here at such short notice," he began, with his solitary concession to irony. As if the men and women crowding into the DOJ briefing room could have been stopped from attending on this morning of any mornings!

Katzenbach introduced his companion at the table in a deadpan eulogistic fashion that paid due tribute to Warren Burger's unblemished career at the Bar and in the service of the Government. He made play of Burger's Republican affiliations without making a big deal of it; everybody knew that Ike had appointed him to a sub-Cabinet post back in the day so there was really not a lot more to say about that other than he was obviously not a Democratic Party stooge in GOP clothes.

When *The Washington Post's* revelations and accusations, innuendo and speculation had broken like a sudden tsunami over Philadelphia the previous Saturday Katzenbach had already been braced for a scandal, but not in his wildest nightmares a washing of the spears of the national press in the blood of whichever senior member of the Nixon Administration put his head above the parapet first.

However, the man who had flown B-25 missions in the Mediterranean and participated in the Great Escape from Stalag Luft III at Sagan in February 1944 had acquired a certain perspective on what was, and what was not important in life. Unlike many of those around Director Hoover and in the coterie around the President in the White House, he had not panicked.

Panicking was not about to help anybody; instead, he had done what needed to be done with a clear conscience. Namely, he had got up to speed and put into action the contingency planning that a wise man in his position always had up his sleeve.

He had understood that the first time the Nixon Administration hit a bump in the road it would look to throw a 'hangover' – like him - from the Kennedy-Johnson era to the jackals. How exactly Nixon's people thought that was even possible, given that the 'hangovers' included Bob McNamara at Defense and industrialist John McCone at CIA, or how exactly even in their wildest imaginings they thought they were going to get away with it frankly defeated all logic. In this, as in a lot of other things it seemed to Nick Katzenbach not one of the new President's men had actually thought this, or a lot of other things through in advance...

This spoke to the fact that not many of the men closest to Richard Nixon – certainly none of the people reporting to Bob Haldeman – had any experience of being in government, or any real feel for what was required of a person in public service – and seemed to share a common disinclination to take advice from those who actually had a little, or in some cases, a lot of experience. It did not help that the Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller, viewed 'Nixon's people' with a mixture of contempt and detestation, or that Henry Kissinger – clearly aware of the kind of people he was dealing with – was operating as a one-man department within the Administration spending as much time as possible away from Philadelphia and behaving as if he was a 'second' Secretary of State. This in turn spoke to how swiftly Henry Cabot Lodge had been marginalised...

Having lived through the heady, disastrous days of JFK's Presidency, enjoyed the short-lived calm before the storm of LBJ's brief sojourn in the hot seat, the Nixon era had begun with an arrogance which had almost immediately morphed into the sort of siege mentality most Administrations only embraced relatively late in the day.

Notwithstanding his reservations about serving in a Nixon White House, Katzenbach had not anticipated things would fall apart so quickly. In fact, he had honestly believed that everything would quieten down while the new incumbent found his feet. Rather than the chaos of the Kennedy years he had optimistically looked forward to something akin to a return to business as usual; some kind of new 'Eisenhower calm', which only went to show how

wrong a man could be!

Katzenbach had figured out what had probably happened the moment *The New York Tribune* originally broke the story about Doctor King and Ben and Margaret Sullivan's daughter. Very little in politics was rocket science; one just had to get hold of some of the facts and it was obvious who had screwed up and why. In December he had specifically 'warned off' J. Edgar Hoover and his sidekick, Clyde Tolson, face to face and in writing, from even thinking about going after King. That had been merely the most recent of his frequent jousts with the old monster over the course of the last four years; just the latest attempt to persuade the FBI to stop chasing shadows and to focus on rooting out organised crime and the graft that was becoming troublingly common across the lower and middle levels of the Federal Government in certain states. He had also tried, unsuccessfully on numerous occasions since the October War and especially after the outbreak of full hostilities in the Midwest, to redirect the FBI's hugely wasteful obsession with the Southern 'Black' Civil Rights Movement, into a drive to investigate the terroristic activities of the Kingdom of the Great Lakes. Back in December he had – mistakenly, obviously - hoped that Hoover had finally got the message...

The only thing which had surprised him, now that he had had time to think about it, was the hamfistedness of the whole 'bugging affair'. Basically, the FBI had tendered the job out to the lowest cost 'contractors', one of the minor New Jersey crime families, and made virtually no serious attempts to cover their tracks. It spoke to an arrogance that beggared the imagination; as if J. Edgar Hoover honestly believed he and his precious Bureau really were above the law.

What had not surprised Nicholas Katzenbach was how quickly the story had ceased to be about the infidelity of the poster boy of the Southern Civil Rights Movement and his pin up white mistress; and how soon it had become about the FBI and Hoover, *and who else in the Administration had known, and or tacitly sanctioned the bugging operation and the subsequent leaking of the 'compromising material'*.

After introducing Warren Burger, the Attorney General began to answer the most pressing questions. It would save time to do that now and besides, he felt himself to be as much a victim of this 'car wreck' as Martin Luther King and Miranda Sullivan; at least they had had a good time while it lasted,

all he was getting was the sort of grief that was not going to go away any time this decade!

"Let me make it clear at the outset that the Department of Justice did not seek or authorise the surveillance of Doctor King or Miss Sullivan. I can confirm that such requests came across my desk last autumn but I vetoed them and instructed the DOJ's legal officers to do likewise. Furthermore, I spoke to Director Hoover on many occasions last year and on each occasion, I specifically forbade him to harass the Southern Civil Rights Movement, reminding him that the then Johnson Administration faced threats from many quarters, both internal and external and that the FBI ought to be focussed on high priority, rather than low priority threats. I do not, and I never have, regarded Doctor King or his Movement as an existential threat to the security of this nation. Moreover, Doctor King and members of his organisation have a sacred constitutional right to exercise their rights to free speech, association and to peacefully protest as *they* see fit."

The moment he stopped speaking the crowd stirred.

"So, just so there is no misunderstanding about this," Katzenbach went on, fighting to bite back his anger, "I categorically deny any allegation that I personally authorised or was in any way implicated in turning a blind eye to the FBI's 'allegedly' illegal 'bugging' activities or otherwise 'spying' on rooms at the Warwick Hotel in New York and other places where Doctor King, or members of his entourage may have lodged in that city or in the State of New Jersey."

Everybody was looking at Warren Burger now.

"However," the Attorney General continued, his voice strengthening all the while, "it is possible that senior DOJ and FBI officers reporting to my office *may* be implicated in gross malfeasance in connection with this scandal. Clearly, I cannot directly oversee a forensic investigation into my own associates, both junior and *potentially* senior," he ignored the involuntary intake of breath in the room, "thus it behoves me to appoint an Independent Special Prosecutor to act on behalf of the Department of Justice."

The use of the word 'senior' had had a literally electric effect on his audience.

Who was senior to the Attorney General?

The Speaker of the House?

The Vice President?

The President...

“To that end I have asked Judge Warren Burger to act as Independent Special Prosecutor to investigate and to bring to justice any Government official who has broken the law in this matter. He will report to me but he will not ‘answer to me’. In fact, in the course of his inquiry I confidently expect that he will wish to interview me. I have already assured him that I am happy for that to happen at his convenience and under oath. I have nothing to hide, nor does anybody else who has not broken the law.”

Katzenbach let the shouted questions bounce off him.

“His Honour Judge Burger will have all the resources necessary to him to get to the bottom of this sad affair. I have placed no budget constraints on his activities, he may bring in whomsoever he deems necessary to progress matters and may subpoena whomsoever he pleases. I am confident that Judge Burger will pursue this thing wherever it leads.”

One question above any other was being repeated.

“No, I have not consulted with the White House. This is a matter that pertains to the alleged gross malfeasance of DOJ and or FBI officers. My responsibility as Attorney General is to uphold the law and to protect the integrity of the US legal system, independent of political considerations. My first and over-riding obligation is to uphold the Constitution of the United States. It would therefore, have been inappropriate and improper to have discussed or sought the White House’s imprimatur in my choice of Independent Prosecutor, or upon questions pertaining to that Prosecutor’s terms of reference.”

Everybody wanted to know if there was any evidence the White House’s – by which they meant the President’s – fingerprints were on the scandal.

“I will have no further remarks on Judge Burger’s inquiry until such time as he elects to report to me on his findings,” Katzenbach retorted with crushing finality.

Chapter 56

Wednesday 3rd March 1965
Carmen's Bar, Strait Street, Valletta

"Well, well, well," the rotund middle-aged man with the bristling moustache said smugly as he blocked Rachel's way into the narrow entrance of Carmen's Bar. "What's a respectable lady just out from England doing walking all alone in a place like this?"

She gave him a long, cool look.

"Does the Governor know you're out alone, *Sally*?" The man asked, his Welsh accent exaggerated by sarcasm. "My, my, the Governor's bit of fluff plying her trade in Strait Street, of all places. Tut, tut, tut..."

Rachel Piotrowska had known things were going too well.

"Hello, Denzil," she said, acidly, knowing the Head of Station of MI6 in the Maltese Archipelago would not have been so stupid as to confront her without backup. There were one or two likely candidates lurking nearby, although they were not big guys, dockyard thugs like the Dom's heavies, Denzil's 'boys' would know what they were doing so if she made a scene things were going to get out of hand in a hurry. "You're still as fat and as complacent as before, I see?"

"Ouch! Prick us and do we not bleed?"

"That can be arranged," she offered helpfully.

Dick White had promised he would keep Major Denzil Williams on a short leash; warn him off. The trouble was people like Denzil always thought they knew best.

"There's no need to be nasty," he complained. "We're all supposed to be on the same side, aren't we?" He thought better of this. "Well, we would be if certain parties were *playing* the game!"

All men were idiots!

"I don't play games, Denzil," Rachel retorted, her patience fast evaporating. "Is *he* still in the bar?"

The man nodded.

"One of my chaps is keeping an eye on him."

Carmen's Bar was so claustrophobic that meant Denzil William's 'chap'

was probably sitting on Joe Calleja's lap. Marvellous! So now Joe knew he was being watched over by the 'occupying power'. That was just the sort of thing guaranteed to go down like a ton of bricks with an avowed Marxist activist!

"My chaps were really impressed by the way you put the Sicilian and his chum in hospital," Williams said jovially. "I'm sure they learned a trick or two watching a real *pro* at work. Although I'm not so sure abandoning our boy in that dive in Msida was such a good idea..."

Rachel had made a minute movement to close the gap with the Head of Station of MI6 on Malta, satisfyingly, he had visibly flinched.

"I'm sure you had your reasons," he grunted, a little surprised by his involuntary psychological and physical backward step. The trouble was he knew something of her history – not a lot, probably only Dick White knew anything more than a fraction of the woman's history - and while she might be 'operationally tamed' on this particular mission, so far as he knew she had not killed anybody yet, he realised he might just have albeit momentarily, pushed her a fraction of an inch too far.

That was careless.

Mental note to myself: DON'T DO THAT AGAIN!

"Perhaps, we ought to go in and speak with Joe?" He suggested.

"No, Denzil," Rachel said blankly.

"Look, you're not..."

Her stare was boring, unblinking into his face and suddenly the hardened veteran who had begun his career as an agent in German-occupied France in 1942, could not stop himself swallowing, dry-mouthed.

"You can stand out here if you like but if you don't get out of my way," she explained, a saturnine smile forming on her pale lips, "there will be a scene and you'll be the one explaining your actions to the Governor." She shrugged. "When, if eventually, you get back on your feet again."

Rachel knew exactly why Williams was muscling in on *her* operation; the man loathed her and was convinced that she had shielded Arkady Rykov – a man who had killed several of his men – from what passed for justice in their dirty little world. At Gibraltar he had briefly had Rykov in his hands, at his mercy, watched with cold satisfaction as his men set about kicking his nemesis to death before he remembered his orders to keep the Red Dawn monster alive. He had never believed Rykov was any kind of double or triple

agent; the man had always been a KGB killer and in the end, he had been proved right and Rachel had, self-evidently, lost the plot so badly that Williams had been picking up the pieces of the shattered Mediterranean networks ever since. The man still held her partially – well, mostly – responsible for everything bad that had happened to him and his people since the October War, and he was not about to let a little thing like a direct order from the Director General of the Combined Security Services stop him doing what he construed to be his duty.

Not to put too fine a point on it the man still believed that she was working for the Reds.

Rachel sighed.

Why is nothing ever simple?

If she got involved in rough stuff in a place like this – Strait Street was crowded local Maltese boys trying to get their piece of the atmosphere and the action, and gangs of British and US Navy men; the battleship USS Iowa was docked alongside the old passenger wharf in the Grand Harbour to allow its crew a little shore time in a less unsavoury place than Naples where the local Mafiosi were notorious for preying on American sailors - were roaming from bar to bar with girls on their arms, people were going to 'notice and remark' upon any fracas, and inevitably she was probably going to get hurt, both things which would quickly get back to the Verdala Palace and upset Dan French...

She was inordinately keen to avoid that.

The Governor had enough on his plate without having to worry about her, and besides, she was still trying to sort out her feelings for the man. It was a long time since she had woken up in bed with somebody in whose arms she felt safe...

She had stopped trusting her emotions after she realised she had allowed Arkady Rykov into her head, and twisted good, bad, and evil out of shape and jumbled them so badly she had, for a while, actually convinced herself she was in love with the...*monster*. But of course, in their bed there had been not one, but two monsters and the strangest thing of all was that Arkady himself had never understood it, until that was, the moment she cut him in half with that magazine-emptying burst of automatic gunfire in Julian Christopher's headquarters at Mdina last April.

Curiously, it had not been surprise in Arkady's eyes as the rain of bullets

smashed his ruined torso against the wall but, for a split second, *revelation*...

And then he had died.

Dan French had given her a key to his personal rooms ‘so that you don’t have to break in like a thief in the night’. She was supposed to be his mistress...

Actually, I am...

How bizarre was that?

“Okay, okay,” Rachel decided. “But just you, Denzil; I don’t want any of your boys listening in. Agreed?”

“I knew you’d see sense,” the man lied as he breathed what he fervently hoped was a silent sigh of relief.

Joe Calleja was sporting a blackened left eye.

He was still sober despite having been in the bar over an hour. He shifted along the bench he had commandeered to accommodate Denzil Williams, whom he clearly knew and disliked, as Rachel settled in a rickety, uncomfortable chair opposite him and placed her handbag on the cigarette pitted and scorched table separating them.

The MI6 man waved and called for a beer.

When Carmen, the frowsy, plump, middlingly ferocious widowed matriarch who had changed the name of the bar after her husband’s death in 1942 delivered the drink, clunking it in front of Williams so hard the glass almost shattered, Rachel quietly asked for a coffee...*in Maltese*.

Carmen hesitated, met her eye and nodded, recognising and immediately respecting another strong woman.

Rachel’s Maltese was still very much a work in progress but just to infuriate Denzil Williams, whom she guessed hardly knew how to string more than two or three intelligible words together in the native tongue, she focussed on Joe Calleja and began to speak in what she hoped was passable conversational Maltese.

“I’m sorry I had to abandon you in Msida the other night, Joe,” she apologised, confronting the brooding mistrust in the young man’s dark eyes. “But I had things to do, people to see. Getting involved in a brawl outside Sammy’s Bar had not been on my ‘to do list’ that night.”

“The Sicilian is still in hospital,” Joe informed her sulkily.

“Would you rather it was you who was still in hospital?”

“No, but...”

Denzil Williams leaned towards Rachel.

“What the Devil are you talking about?”

Joe ignored him: “I thought you worked for this,” he was about to say something rude and no son of Peter and Marija Calleja had been brought up to do a thing like that in front of a lady, “guy?” He asked.

Rachel grimaced.

“No, thank goodness. But the trouble is he’s one of those people who thinks that *everybody* works for him!”

Joe Calleja smiled before he could stop himself.

“You’re the woman who killed all those Russians at Mdina,” he checked, clearly confused. “Marija’s friend? You were in Oxford after the battle in April last year?”

She nodded.

“I was on drugs, I was a bit hazy most of the time I was in England,” the man recollected. “A lot of stuff got mixed up. I sort of remember meeting the Queen,” he shrugged, “and going down to Southampton to see Marija and the others off but the rest of it is sort of like a dream.”

“I should imagine most of the last year has been like that?” She sympathised.

“Talk English!” The Head of Section of MI6 in Malta demanded.

Rachel obliged him, for a sentence, at least.

“You’ve been here over a year; you should have learned the language by now you ignorant pig!”

“English *is* the bloody language here!”

“Your mother is worried about you Joe,” Rachel went on, lapsing into the native idiom.

Joe Calleja was tired of playing games.

“That’s what Mama’s do, worry,” he replied in English. “Who are you, Rachel, or whatever your name is?”

“My name *is* Rachel Piotrowska,” she told him. There was something about the young man that made women of or approaching a certain age, want to mother him. He was a nice boy, lonely, troubled and clearly unhappy in his own skin as if he knew he would never quite fit in. Not here, not on Malta with his sudden fame and notoriety, and not unnaturally, it was all a little too much for him. Marija had been the loving, devoted sisterly glue that had held his conflicted little world together and now she was thousands of

miles away. “I work for British Intelligence and I have been sent to Malta to protect you, and the reputation of your family. This is my last job; I’d like to sign off without anybody else getting hurt.”

Denzil Williams guffawed loudly, attracting the looks of the dozen or so other men in the bar.

Rachel glared at him: “Why don’t you write it on a billboard and stick it in the window? Come and look at the spies!”

She had said it so lowly nobody more than two or three feet away could possibly have overheard her. With a shake of her head she ignored the MI6 man and leaned towards Joe as if she was about to whisper in his ear.

“Major Williams is the senior British spy on Malta. Contrary to appearances, he is not a complete oaf. He believes that I am a bad person and, in some respects, he is correct. That is why he understands that if I have to I will kill him, and anybody else who gets in my way protecting you and your sister from your enemies on this island.”

Joe Calleja’s eyes widened as he sat back, automatically raising his half empty beer glass to his lips.

Madame Carmen brought Rachel’s coffee.

The women exchanged smiles of respect.

Joe watched the woman retreat, jerked forward onto his elbows and hissed: “No, you can’t do that!”

“I didn’t say I wanted to, Joe. Just that it was an option.”

“What am I supposed to do?” The young man asked plaintively.

Rachel smiled, reached across the table and patted his arm.

“Why not go to America to see Marija and your new niece?”

The young man’s jaw went slack for several seconds.

“That’s possible...”

“Yes. The Governor’s office has reserved a seat for you on the Friday Comet shuttle to Brize Norton. You should stop drinking. If you hurry you’ve still got time to jump on the Sliema Ferry. Go home and tell your Mama and Papa the good news.”

“Abracadabra,” Denzil Williams whistled lowly.

“You’re serious, aren’t you? What about my responsibilities in Malta?”

“The Dom’s heavies will beat you to a pulp if you go anywhere near the dockyards,” Rachel reminded him. “If they can’t frighten you off they’ll start making problems for your family. You can’t fight these people alone.” She

attempted to sweeten the pill: “Maybe, in years to come when you and your sister return to the Archipelago, who knows what you can achieve?” This she posed rhetorically. “But right now? Goodness, Joe, you’re still only twenty-four, get away from here. Travel, learn about the big wide world out there the way Marija is learning about it; it will make you stronger, better able to take on the responsibility of being Joseph Calleja, George Cross, the hero of the Battle of Malta in the years to come. Trust me, Malta will still be here when you chose to come back.”

Denzil Williams detailed off two his ‘boys’ to escort a bewildered, shell-shocked Joe Calleja *all* the way back to the family home in Tower Street, Sliema.

“So that’s the plan? Send the kid away to Philadelphia?” The man inquired as he and Rachel walked up Strait Street. He had a car parked close to the bus terminus outside the gates of Valletta and had offered to drive her back to the Verdala Palace.

“So far as Joe is concerned, yes,” Rachel confirmed.

They had stopped fighting each other and neither of them was comfortable; the anti-climactic mood oppressed them.

“What about the rumours?”

“That’s my problem.”

“Did you mean that nonsense about this being your last job?”

“I don’t know. You never know, do you? Not in our business but...”

“But what?”

“You may not believe me when I say it but Rachel Piotrowska is my real name. Deep down inside me there’s still an eleven-year-old girl back in Lodz who remembers the Russians dragging her father into the night. His was probably one of the bodies the Germans discovered in the Katyn Forest a couple of years later.”

Denzil Williams paused, lit a cigarette.

“Could I have a drag on that?” The woman asked.

She inhaled deep. Exhaled and sucked in another lungful of smoke, coughing this time as she expelled the fouled air. Her hands had been trembling, now they were steady.

The man drew out another cigarette, a match flared in the gloom as they walked on, putting the noise and bustle of ‘the Gut’ along Strait Street behind them.

“I knew how many people, they were all men apart from the women who got caught in the crossfire - in the wrong place at the wrong time - I had killed until that day in Mdina. I have no idea how many people I killed in the Wister Park,” her lower lip trembled and she sucked on her cigarette, “nightmare...”

The man halted, she turned to him.

“Are you all right?”

He clearly did not believe he was asking it.

“No, not really...”

Chapter 57

Thursday 4th March 1965
US Embassy, Oxford

"What on earth is going on in Philadelphia?" Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson inquired cheerfully the first moment he and his wife were alone with the Ambassador and Ambassadress, Walter and Joanne Brenckmann.

Tom and Patricia Harding-Grayson dined regularly at the Embassy, albeit less wide-eyed nowadays than they had been in the beginning. Dinner at the Embassy was what most of their countrymen and women would describe as a 'banquet'. Realising that her English guests' stomachs and palates were adjusted to somewhat meagre rations, Joanne Brenckmann had scaled down the menu so as to avoid indigestion and guilty consciences. For a spell last year, she and her husband had elected to 'eat as Oxonians eat' in solidarity; a thing which had gone down like a lead balloon with many of their staffers. Fortunately, most of the citizens of the surrounding town now ate a lot better than they had this time last year, so it had been permissible – morally speaking – to re-institute a more 'normal' culinary regime of late.

Walter Brenckmann sucked his teeth and shook his head.

"Honestly, it beats me, Tom!"

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's wife decided it was far too early in the evening to be talking 'shop'.

"Did I hear your lovely daughter-in-law has brought little Tabatha back to Oxford?" Pat Harding-Grayson asked of the Ambassadress.

Her friend clapped her hands together with genteel delight.

"Yes!" She sighed. "Judy said she was cramping the boys' style."

The boys were Joanne's son Sam and his friend from Minnesota, Bob Dylan, who were touring here, there and everywhere with their band in the British Isles to apparently ecstatic receptions wherever they went.

Joanne took Pat's arm.

"We'll leave 'the men of affairs' to gossip," she suggested. "Come and say hello to Judy."

Notwithstanding she had been exposed to a lot of them in the last year, Judy Brenckmann had still not really got used to meeting 'famous' people.

Her husband Sam, Bob and the other guys in the band were famous, of course, but that was different. Heck, the baby of the tour, Ry Cooder – he was still only seventeen, it was his eighteenth birthday in ten or eleven days' time - was like a kind of eccentric, distracted little brother to her...

The most disconcerting thing was how friendly everybody was in Britain. Last July these people had been at war with the US; but it was like that had just been some terrible misunderstanding.

Bygones...

She was walking and rocking Tabatha when there was a knock at the door. Soon her daughter was being cooed over by her grandmother and the elegant, smiling lady who turned out to be the wife of the British Foreign Minister.

"You wouldn't think she was born in the back of a LAPD cruiser," Judy murmured nervously as her fifteen-month-old toddler lapped up the attention.

Pat Harding-Grayson noticed that Joanne Brenckmann was oddly protective of her daughter-in-law that evening. When they went back downstairs for dinner she gave her a thoughtful look.

"Judy wasn't going to come over here with the boys," her hostess explained. "She got some, well, bad news, you see a few weeks ago. She was sort of separated from her first husband before the Cuban Missiles War. He was in the Army in Germany and he'd stopped paying the mortgage, that sort of thing. Anyway, then she met Sam – that was on the night of the War – and after all sorts of adventures they escaped down to Los Angeles, had Tabatha, got married and everything was hunky dory." Joanne Brenckmann shrugged. "Then she got a letter. It was from her husband, Michael's, commanding officer in Minneapolis. Michael had been killed in action just before the fighting in Wisconsin stopped. It turned out that Michael had known that Judy had re-married and hadn't wanted to 'rain on her parade'. It was an awfully nice letter from a Colonel Schwarzkopf, all about what a good soldier and a fine man Michael had been. Michael had not wanted Judy to know he was still alive but Colonel Schwarzkopf wrote that 'if we forget all the good people we have lost we lose a little of ourselves every day'."

"My goodness, that's..."

"Judy's a sensible girl."

The women found their husbands in earnest conversation with a US Navy Commander wearing the badges of a naval aviator above his multiple

rows of medal ribbons.

Joanne Brenckmann did the introduction for Pat's benefit.

Commander Thomas Hayward was 'stopping over' in England for ten days to participate in the ongoing programme of 'confidence building' meetings with his British counterparts, ahead of travelling on to the Mediterranean where he was to take command of the USS Independence's Air Wing in time for the carrier's deployment to Korean waters.

Over dinner Pat gently teased the thirty-eight-year-old veteran of the first Korean Conflict's life story out of him. He was a fascinating man, wholly buried in his career.

A native of Glendale, California it still rankled that he had not flown combat missions in World War Two, having been inducted into the US Naval Academy at Annapolis half-way through his flight training. After graduating from the Academy as a Batchelor of Science he had served on an aircraft carrier, the USS Antietam (CV-36) before completing his flight training at Pensacola in 1950. Thence he had been assigned to Fighter Squadron Fifty-One (VF-51) and flown the best part of one hundred and fifty combat missions off the decks of the USS Essex (CV-9) and the USS Valley Forge (CV-45) over Korea.

Pat had made him explain his medal ribbons.

Hayward – 'Bibb' to his friends – had won a Distinguished Flying Cross, a clutch of Air Medals, a brace of Navy Commendation Medals with Combat 'V' for, needless to say, 'valour'. The man was a marvel! He had been a test pilot at the Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, an instructor, had been working in the office of the Secretary of the Navy at the time of the Battle of Washington where he had picked up a gun and fought on the barricades within the Pentagon, and now – fully recovered from his wounds – he was off to a new war.

"The plan is for the Independence to transit the Suez Canal around the end of the month, and to make passage to Kobe for a couple of weeks in dock, before becoming flagship of Carrier Division Seventy-One supporting ground operations in the Korean Peninsula," he explained matter of factly.

Hayward was scheduled to fly out to Malta at the weekend to join his new ship. In an indication of the ongoing thaw in US-UK relations he was booked on one of the six seats now reserved for US personnel on the daily RAF shuttle to Luqa from Brize Norton, an arrangement under-pinned by a

deal under which the Sixth Fleet regularly topped up the AVGAS storage bunkers in the Grand Harbour.

The only downside to his new posting was that he was not going to see a lot of his wife and two daughters in the next year.

“I expected more razzmatazz over this election you’ve got going on over here,” the naval aviator remarked, tactfully wearying of talking about himself.

Pat Harding-Grayson tried to remember what General Election campaigns had been like in the 1950s; asking herself it they had been any less staid, more animated. It was so hard to remember, like dredging up childhood memories rather than recollections of things that had happened just before the October War. That old, pre-war World was quickly slipping into the darkness of remembrance, overwhelmed by the realities of the new age.

“I’m afraid our politics are sometimes a reflection of our national character, Commander Hayward,” she laughed. “The Prime Minister does her best but I’m afraid we’re a lot of stick-in-the-muds over these things. Of course, our TV and radio are less all-enveloping over here, which doesn’t help. The tradition is of printed literature and grandstanding speeches in town halls, rather than great public rallies and demonstrations. There always used to be a lot of knocking on doors.” She smiled. “People were usually horrified when I knocked on their door and handed them a copy of the local Labour Party candidate’s election address!”

“My wife and I,” Tom Harding-Grayson interjected, “have taken a back seat this time around. It would be too complicated for either of us to take a leading role in the campaign.”

“Even if we had the time or the energy,” Pat concurred ruefully. “Anyway, what’s going on in Philadelphia is much more interesting than our little local politicking!”

Joanne Brenckmann exchanged looks with her husband.

“I just feel so sorry for that poor young woman, Miranda Sullivan, who has been caught up in the middle of it all!” She had been trying to keep the conversation non-political. The trouble was her other daughter-in-law, the force of nature that went by the name of ‘Gretchen’, was that ‘poor young’ woman’s attorney.

“Things were so much simpler,” her husband observed, rescuing the situation, “when nobody in the family was famous.”

“So much simpler,” Joanne agreed proudly.

“But seriously,” Tom Harding-Grayson posed rhetorically, “with so much going on; the build-up for the offensive in Korea, the Manhattan Peace Process, establishing the peace lines in the Midwest, and all the uncertainties about US policy towards Europe, among other things, the last thing the President needs is a potential upsurge in civil disorder in the South or the distraction of a judicial investigation into the conduct of members of his new Administration?”

“I’m pretty sure nobody in the Oval office saw things working out this way,” Walter Brenckmann declared, privately thinking that actually, somebody ought to have realised that if you prod a hornet’ nest with a sharp stick only one thing was going to happen next.

Chapter 58

Thursday 4th March 1965
USS Independence (CV-62), Ligurian Sea, Mediterranean

Lieutenant Heidi Takawa loved this time of day when the light was starting to fade and men, and a handful of women, of all ranks hung out in the stern gallery twenty feet beneath the flight deck. There were several other places where one could stand at the rail, stare at the sea but nowhere that so many people, perhaps, thirty or forty or more could collect, smoke a cigarette, and just enjoy the view.

The Flagship of the US Sixth Fleet had been flying continuous air operations for the last thirty-six hours, working up the newly arrived F-4B Phantoms of Fighter Squadron VF-62. So many pilots and backseat navigator/weapons specialist were coming back into the service these days it took a while to integrate the 'returnees' into the evolving – post-Kharg Island 'experience' – rules of the game. Right now, the Skipper was working the butts off the new guys night and day like the ship was in a real war zone.

Heidi was a nurse; she had no idea what 'lessons' had actually been learned last July. All she knew was that the carrier and its ever-present escorts, the converted anti-aircraft guided missile cruiser USS Little Rock (CL-92), and the two Charles F. Adams class destroyers USS Claude V. Ricketts (DDG-5) and USS Semmes (DDG-18) had been operating at, or around, flank speed from the moment they had cleared Naples Bay.

Crewmen around her told her that presently they were operating in the northern Ligurian Sea in a 'box' roughly located between Corsica and Villefranche-sur-Mer, on what used to be and might still be – for all she knew - the French Riviera.

Above her head an F-4 thumped down on the deck, its two General Electric J79-GE-17A axial compressor turbojets screaming deafeningly as it 'bolted' straight off the angled deck of the carrier.

Every new guy had to complete a gruelling sequence of landings – arrester wires 'down' – in which the moment the undercarriage hit the deck he shoved the throttles up against the stops and got airborne again. Then he would get in the queue and come around and do it again and again until the

CAG – the Combat Air Group Commander – and his hard-arse staff were convinced a pilot knew exactly what he was doing. The standard required was not perfection; it was ‘perfection plus’.

In between ‘bolts’ the deck crew would hit the switch and set the arrester wires – four for normal deck landings – and ‘catch’ aircraft returning from CAP (Combat Air Patrols), ELINT (Electronic Intelligence) missions, ASW (anti-submarine warfare sonar dipping operations), and a myriad of other exercises that Heidi did not even know about.

She watched as a Vought F-8 Crusader supersonic fighter lanced down towards the carrier in its final approach. In the failing light the aircraft looked like an arrowhead hurtling towards the stern. The F-8 was the last ‘gunship’ fighter in the Navy, half the size of a Phantom and with none of the bigger, more advanced F-4B’s cutting edge technologies, missilery or adaptability. A Phantom could fly bombing, ELINT ops or duke it out with any other air superiority interceptor that had ever flown; a Crusader was a straight dogfighter.

The F-8 crunched down onto the deck. Her pilot hit his throttle, spoiled back in an instant as the arrester wires slowed his ride from its landing speed of close to a hundred and fifty miles an hour to zero in less than a hundred feet.

A mile off the port quarter of the Independence a Sikorsky SH-3 loitered; in case something went wrong, a pilot had to eject, or there was a crash, or an engine blow out or some other critical landing ‘incident’. The list of things that could and did go wrong operating fast jets from a moving ship at sea was very, very long. Not that flying fast jets was the most dangerous job in the Navy; the most hazardous job in the US Navy was pulling flight deck duty on a big carrier. Stand in the wrong place and the afterburner of an F-4 or and F-8 would blow your scorched, crisped body over the side of the ship, ordnance and fuel lines were everywhere, relax for a second and a recovering arrester wire could cut you in half as it rattled across the deck to be re-tensioned for the next incoming bird.

Heidi had been on the flight deck in port, and on parades; otherwise she stayed below deck where it was ‘safe’. Not that anywhere was in any meaningful way ‘safe’ on a big carrier; that was another thing drummed into you as soon as you stepped onboard. The Independence was a seventy-thousand-ton floating air base with a crew of over five thousand men (and a

dozen nurses) operating up to eighty aircraft day and night, carrying enough AVGAS and explosives to re-profile a medium-sized city without recourse to the nukes she carried deep in her bowels in her heavily armoured, special munitions ultra-high security magazines.

The Independence's sick bay – it was more like a small, superbly well-equipped state of the art no-expense spared hospital on land – treated a constant stream of thankfully, mainly walking wounded, injured in the course of their routine duties. Old hands had warned her that when the ship was operating like it was now it was only a matter of time before somebody got badly hurt...or killed.

That was just the way it was...

Anyway, that was why – regardless of how tired she was – she dragged along to the stern at this time of day. On a ship you made your own karma, lived within your own psychic bubble, that was how you retained your identity, never forgot who you really were and where you needed to get to.

Fleet Command cut her revised orders after the Dewey had departed Malta to give her time – albeit a short tour – onboard a big carrier because that was important in the Navy for all 'fast-tracked' officers.

She was onboard the Independence to learn, to experience what the Navy was all about and frankly, to be a little blown away by it.

Heidi would have liked to have stepped ashore on the Riviera, at Monaco or Monte Carlo, or Nice or been onboard a ship steaming slowly into Villefranche but it was not to be.

The ship's daily bulletin; a mimeographed sheet reported that there were 'a number of former French Navy ships anchored in Villefranche-sur-Mer including the old battleship Jean Bart'. The Independence's Northrop Grumman EA-6 Prowlers had traversed the French coast and here and there 'intruded' several miles inland, charting a largely 'dead' electronic environment.

An electronically dead land...

Half the World had been bombed back to the Stone Age.

Heidi had been so sure she was doing the right thing leaving Malta without trying to explain herself, or anything to Guy French. Heck, it was not as if they were lovers. Writing that letter had been rough, she had cried and she never did that, not over a man. Well, not until now. What she had wanted to say seemed and sounded so reasonable in her head; yet on paper

the words haunted her.

He did not know that the Independence was paying a ‘good will’ call to Malta when she was done playing war games up here; *she* did not know if he would still be on the island. He had wanted to get back to England to pick up his flying career; she had her plans, the Navy had big plans for her and some day she *was* going to be a doctor. That was not going to happen if she married a man she was crazy about and started having his brats...

The great carrier had turned onto a more easterly course.

Astern the outlandishly tall radar masts of the old World War Two converted Cleveland class cruiser Little Rock were starkly silhouetted against the setting sun as momentarily the clouds parted.

She could not help but think of the listing USS Albany on the morning after the Second Battle of Kharg Island, bunker oil bleeding for miles down range, grey smoke still rising from her fo'c's'le and her fire-blackened futuristic superstructure. The nightmare seemed less real some days, on others it was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday; the bow of the broken-backed Kitty Hawk rearing up out of the sea, the dying and the maimed being brought onboard the Dewey – herself partially disabled in the hours after the battle, leaking from splinter damage caused by two near misses – and later, only bodies coming over the rail.

And now she was completely stupid over the man responsible for practically all of that grief and misery...

Chapter 59

Friday 5th March 1965
Alfriston, East Sussex

Denis Healey was infuriated by his forced inaction, a situation much exacerbated by the fact that the telephone line from his house in the village of Alfriston was only periodically connected to the national network. It mattered not one jot that his wife reminded him at regular intervals that the 'journey home' from Leeds had almost been the death of him; he was on the mend and he was needed on the campaign trail.

'No, you are not!' Edna would retort. "Jim Callaghan and Roy Jenkins are not complete idiots. You must trust them to make do without you for a day or two longer!'

When it came to running an election campaign he was fairly confident that Jim Callaghan knew what he was doing, but as for Roy Jenkins...

The trouble with the Home Secretary was that he honestly believed that being the son of a Welsh miner actually made him a socialist. Presumably, he applied the same logic to his Oxbridge accent, his taste for fine wines and preference for intelligent, independently-minded women of aristocratic manners if not invariably lineage?

It angered Healey that the campaign had been hijacked by Michael Foot and his friends, the majority of whom regarded Jim Callaghan as the 'acceptable' face – to the electorate - of the now left-dominated Party. He knew that once the Labour Party was ensconced in power, with its hands firmly on the levers of industry and commerce, Foot and his friends would quickly promote another, more ideologically sound figurehead to displace Callaghan, and presumably, begin to purge anybody else they did not like from the upper echelons of the Party. It was a task well within their grasp; after all, the first consequence of a massive Labour landslide in the General Election, less than a week away, would be that a raft of left-leaning new Members of Parliament would be sent to the Commons, and it was the MPs who decided who they wanted as their leader...

Regardless of whomsoever the British people had actually voted for in the meantime!

It was the profound dishonesty of the left that enraged him the most. Some of Michael Foot's most devoted followers were little more than Marxist's in disguise – thinly disguised at that – but not one of them had the moral courage to go to the electorate in their true 'communist' clothes.

"I'm going up to Sheffield on Monday come what may!'

Thus, he had declared, glowering at the others in the crowded living room of the old cottage. There really was not enough room for Edna, the three children and his brother's family in the building but most of the time they knocked along well enough.

However, right now he had to listen to the radio.

Last night it had been the Liberals' turn to address the nation; tonight, was the turn of the Conservatives. In a few minutes time Margaret Thatcher would make her last unexpurgated, unedited or moderated, 'pitch' to the nation.

Jolyon 'Jo' Grimond was a pleasant sort who had become the leader of the Liberal Party in 1955 at a time when it had attracted somewhere around one in thirty-seven of the votes cast in that year's general election and had won six seats in Parliament, none of them in England. By 1959 he had doubled the Party's vote without winning any more seats in the Commons. Having rejected Edward Heath's and Margaret Thatcher's offer of a seat in Cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland – offers made in the interests of 'national unity' rather than the utility or otherwise of the votes of the handful of Liberal MPs – Grimond had retreated to the Highlands and his Party had been virtually invisible until the calling of the election. Now the blighters were everywhere, peddling a quaint, less than coherent mantra which included such items as 'Home Rule for Scotland', the 'liberalisation' of laws on promiscuity (nobody had a clue what that meant), and the unilateral abolition of nuclear weapons and most of the armed forces (except of course, for those places where military equipment was produced, or based, in an existing Liberal Parliamentary constituency).

To Denis Healey this manifesto – different variants of which could be obtained from one place to another throughout the country - if it could be called such a thing, reflected in many respects the contradictions which had always hamstrung its Leader's career in politics.

For example, Jo Grimond found no difficulty reconciling his preoccupation with 'Home Rule' for the country of his birth with enjoying

the fruits of being, in full measure, a fully paid up ‘fellow traveller’ within the English establishment most of his life.

Fifty-one-year-old Fife-born Grimond had been, as befitted a son of the gentry, educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, obtaining a first-class honours degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics before training to be a barrister ahead of his admission to the Bar as a member of the Middle Temple. After the Second War he had eventually won the Orkney and Shetland seat in 1950, and by default, acquired the Leadership of his Party five years later. Like most things in his life, it had virtually been handed to him on a plate; albeit a pewter rather than a silver salver because the Liberals did not go in for that sort of thing. In any event, the leadership was only a part time job, a hobby really. Back in 1938 he had married Laura Bonham Carter, the granddaughter of the last Liberal Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith and after the October War he and his family, not to mention their ‘connections’ had retreated to the North of Scotland and so far as Healey knew, drawn up the drawbridge and waited for something to turn up.

Like, for example, an opportunity to pretend that the Liberal Party had been the ‘moral steel’ – it had not been that since the nineteenth century - in the British character which had allowed the nation to emerge so triumphantly from its post-October War traumas.

That at least – so far as it had been possible to divine any unified intellectual thread in its verbose, rambling grind - had seemed to be the broad tenor of Jo Grimond’s unctuously phrased appeal to the electorate last night. There was no mention of the rumoured rift within Liberal ranks south of the border because their Leader was too afraid of residual fallout ‘hot spots’ to campaign in England, and he had carefully ‘brushed over’ his desire to disarm the entire British Isles and to tow Scotland off into some Brigadoon-like magical future where the milk and honey flowed twenty-four hours a day...

Whenever Margaret Thatcher mentioned the Liberal Party – which was hardly ever – it was with a sneer and curl of her lip; and in this respect, if few others, he understood exactly where she was coming from.

The Prime Minister’s less than dulcet tones burst from the radio, daring the background static and customary signal attenuation to interrupt her.

The first time Denis Healey had heard the woman speak her voice had made him wince. It had had about it that peculiar quality of shattering glass.

In the fifteen months she had been Prime Minister her tone, although often hectoring, had moderated. Possibly, that was the influence of Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, a worldly wise and calming presence. He would not have put it past Airey Neave to have arranged elocution or some specialist voice-training regime – such as that used by stars of stage and film – for the lady. In any event, her delivery had lost much of that jarring, glass-scratching quality. It had been replaced with a strange sort of matriarchal, quasi matronly, bossy, motherly authority which throughout the campaign, had marvellously complemented her naturally telegenic...*presence*.

Basically, whatever she was saying she looked and sounded better than tired old Jim Callaghan, or the 'ragged unkempt hand-waving hobo' look that Michael Foot seemed to cultivate; and nobody knew, or really cared who Jo Grimond was anyway. Watching the lady moving from hustings to town hall meeting, sidestepping sure-footed through the aftershocks of the Whitelaw assassination, the IRA bombings, the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding along the Channel coast of France, in the middle of a low-level civil war in Ulster, and a real war to take back the streets of London from robbers, brigands and Red Dawn fanatics, she had exuded an undeniable grace under pressure.

The woman looked and sounded as if she was the one in charge; because actually, she was...*in charge*.

Jim Callaghan had looked old, lack-lustre; and she looked young, vigorous, and hungry to continue to fight and all of a sudden nobody was comparing her to Churchill in 1945.

Healey listened to Margaret Thatcher's opening peroration.

His heart sank a notch.

Polished, very polished...

"*When in December 1963 after the murder of Edward Heath in Washington DC, I was asked to take over as Prime Minister I was*," the lady hesitated, "*humbled and I confess a little frightened. Had I known then what I know now, had I known then what battles lay ahead I might have balked at the task before me. Many times, last spring and summer I asked myself if I, of all people, was fitted to be a war leader. There were times when I was close to despair...*"

Denis Healey looked around the room.

Even his teenage children were listening, their attention seized and

somehow, enthralled by *that* voice. The lady was doing something she had never done before; admitting of fallibility, doubt. From the outset, love her or loathe her, she had always grabbed the attention of a listener. At first men who ought to have known better wrote this off to the 'film star blond bombshell effect' but that was to entirely miss the point; she always commanded any room she was in. Yes, she was an attractive woman but no, she was not Marilyn Monro or Hedy Lamarr; she had something else and whatever it was it had enabled her to cleave through the male-dominated, essentially misogynistic British establishment with the alacrity of a hot knife through butter. And now she had added humility, and the suggestion that she too – like her listeners – was fallible, and vulnerable to doubt, fear. She was not on any kind of pedestal; she was one of them, a woman of the people. The grocer's daughter from Grantham who had grown up 'above the shop' and fought tooth and nail for everything she had achieved in life, was far more in touch with the grief, anguish and the hopes of *her* people than any of the mostly middle and upper middle class demigods of the Labour left, or a salt of the earth, decent, and in all things political – moderate – James Callaghan.

Somebody or something had turned *The Angry Widow* into a living, breathing woman.

Boadicea incarnate had become the nation's stern mother, and the very fact of the nation's survival as a 'going concern' after what it had been through in the last two-and-a-half years was proof positive that *she* was also an extremely competent manager of her 'household'.

"*We know now that Edward Heath died by the hand of a deranged woman whose mind had been poisoned by the twisted theology of the evil Church of the Great Lakes, at the very moment he had opened up the possibility of a new World order in which famine and pestilence might soon be banished from our sorely pressed lands*."

The tenor of the Prime Minister's soprano voice rang with assurance and purpose.

Tonight, she had gone back to Cheltenham to speak from the same stage where she had announced the death of one Premier on 14th December 1963 and broken the news that she was stepping into the breach; the symbolism of it all was breath-taking.

Denis Healey had tried to make his colleagues see sense; keep things

simple but no, they had opted for great rallies of the faithful, malleable collectives of the already converted and in this new age that metric suddenly seemed wrong.

"*Ted Heath*," Margaret Thatcher went on, "*believed passionately that it was not enough just to survive. He had a dream for this country that I share. The old World is gone. Yes, we should mourn for what has been lost and for all the ones we loved who are gone forever. No, we should never give in! No, we should never accept second best! I say to you that surviving is not enough; that we owe it to our children to be worthy of aspiring to something more!*"

The airways were filled in an instant by a deafening barrage of applause. Healey saw in his mind's eye hundreds of people spontaneously jumping to their feet in Cheltenham Town Hall.

"*I solemnly promise you with every fibre of my being that I will never stop fighting for a better world for all our children!*"

The crowded Healey living room was silent.

The woman was not going to pillory her political foes or whine about all the things that were wrong in the World. None of that mattered; all that mattered was that things *will* get better and we *will* win through in the end. Come with me on this great crusade to make a better World for *all* our children, let this generation be remembered for *all* time by future generations as the generation which turned the corner, and began to rebuild a World fit for heroes and their children.

She had a dream.

Her foes just had an ideology.

Do you want to re-make the World in the image of the old?

Or do you want something better for all our children?

"*I believe that people have a right to know what their leaders are really thinking; and that so far as possible your leaders should not keep secrets from their people. I believe that the people have a right to know what sort of man or woman is putting themselves forward to lead the country.*"

Denis Healey thought that was a quaint, rather naive notion. If 'the people' actually knew who they were voting for they probably would not bother going out to vote! Goodness, the Official Secrets Act had never had anything to do with the security of the Realm; it was about saving the blushes of the Government of the day!

"*People used to call me 'The Angry Widow'; well, I am still angry. What rational person would not be angry for what we have lost. My husband disappeared on the night of the War, one of millions who perished in London. For a long time afterwards, I thought myself an island...*"

Healey's ears pricked up, his political antennae so violently stimulated that his suddenly heightened acuity was almost physically painful.

What the Devil is she up to?

"*But then I met Admiral Sir Julian Christopher*," the lady said, "*the hero of Operation Manna*," she went on, her voice quivering bravely. "*We met, within hours he had saved my life, shielded me with his body from the blast and debris of a nearby bomb hit at Balmoral – at no small cost to himself - on that dreadful day traitors attempted to murder the Royal Family. Within days I saw him off on his way to Malta, there to meet his destiny. At that time, I knew that he was still injured, it nearly broke my heart to wave him goodbye and that was when I knew that like you, like the British people, I too was meant not just to struggle on for the sake of my children, but to fight with all my might for something better for myself, and for us all...*"

I am your leader, I have been your leader in terrible days and we have, together prevailed

This is who I am!

Are you behind me?

This had to be Pat Harding-Grayson's script, not even Airey Neave could have imagined this kind of self-revelation.

"*Very nearly a year to the day ago I travelled to Malta to attend the wedding of Sir Julian's son, then Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher and his lovely Maltese bride, Marija, at St Paul's Cathedral in Mdina. On the night before the wedding Sir Julian proposed marriage to me and I accepted, with the one caveat; that he would complete his term of command in the Mediterranean without the 'distraction' our marriage would inevitably cause to him in the conduct of his vital duties in Malta. Had Admiral Christopher not been killed at the height of the Battle of Malta he and I would have wedded by now...*"

Denis Healey's wife touched her husband's arm.

"Did you know this, Denis?" Edna Healey demanded urgently.

"There were rumours, but nothing concrete," he obfuscated, shocked to the core by Margaret Thatcher's candour in front of an audience of millions.

"*I have spoken to you of hope,*" the Prime Minister continued, clearly at war with her emotions. "*Even in grief and despair there is always hope. Next month – regardless of the verdict of the British people next Thursday - I will travel to Philadelphia to attend a joyous event, the christening of Sir Peter and Lady Marija Christopher's baby daughter, Elisabetta Margo. She is a beautiful baby, perfect in every respect and the apple of her new parents' eyes. The Ambassador and Ambassadress were so kind, and thoughtful, as to ask me to be one of their daughter's god parents. I confess, I shed more than one tear in accepting, I can tell you...*"

Denis Healey was asking himself how Jim Callaghan was going to match, let alone better this...*tour de force*.

Or if, after listening to 'the lady' open her soul to them, the nation would even bother to turn on the radio tomorrow night.

"*You see, I had lost so much and I had tried so hard not to be embittered by my loss that I had begun to doubt my belief in things. I had never realised that in Julian Christopher, his son and his equally remarkable daughter-in-law I had, without knowing it, become a part of a new, broader family. I had imagined that I was alone. One must never do that. One must always remember that we are all part of something that is bigger than any one of us.*"

Denis Healey shut his eyes in despair.

The bloody woman's voice was inside his head...

"*You are never alone, while I am your leader there will always be somebody who is on your side!*"

Chapter 60

Friday 5th March 1965
Verdala Palace, Malta

'I thought we might dine alone tonight? If that would be agreeable to you?' The Governor of Malta had suggested of Rachel that morning.

She had slipped into his bedroom last night – the first time since she had broken down when she was with Denzil Williams in Valletta – and he had been well, very sweet but they had not really spoken.

As on previous occasions she had made herself scarce before dawn and they had encountered each other, as if in passing, at the breakfast table. Daniel French had joined her briefly on the veranda for a cup of tea ahead of embarking on his typically crowded day's schedule.

'Forgive me but you have not been yourself the last day or two?'

Myself!

Which self would that be?

The thirty-six-year-old woman haunted by the nightmares and flashbacks of the damaged partisan child of 1943 or 1944?

The fool who had forgotten who she was and who she worked for before she and Arkady Rykov pitched up in Gibraltar in December 1963?

The butcher of Mdina in whose arms Julian Christopher had bled to death?

The avenger of Wister Park whose bloody rampage had only come to an end when a Marine had half-brained her while she was torturing a man to death?

The woman who had lived a half-normal life with the Maltese wives within the family of the new British Embassy in Philadelphia last autumn?

The stranger who had held her friend Marija's baby daughter in her arms and wondered what might have been?

Or the woman who had been sent to Malta to tidy up one last Imperial loose end, no questions asked, any way she saw fit?

For a few moments she was lost for words but Daniel French was a patient man; he had waited, watching over her.

'I'm sorry. I should have said something,' she had shrugged, afraid to

meet the man's eye, 'the last thing I want to do is cause you further embarrassment.'

The man had been sanguine.

'Embarrassment?' He had guffawed ruefully. 'It's a long time since I've really felt like a human being. What's a little embarrassment, which I'm not aware of, anyway, set against a thing like that?'

Rachel had accepted his invitation.

Dinner in the Governor's private rooms; wearing her best – albeit somewhat dowdy frock – specially pressed by the Palace's staff, her hair and foundation the subject of atypical attention to detail.

She was strangely nervous, unsettled as the hour approached in the way she had never been anxious, or remotely troubled before she *executed* a planned *hit*.

"The thing with Joe Calleja will be over soon," she said before she realised she had opened her mouth the moment she was alone again with the man.

Air Marshal Sir Daniel French was in civvies, a lightweight grey suit and an RAF Association tie; in mufti, wanting for once to be an ordinary fellow dining with a pretty woman whose company he enjoyed.

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow.

"I have made the necessary arrangements with Denzil Williams."

"Do I need to know about those arrangements?"

Rachel shook her head.

"No," she said quietly. "Sorry, talking 'shop' probably isn't a very good idea."

The man shrugged.

He poured wine; a bland locally produced white *Marsovin*, into two long-stemmed crystal glasses.

"What shall we drink to?" He asked, smiling.

Rachel brightened. The Governor of Malta shed twenty years when he smiled, became for a moment a mischievous schoolboy.

"Different lives," she murmured.

He thought about it and they raised their glasses, clinking them together tentatively. They sat at the head of a long table, he on one corner, she adjacent to him at a right angle. A small, more intimate table had been laid on the veranda; then a squall had blown across the island and their 'date' had

been moved inside.

"All our lives have been different since the war," Dan French remarked.

Rachel inclined her face.

"In some ways."

"Ah, we may be talking 'shop' again," the man chuckled softly.

"Sorry." The wine was pleasantly nondescript, it slipped down easily. "Do you remember when we first met?"

"I'm not likely to forget, dear lady!"

"No," she conceded, feeling a little foolish. She had still been wearing the blood-stained – blood and gore-stained, actually – frock she had worn during her murderous 'walk' through Mdina on the day of the Battle of Malta. She must have looked like...*shit*. "I wasn't at my best..."

"Actually," Dan French countered, "you looked," he lost his courage, a thing which had rarely happened to him in his life to date, "well, let's just say I shall never forget that moment..."

"I was never going to come back to Malta," Rachel confessed. He had made an impression on her too on that day eleven months ago. She had told him her story; he had believed her. "I am who I am, you are who you are."

"I don't plan to spend the rest of my life here either," he retorted gently. "In fact, I'm pencilled in for a job in England sometime this autumn if the socialists don't abolish the Royal Air Force!"

Rachel caught his mood.

"What will you do if that happens?"

"Worry about it then, I suppose."

Rachel nodded, sighed. If the wrong kind of people were in charge 'back home' after the election she could find herself a member of an endangered species. In that event she would have to disappear, become another woman.

"I quite like being your mistress," she said. "I'm sorry if I'm not the mistress you deserve."

Dan French chuckled, shook his head.

Rachel sipped her wine, inadvertently draining the glass.

He refilled it.

She wore a white satin slip – her one piece of real lingerie – in bed with Dan French, oddly precious about the marks on her torso from wounds old and new, and scurried away before dawn so that beneath her ruined makeup her relatively new Wister Park facial scars would remain invisible. Actually,

those ‘scars’ – one on her cheek and another mostly hidden by an eyebrow – were not so bad, nothing compared to the knife slash below her left breast, or the indentation in her right rib cage...

“The mistress that I deserve?” The man echoed.

“Yes,” she muttered, her face suddenly burning hot.

“I’ve never had a mistress before; so, I’ve got no point of reference. Things seem positively spiffing to me!”

Rachel giggled, almost spilled her drink.

There was a lapse in conversation as soup was served, something fishy.

“If I hadn’t been with Denzil Williams the other night I’d have gone to pieces,” she said without preamble, knowing words were about to spill uncontrolled and unguarded, dangerously from her lips. “I’d have panicked, probably hurt somebody. Nobody’s ever asked me how I can do what I do; but it’s easy. Right now, I’m a normal woman – okay, with a past, granted – who thinks and feels like *a woman*. I even get broody some days when I’m like this. But then there’s this other person, she’s not like me at all. She’s a monster and she enjoys hurting people. Sometimes, I get confused; I forget which woman I am. I used to be cold-eyed, turn that persona off and on. The October War changed all that; I didn’t know how much until I found Margo Seiffert dead on the ground that day last year. It was like a switch clicked in my head. I picked up a Kalashnikov, emptied the magazine into the trooper who had killed Dr Seiffert and that was that, I was in a sort of trance for most of the next hour. I didn’t really break out of it until I woke up with Julian Christopher dying in my arms. When our people re-took the headquarters building in Mdina I went along with them as good as gold. You see, I’d reverted to that other, ‘normal’ me by then, I don’t have it in me to hurt a fly when I’m that way,” she grimaced apologetically, “this way...”

Dan French tried not to look as if he needed a very stiff drink.

“Is that what happened in Philadelphia, you forgot who you were?” His voice was – understandably - a little hoarse, underscored by patently genuine concern.

Rachel shrugged.

“I was provoked,” she said dully. “The bastards beat me up and raped me, ten, fifteen times, I lost count. They’d tortured and murdered my friends, people who had treated me like a ‘normal’ person even though they had all heard the rumours about Mdina. If Galen Cheney and his psychos had

known who I was they'd have put a bullet in my neck and thrown me down the Embassy steps with the others."

"Oh..."

"But they didn't know who, or what I was. You can't reason with people like that. You can't 'save them', there's nothing you can do to bring them back into the fold of civilization. All you can do is kill them. So, I took my revenge. I enjoyed every 'kill'; each one is etched in my memory. When I started the killing I was still *me*, I knew what I was doing, I was still working out the odds, calculating risks. After a while I got to a stage where I was just killing, hurting people for the sake of it. Because I enjoyed it; no, that's the wrong word, I was *ecstatic* and I never wanted it to end. I didn't even notice I'd been stabbed twice, or that I had a spent bullet in my back, or that somebody had kicked one of my ribs half-an-inch into my chest..."

Why am I telling this man my darkest secrets?

Dan French had put down his wine glass before he squeezed it so hard it splintered in his hand. He sat back, viewed Rachel with troubled eyes.

"I'm sorry, I knew terrible things happened in Philadelphia," he confided. "But I had no idea..."

"Once I've done what has to be done here you'll never see me again..."

"No!" The man objected.

Rachel frowned.

"I always do what needs to be done, Dan."

The man leaned forward. They looked at each other for some seconds before he sighed.

"Well, damned well find a way to do it in such a way that you can live with yourself afterwards!"

The quietly-spoken vehemence rocked the woman.

"Things don't always work out the way you want them to," she protested half-heartedly.

Dan French shook his head.

"When I was my son's age," he replied, "I flew the best part of a tour of ops on Lancasters convinced that I was as good as dead already. But that didn't mean I didn't want to survive, or to return to some kind of 'normal' life when it was over."

He threw up his hands, frustrated that he had not said anything like what he had meant to say; yet bereft of any other argument.

Rachel did not recognise her voice.

Suddenly, she sounded Polish again like the sixteen-year-old skinny, wild-eyed girl who had emerged from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, more dead than alive, in the spring of 1945.

“You are a good man...”

He opened his mouth to gainsay this, she held up a hand.

“No, you are. In a World in which few things are what they seem, I think that you are a good man. I am not a good woman. It is for the best that...”

This time Dan French would not be silenced.

“Have you always been such a bloody awkward woman?”

Despite herself Rachel giggled like a schoolgirl for the second time that evening.

Chapter 61

Saturday 6th March 1965
Embassy of the United Kingdom,
Montgommery County, Philadelphia

"JOE IS COMING TO AMERICA!"

Captain Sir Peter Christopher, VC, since last July the United Kingdom's man in Philadelphia was discussing the latest Foreign and Commonwealth Office telegrams – an unusually large batch of 'Important' and 'Confidential' material having been de-ciphered overnight - with his deputy, Nicholas 'Nicko' Henderson.

The Ambassador and his 'first lieutenant' had developed a close, trusting working relationship in the weeks since Henderson, accompanied by his wife Mary and eleven-year-old daughter Alexandra, had arrived in Philadelphia to fill the post of Chargé d'affaires previously temporarily occupied by Alan Hannay.

Chancery, the Embassy Department responsible for what the FCO laughingly called 'policy', oversaw security, Embassy pay and rations, and the Cipher Room, reporting directly to Nicko Henderson. It was in the process of rapidly expanding its workload and attempting to assimilate a tranche of new officers fresh from England. Presently, Chancery was a mess and practically any other Ambassador trying to cope with the frustrations this caused him – every day – would have made his *Chargé's* life miserable. Especially, since Henderson had been wished upon him without consultation, and he had – several times – requested that the madcap expansion of the Embassy ought to be both properly planned (a notion alien to the FCO in any age, he had subsequently learned), and done over a period of six to twelve months, not eleven weeks.

However, the man who was still the youngest Post Captain in the Royal Navy – and was likely to remain so for many years to come – had never subscribed to the view that blaming a man for things over which he had no control was a particularly good way to run any ship. And besides, he liked

Nicko Henderson and when a ship was short-handed everybody had to pitch in or the vessel was liable to sink.

Henderson had just completed reporting the ‘latest state of play’, and the two men had begun to turn their minds to what could be done to bolster the morale of their hard-pressed Chancery staffers.

“JOE IS COMING TO AMERICA!”

Peter Christopher looked up as his wife burst into his office, her face flushed and her eyes bright with delight. For a moment he was afraid she was so distracted that she was going to forget that she could not run in her rush towards him as he and Nicko Henderson rose to their feet.

The first time his wife had forgotten she could not run she had, witnesses attested, contrived to ‘run’ several steps before her body remembered its limitations, and she had fallen flat on her face. Now and then he had had occasion since to catch her when she forgot herself...

The Ambassador relaxed.

His wife was brandishing a telegram ‘flimsy’.

“JOE IS COMING TO AMERICA!”

Nicko Henderson, a tall, flamboyant man whose suit always seemed one size too large with a fair, boyish mop of hair that constantly fell over his brow, smiled quizzically at the Ambassadress.

He and his wife had worked out within hours of arriving in Philadelphia that the only reason the Embassy functioned at all – actually, it operations were an object lesson in how to put one’s country’s best foot forward in very trying circumstances – was because of the marvellously benign influence of the two ‘Maltese wives’ at its beating heart. That was not to say that having such a calming, natural leader as Peter Christopher – very much the captain of the ship – at the wheel did not have a great deal to do with the Embassy’s astonishingly good relations across the whole Philadelphia ‘establishment’; but the key ingredient was undoubtedly, Lady Marija, and to a lesser but very important extent, her ‘sister’, Rosa Hannay. That so many of the key Embassy ‘personalities’ were so young – the Ambassador and his wife were still only in their twenty-ninth years, Alan Hannay twenty-six and his wife, twenty-seven – defied conventional ‘Embassy wisdom’ and frankly, terrified the older hands back in Oxford. Yet here in Philadelphia the very fact that so many of the senior figures at the mission were so young, and so obviously charismatically skilled at making friends and influencing people, had fostered

the general impression that the Brits had sent their best and their brightest to represent their interests in America. It did no harm at all that all the 'young people' actually loved being in the United States...

Henderson realised he was wool-gathering.

The Ambassadress had pressed the telegram flimsy into her husband's hands, and as she often did touched his chest with the fingertips of one hand as she bumped fondly against him. That was another thing the Americans loved; the way the Maltese wives and their husbands were so normal in public, like newlyweds uninhibited about showing exactly how fond they were of each other.

The telegram had been received by the Embassy in plain text marked 'Personal'. It was from Malta; addressed to Lady Marija Christopher.

MARIJA STOP PLEASE BE ADVISED MR JOSEPH MARIO CALLEJA GC EN ROUTE TO PHILADELPIA VIA OXFORD AND NEW YORK STOP FLIGHTS BOOKED UNDER FCO PERSONNEL TRANSFER ADMIN STOP WILL ARRIVE PHILADELPHIA 11TH OR 12TH THIS MONTH DEPENDING ON FLIGHT CONNECTIONS STOP JOE ENGAGED ON FCO SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS IN NEW ENGLAND AND CALIFORNIA APRIL AND MAY STOP AMBASSADOR TO DETERMINE ROLE OF JOE THEREAFTER STOP PLEASE SAY HELLO TO ROSA FOR ME STOP KISS ELISABETTA MARGO FOR ME STOP RACHEL MESSAGE ENDS.

Peter Christopher's eyes widened a fraction.

He passed the flimsy to his Chargé without comment, confidently relying on his wife to explain what could be explained ahead of her brother's unexpected arrival in America.

"Joe was the one who fired the torpedoes that sank the big Russian ships in the Battle of Malta!" She declared proudly. "He's been miserable lately."

Peter Christopher was aware of the keenness of his wife's scrutiny. He shrugged, held up his hands.

"This is news to me," he protested.

Marija accepted this and moved on.

"Joe came with us and a lot of *our* brave Talaveras to England after the battle. Joe was knocked about quite badly. He was still in bandages when we had to leave to come over here. We had to leave him on his own in Oxford." She smiled stoically. "Joe is my 'little brother', on that day in

1942 in Vittoriosa-Birgu we were the only people who came out of the ruins alive, we've always been very close. All those years I could not walk he was the only one who treated me like a normal," she looked to her husband for moral support, "sister. We always looked after each other. I know it has been very hard for him being alone in Malta, I worry about him all the time..."

Oblivious to Nicko Henderson's presence she nuzzled her husband's shoulder with her brow, patted his arm and was gone leaving the two men looking at each other.

"I'll chase up Oxford to confirm the flight details," Henderson promised.

Peter Christopher nodded distractedly.

"Joe and Jack Griffin were the only men left alive on Talavera's torpedo deck after the battle," he told the Chargé. "Jack swears blind he saw Joe step onboard as we cast off while all the other dockyard workers were jumping off the ship." He sighed. "Losing his brother, Samuel, then Marija leaving Malta was really hard for Joe."

Henderson read volumes into this. The Ambassador's brother-in-law was not just his wife's younger brother; he was also one of Peter Christopher's immortal Talaveras. The two men had resumed their seat, picked up their lukewarm cups of tea.

"I've been talking to a few people at the State Department," the Chargé remarked, changing the subject. "Mary's had a couple of chats with contacts from her days working for *Time-Life*, too."

Henderson's Greek-born wife had been, of all things, a war correspondent, in her previous career. She had almost as many 'contacts' as anybody in the Embassy.

"The general consensus is that this nonsense with Martin Luther King and Miss Sullivan has virtually shut down normal Administration business. Apparently, the White House has pulled up the draw bridge, let down the portcullis and started pouring boiling oil on the heads of anybody so unwise as to approach it!"

Peter Christopher had never really had much of a taste for salacious tittle-tattle. Broadly speaking, what other people chose to do together in bed behind closed doors was none of his business. The World had tried, and very nearly succeeded in blowing itself up less than thirty months ago! Did it really matter what went on at the Warwick Hotel?

Or who had ‘bugged’ whom?

Nicko Henderson continued: “This Special Prosecutor fellow, Judge Burger, is supposedly of that incorruptible, remorseless breed of big judicial beasts. Supposedly, he’s about to start sending out subpoenas in all directions. There’s even a suggestion that people close to President Nixon may be hauled up in front of him.”

“It all seems a little bit of an over-reaction to me,” the Ambassador retorted. “Surely, it’ll all blow over in a couple of weeks.”

“Perhaps,” Henderson conceded, “but this feels, well, *different*.”

“Oh, how so?” Peter Christopher prided himself on not pretending he knew all the answers or began to understand all the convoluted ins and outs of the American system of government and jurisprudence. Working with Nicko Henderson had already been an education and whenever his Chargé cared to share some small part of the wisdom he had acquired in his years in the diplomatic service, he was all ears.

“Checks and balances,” the other man averred, ruminatively. “The executive, the President commands. The House of Representatives makes and amends the law. The judiciary ‘judges’. The demarcation lines are very sharply drawn under the US Constitution in a way quite foreign to our way of doing things. The President can go to war at his pleasure but he cannot wilfully order the infringement of a citizen’s – *any* citizen’s - ‘constitutional rights’. So, for the sake of example, had somebody in the ‘executive’ – the White House – incited a Federal employee in the Department of Justice, say in the FBI, to ‘bug’ Doctor King without a judge, a member of the judiciary, authorising the same, then that member of the ‘executive’ would have committed, potentially, a very serious criminal offence. I apologise if all this sounds a tad tautological. But here’s the thing. What happens if at the end of the day it turns out that somebody in the Administration gave the green light to somebody in the FBI to ‘bug’ Doctor King and, if and when that person is interviewed by Judge Burger, as he might well be, he or she, turns around and attempts to justify their ‘illegal’ actions by employing the defence ‘I was only obeying orders’?”

“Oh,” Peter Christopher muttered. “You mean this Special Prosecutor could theoretically end up putting the President in the dock? Can he really do that?”

“No,” Nicko Henderson guffawed. “But the House of Representatives

could and if it can assemble a two-thirds majority it might, theoretically, impeach the President."

"Has that ever happened?"

"No," the Chargé said for a second time. "I am reliably informed that thus far there have been thirteen cases brought to the Senate, ten concerning judges, including a supreme court justice, one senator, a Secretary of War, William W. Belknap for corruption back in the last century, and President Andrew Johnson in 1868, who was acquitted."

"Thirteen cases in about a hundred and eighty-nine years," the Ambassador thought out aloud. "And no President has ever been impeached?"

"No."

"I can't believe President Nixon would have stooped so low as to use the FBI to discredit Doctor King," Peter Christopher asserted, before he had given himself a chance to think it through. "Surely not?"

Nicko Henderson gazed into his tea cup.

"It's a funny old World, isn't it?" He reflected.

Chapter 62

Saturday 6th March 1965
Hertford College, Oxford

Having finished the recording of his daily piece to camera – about the Prime Minister's marvellously uplifting pep talk to a group of farmers' wives visiting Oxford – that afternoon, Colonel Francis St John Waters, VC, had repaired to a local hostelry for a quick shot of Dutch courage before popping in to the headquarters of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Thus, fortified he was in a relaxed frame of mind when one of the Director General's minions – whose name he had not caught - started to give him a 'telling off'.

Or at least, he thought that was what the chinless wonder was trying to do. In the former SAS man's book if a chap was left in any doubt that he was getting a 'right old bollocking' then whoever was administering it was clearly not doing a very good job of it.

"You simply cannot stand there feeding the Prime Minister questions about whatever the Central Office of the Conservative Party wants to talk about that day, Frank!"

The old soldier looked wounded.

"Why ever not, old boy?"

Whatever the lady said made eminently good sense to him; there was none of the evasive flannelling that one got from the other leaders. She told a chap straight out, no messing about; who was he to tell her what she ought, or ought not, to be talking about?

"We're supposed to be neutral. Non-partisan. You are supposed to be a journalist not a bally party apparatchik!"

"Um," Frank Waters grunted. People who bandied about words like 'apparatchik' were often lefties, or worse, closet Reds in his opinion. That was the trouble with the BBC; it was far too bloody wishy-washy, as if it did not know whose side it was on!

"And," the chinless wonder went on, getting hot under the collar, "if you're going to keep referring to a sheet with a list of questions on it, at least have the gumption to write it yourself and not use the one you've been

handed by one of Nick Ridley's or Airey Neave's people with a 'Conservative Party' letterhead on it!"

Frank Waters was beginning to get impatient.

Now this chap was being a prize clot!

What happened if he made a mistake copying one of the questions from the original sheet?

The lady would think he was a complete dunce!

Really, some of these BBC types did not know they were born!

He opened his mouth and was about to point this out when the blasted man cut him off.

"I believe the DG talked to you about your 'partiality' for the Conservative side last week. He asked you to look at Barry Lankaster's work covering the Labour Party campaign. Barry's work is objective, even-handed and where necessary he is prepared to ask senior figures, including, Mr Callaghan, hard questions and not take 'no' for an answer. In comparison your stuff is well, totally uncritical!"

Barry Lankaster had been doing this 'reportage' nonsense for a while now. He was perfectly at liberty to go about his business as he thought fit. It just so happened that the old soldier thought his way was better.

"Have even read the reporting guidelines the DG gave you, Frank?"

"They came in very useful."

"Really?"

Frank Waters grinned toothily.

"Absolutely," he had lit a couple of fires back at his digs with the crumpled pages of the superfluous document.

"Dammit, Frank, the Deputy Prime Minister's staff and the Liberals have been knocking down the DG's door over this!"

The former SAS man opened his mouth...

"And why on earth are you in so many of the pictures of the Prime Minister grinning like an idiot?"

"There's no need to be offensive," Frank Waters complained. "The DG told me to keep close to the PM, don't you know. If I hadn't been 'close' to the lady in Westminster goodness knows what would have happened. And then the country would be in a right old mess!"

The other man paused.

"Yes, about that. How is the shoulder now, I notice you're no longer

sporting a sling?"

"It's still a bit sore, obviously," the old soldier quipped ruefully. "But worse things happen at sea, what?" Again, he grinned that characteristic toothy grin. "Besides, I could tell *the lady* was worrying about it every time she saw me all bandaged up. All things being equal I thought the best thing was to get rid of the sling and wear a brave face. For *her* sake, what?"

"For *her* sake?" His companion echoed, aghast.

"Anyway," Frank Waters concluded, rising to his feet. "I didn't want this bloody job with the Corporation in the first place. While we're about it; I might at least have expected you desk wallahs in England to say thank you for all the work my chaps and I did out in the Gulf last year. As it is you've gone out of your way to behave as if we sent back the film with blood on it!"

The other man's mouth opened and shut like a fish out of water.

"I haven't finished yet," he protested as the ex-SAS man stiffly shot his cuffs and made for the door as swiftly as his recent injuries permitted.

"No? Well I bloody well have, old chap!"

There was a reception in the Prime Minister's rooms at Hertford College tonight and Frank Waters's immediate priority was finding a barber. He could hardly turn up looking like a beatnik! A trip out to the nearest Army base ought to do the trick; everything in Oxford had already shut down around mid-day. Who said nothing was returning to normal in jolly old England?

Duly spruced up he reported for duty at the gatekeeper's cubby hole to Hertford College as it was getting dark. The lady and her top cronies were gathering to listen – and presumably mock and heckle – dear old Jim Callaghan's reply to her magnificent *piece de resistance* of last night.

God, she had been superb!

He had heard tittle-tattle about the lady and the Fighting Admiral; not known what to make of it. It seemed the lady was flesh corporeal after all!

What a woman....

Steuart Pringle's AWPs were all over the place, spic and span and armed to the teeth, looking menacing, daring the IRA to do their worst. That evening Frank Waters was in such a good mood he could not bring himself to cavil about having to surrender his gun into the safe keeping of the Royal Marines for the duration of the evening.

Upstairs there was a hubbub of voices.

Knowing that most of the party bigwigs would be discussing treason against the lady – fomenting plans to be put into effect the day after the election – he briefly regretted having not made a better fist of hiding his gun about his person.

Much though he agreed with most of what the men in the room claimed to stand for; Queen, country, the British way of life, Parliamentary democracy some of the time, and so forth, he had little time for the majority of the two faced, duplicitous scoundrels around the lady.

She really did deserve better...

"Oh, Colonel Waters, I'm so glad the BBC let you come to our little 'party'!" Margaret Thatcher declared loudly, smiling a smile that made the old soldier's legs threaten to buckle at the knees.

A glass was pressed into his hands.

Brandy, the good stuff you could not buy in the shops any more.

Several heavy hands clapped him on the back.

Blinking through tears of pain he grimaced feebly and nodded his appreciation of the sentiments of the 'well-wishers'.

Instantly, there was a brusque reminder that 'Frank is still recovering from his wounds', from *the* Lady, and thankfully the excruciatingly painful back slapping ceased.

"They've all drunk far too much already!" The Prime Minister complained irritably, solicitously leading the invalid to a comfortable chair which, when his tears cleared, he realised was marvellously adjacent to her own in the centre of the low-beamed old room.

Presently, the men – and a handful of women who retreated out of sight and sound at the first opportunity – pulled up chairs or formed a standing rank near the back, as the hour drew near for the 'Address to the Nation of the Right Honourable James Callaghan, MP, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party'.

Airey Neave made his entrance as the entertainment began.

A chair was vacated for the Secretary of State for National Security next to Frank Waters.

"Diana's a little under the weather," his friend told the old soldier, lowly, explaining his late arrival and his wife's absence. "I talked her out of tagging along to this little bean feast at the last moment."

The Labour Party Leader's 'address' commenced, its timbre that of a

funereal dirge. It was not long before the junior members of the gathering were heckling and telling each other jokes in low, smug tones.

"Can we please listen to what Mr Callaghan has to say for himself!" Margaret Thatcher demanded and like naughty puppies the young bloods shrank quietly into the shadows, heads hung low.

Ten minutes later Airey Neave sighed, leaned across Frank Waters to speak confidentially to the Prime Minister.

"Is it just me, Margaret, or doesn't the poor fellow know if he wants to defend the country or not?"

"I think Mr Callaghan knows exactly what he wants to do but he has no idea if his comrades will let him get away with it!"

Frank Waters must have dozed off to sleep later because he was awakened by a sudden tumult of derision.

Apparently, this was because Mr Callaghan had asserted that his Government would pursue a 'rational foreign policy' in which 'the United Kingdom would withdraw its armed forces from East of Suez', and would seek to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the Falkland Islands 'dispute' with the Argentine. Moreover, those troops currently 'stationed' in Northern France would be withdrawn the day after a Labour Government was elected!

It was not lost on the old soldier that throughout the cat-calling and heckling Margaret Thatcher had been silent, now she spoke.

"I will not leave those poor people trying to get to the Channel Ports held by our forces to their fate. Nor will the Royal Navy whatever Mr Callaghan says next Friday morning."

Very little else of what the leader of the Labour Party had to say disturbed Frank Water's napping; James Callaghan's somnolent tones and drab rhetoric, so many clichés strung together with poorly constructed and unenthusiastically enunciated prose, was oddly restful and by its dreary conclusion he felt unusually well-rested.

The room cleared quickly.

Soon he was alone with Airey Neave, Nicholas Ridley and the acting Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Carington.

"That was not a patch on your address, Margaret!" Airey Neave declaimed triumphantly.

"Unfortunately, if those damned pollsters are right it won't be enough," the Prime Minister retorted, momentarily betraying her bone deep weariness.

“Not nearly enough. If I actually thought the Labour Party was capable of delivering the half of their threats and promises I might despair.”

Chapter 63

Sunday 7th March 1965
Dunkirk, France

There had been no dredging of the main channel or soundings of the outer harbour since before the October War, and the stern of the burned-out ferry *Falaise* jutted out of the water alongside the outer wall of the western mole, narrowing the harbour entrance by a quarter.

Even from several hundred yards away as HMS Cavendish's clipper stem slowly knifed through the strangely glassy grey green waters of the English Channel, everybody on her open bridge could see the dark, closely packed ranks of ragged humanity waiting and hoping for rescue on the eastern sea wall.

In the distance pillars of smoke fouled the sky, painting everything hazy, indistinct and tainting the air with the vile stench of burning oil.

Lieutenant-Commander Dermot O'Reilly felt as if he was witnessing a re-enactment of the events of late May and early June 1940. Like everybody, he had seen the iconic pictures of the 'Miracle of Dunkirk', the little boats carrying men off the beaches, the destroyers edging through harbours clogged with the wrecks of sunken ships to carry the troops away to safety...

Four miles out to sea the County class destroyers HMS Devonshire and HMS Hampshire periodically hurled salvoes far inland, directed by Naval Fire Control teams attached to the Royal Marine and Army units manning hastily thrown up revetments south of the town.

What had started as a trickle of refugees had become a flood as brigands in heavily-armed bands roamed Northern France preying upon, dispossessing, murdering and driving out local populations which as one had fled or were in the process of fleeing to the coastal ports, now the last bastions of what had once been France.

The trouble was that once things had started breaking down the genie was out of the bottle and there was no putting the cork back in it. The anarchy in the countryside had begun to infect the handful of remaining oases of order as the influx of starving humanity had overwhelmed the limited resources of the coastal communes.

Dermot O'Reilly had not slept for thirty-six hours, or properly for a week and he knew his men were as exhausted as he was but there was a job to be done.

The port of Dunkirk had been rebuilt in part since 1940. Now the outer port where the ferries docked was separated from a new, inner cargo port connected to the western docks by a coastal ship canal. That was where the oil storage tanks were on fire, sabotaged by the 'enemy' – whoever 'they' were these days – soon after the first landings. Two companies of 43 Commando had gone ashore and cut through the rabble looting and wrecking the port like a dose of salts!

But not before the defenders had set fire to the tanks.

"Wheel amidships!" O'Reilly called, pausing to check the changing bearing of the concrete wall of the Eastern Mole. On the Cavendish's last run to Dunkirk the people on the mole had been so desperate to get onboard that parents had thrown children into the arms of his men as the destroyer had cast off.

O'Reilly had no idea how many men, women and children Cavendish had rescued on its three runs to Dunkirk. Each time the ship was more overloaded, deeper in the water and horribly 'tender' out in the mill race of the Channel. Nobody was counting but he and his ship must have carried several thousand people to England in the last two days. The moment the transom cleared the harbour she had raced for Dover at twenty-five knots, docked beneath the white cliffs, turned around and charged back to France. Other ships were on the Calais and Boulogne 'runs'; and out in the Channel the gun line patrolled like big hungry cats waiting for a chance to pounce on invisible enemies miles inland.

Most of the time the comforting roar of RAF fighters and bombers circling high over the coast fell down to the earth and the sea like a protective blanket.

In the last two days the enemy's guns and mortars had been driven away from the shoreline and his ability to fire directly on the rescue ships negated. Operation Safe Harbour had developed from a simple rescue mission into an ever-escalating exercise to: one, removing the majority of the refugees from the ports of Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk to England and; two, having removed the majority of the refugees, whom there was no way of feeding or housing in France, British forces would thereafter temporarily

‘extend’ their defensive perimeters around those four ports. Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk were to be designated ‘safe havens’ and bases from which British forces might sally forth to open up roads down which more refugees might escape.

Dieppe had been judged ‘too tough a nut to crack’ and the advance guard of Scots Guards sent in to restore order had been, after a prolonged artillery duel between the two ‘Counties’ and the enemy, rescued with the loss of over fifty Guardsmen. Near the end of the operation to evacuate the troops Cavendish had gone close inshore – within two cables of the harbour entrance - and poured 4.5-inch and 40-millimetre rounds into enemy positions as her sister ship, HMS Caprice went in to ‘lift off’ the last Guardsmen and hundreds of civilians. It had broken O’Reilly’s heart having to leave so many helpless people behind but by the time the Caprice got back to England she had had so many holes in her she was in a virtual sinking condition as she limped into and docked at Newhaven.

Cavendish had escorted her sister most of the way back to England, her own pumps starting to work hard to keep her bilges clear as hurriedly welded patches over her recent wounds flexed and ‘wept’ in the Channel chop. That had been yesterday afternoon and already, it seemed like a very long time ago; by evening she had been back on station off Dunkirk, waiting her turn to nose into the outer harbour.

“Is Arromanches holding station?” The commanding officer of the Cavendish demanded.

“Yes, sir! She’s holding at one cable directly astern!”

Cavendish had ‘collected’ the channel steamer Arromanches five miles north of Dunkirk, patiently awaiting an escort inshore. Ranging alongside O’Reilly had had a brief megaphone conversation with the steamer’s master.

‘MAINTAIN RADIO SILENCE FROM NOW ON IF YOU PLEASE, SIR!’ He had demanded. ‘THE FRENCHIES LISTEN TO OUR VHF TRANSMISSIONS! IF THEY KNOW WHEN WE’RE COMING IN TO DOCK THEY’LL TRY TO SHELL THE HARBOUR ENTRANCE! JUST FOLLOW ME IN AND MOOR ASTERN OF ME ALONGSIDE THE EASTERN MOLE!’

O’Reilly eyed the stern of the *Falaise* narrowing the channel ahead of the Cavendish. The Devonshire had nosed into Dunkirk before the steamer was hit by shellfire. The big County class destroyer – the size of a World War

Two light cruiser – had grounded twice as she squeezed out of the port laden with over three thousand refugees. With the deep-water channel partially blocked it was not worth the candle trying to repeat the 'Devonshire experiment'.

"Helmsman!" He called. "Five degrees of port wheel if you please!"

He waited until he felt the rudder bite but not long enough for the ship's bow to alter its angle of attack; at low speeds Cavendish's long lean hull was slow to react to the helm, every helm command took five, ten seconds to take effect unless one or both of the shafts was employed.

"Wheel amidships!"

The bow was moving left now.

O'Reilly gauged distances; held his nerve as the destroyer slid past the wreck of the Falaise. Mercifully, the steamer had been inward bound and 'empty' when she was hit; had she been exiting the harbour she might have had up to two thousand people onboard.

"Stop both!"

HMS Cavendish glided into the calm waters of the harbour.

It began to rain again, another small misery to add to the litany of trials suffered by the survivors huddling on the Eastern Mole as the destroyer began to drift closer, her crew throwing every fender they could lay their hands on over the side to cushion her plates against the first impact.

"Half-astern PORT!"

There was no time for fancy manoeuvring, or space in the increasingly wreck-strewn enclosed waters of the outer harbour.

"STOP BOTH!"

The ship juddered from stem to stern, riding over a sunken obstacle.

Dermot O'Reilly had known there was a risk of grounding running into the port nearly two hours before high tide but sometimes a captain of one of Her Majesty's Ships answered to a greater call than the safety of his command. The Navy could always build more ships; its honour and its pride were things it had taken centuries to establish. The Navy was not its ships but its traditions and if a man was not prepared to die for those traditions he had no right to walk the bridge of one of Her Majesty's Ships. Not for nothing was every man jack onboard the Cavendish rightly proud to serve in '*The Grey Funnel* Line'! Besides, if he 'got away' with sneaking in now, the old destroyer – by then much deeper in the water – would be able to depart

the port less hazardously on the flood tide.

Old destroyers and new frigates alike were all being sent into harm's way, with every available minesweeper and patrol boat creeping inshore into the smaller, shallow inlets where the big ships like Cavendish dare not go. The Channel Fleet was Hell bent on aping the reckless abandon and indifference to danger that other fleets and squadrons had demonstrated in the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf in the last eighteen months. It was as if the whole Navy had been infected by some latter day Nelsonian contagion that flew in the face of every post-World War Two tactical assumption, that future naval warfare would be a cold, detached, over-the-horizon technology-ruled affair. Instead, the old mantra of 'no captain can do more than lay his ship alongside the enemy' was – when the going got tough - the *only* thing an officer in the Queen's service needed to remember.

The Cavendish's Tannoy started blasting a mixture of reassuring promises and cautionary words at the throng on the Eastern Mole as the destroyer came alongside. On the last two trips O'Reilly had had a French-speaking officer broadcasting continuously as the ship docked. Now a score of volunteers – including half-a-dozen women, whose presence was invaluable in comforting those who were the most distraught and traumatised by their recent experiences - rescued in earlier mercy missions mingled with his men to comfort their countrymen and women as they were unceremoniously bundled aboard and directed below decks; the whole operation was becoming, albeit in an organised chaos sort of way, almost 'slick'. Not so the ship herself; between decks she was a mess that stood comparison with any old-fashioned 'pig boat' submarine returning from a long patrol. Each cargo of refugees, hungry and weakened, sea-sick and packed together like sardines left compartments and passageways running with their effluence. Cavendish's crew slopped out, hosed down decks, liberally swabbed disinfectant ahead of taking on the next 'load' but conditions down below were atrocious and there was nothing Dermot O'Reilly could do about it.

At any other time, the damage the ship had suffered off Boulogne – that seemed like months not days ago – ought to have put her in dry dock for a month. Her 'B' main battery gun mount, forward of the bridge had taken a direct hit, and two near misses amidships had wrecked everything on the

torpedo deck, opened up a hundred large and small splinter holes in the hull, wrecked the gun director, severed all the lines to the fire control radar, ruptured a main steam line to the starboard turbine and left her funnel looking like a passable imitation of a colander. Thankfully, the shell that hit ‘B’ turret had glanced off the breech of its 4.5-inch Mark V rifle and exploded some thirty yards beyond the ship, killing two men but leaving the rest of the gun crew miraculously unscathed. In total five men had been killed and another thirteen hospitalised.

Limping into Portsmouth it had seemed as if the entire dockyard work force had swarmed over the Cavendish for the next fifty-two hours unbroken; and then she had been sent back to sea, leaking still, her best speed reduced from somewhere in the mid-thirties to about twenty-six knots, her ‘B’ main battery gun mount removed and the deck plated over, otherwise she was aching to return to ‘the fight’.

Now the Cavendish and the new Tribal class frigate HMS Ashanti were on the ‘Dunkirk run’, each escorting its own ‘channel steamer’. Cavendish’s sisters, the Caesar and Chequers were assigned to Calais, the Blackwood class anti-submarine frigate Dundas and the Leopard class frigate Jaguar were on ‘ferry duty’ at Boulogne. The latest news was that the Ajax and the Dido - the most modern general-purpose frigates in the fleet - had been detached from the gun line out in the Channel and sent them in company with the Battle class destroyer HMS Camperdown, released from her fire support duties in the Thames Estuary, to ‘sort out the situation at Le Havre’. In addition, at least half-a-dozen lightly armed minesweepers and a flotilla of motor patrol boats – covered by the guns of the other new arrival from the Thames, HMS Trafalgar – were busy ‘lifting refugees’ from smaller ports and even off open beaches in the brief windows afforded by the winter tides.

Cavendish ground against her fenders.

Immediately, a gangway clunked down onto her fo'c's'le, and other less substantial ones amidships and at her stern.

Dermot O’Reilly was relieved to see several men in the uniform of the Gendarmerie marshalling the mass of bodies on the mole. The top of the sea wall was half-way up the destroyer’s superstructure, the drop even to the wet fo'c's'le deck was horribly treacherous. He stepped to the bridge wing, took off his cap as he surveyed the faces of the men, women and children his ship had come to France to save.

Spontaneously, he waved his cap.

And to his astonishment a ragged cheer began to travel like a wave of rising sound all the way down the Eastern Mole; and then return.

Suddenly, there was a lump in his throat.

And a mistiness blurring his vision.

Chapter 64

Monday 8th March 1965
Bramall Lane Football Ground, Sheffield

To get to Sheffield from Denis Healey's family home in the village of Alfriston in East Sussex had been a gruelling ten-hour marathon involving four changes of trains and maddening waits for connecting services. At the time of the October War *British Rail* had been in the process of phasing out steam and switching to diesel and electric trains; post-October War when the national electricity grid was in ruins, and oil imports had dwindled to nothing in the spring and summer of 1963, every available steam locomotive had been pressed into service – including many recovered directly from scrap yards – because the one fuel that was not in short supply, or unavailable to the railways, was king coal.

While the relatively small coal fields of Kent had been put out of action; elsewhere in the Welsh valleys, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire, and in the North East and Scotland the coal fields which had fuelled the industrial revolution were intact, their miners and their communities in many places, untouched. Now those coalfields were the heartlands of the Labour Party and the standards of the Durham, Welsh, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire miners and a dozen other northern enclaves fluttered defiantly in the floodlit arena.

It was a meeting of the clans, the soul and sinews of the labour movement was represented on the old sports field; steel workers, shipyard workers, factory workers, mill workers, stevedores and dockers, the historic spine of the Party.

Denis Healey took his place on the stage tonight only as a witness. He had hoped to have got to Sheffield in time to influence the tone of the evening's final speeches; the ones that would be parroted in tomorrow morning's newspapers and probably re-broadcast on radio and TV in the few days remaining before the election. In effect tonight would be the Labour Party's last word of the campaign.

However, by the time Denis Healey had taken a cross country stopping service to Portsmouth, thence to Winchester, on to the junctions at

Basingstoke and Reading, Oxford and finally to Sheffield, there had been just minutes to go before the curtain went up.

Now he was an exhausted and frankly, despairing spectator wearing a mask-like rictus smile hoping above hope that all his worst fears would come to nought.

The plans for this election campaign had first been formulated over a year ago. The process had been horrendously painful, and little had been achieved in attempting to bring the warring left and right factions in the Party back together other than a paper-thin truce which partially covered up the worst of the Party's internal contradictions. In the end the compromises reluctantly, half-heartedly agreed had satisfied nobody, and as was the Party's tradition, the resulting 'plan' had been subverted almost as soon as it was promulgated. Inevitably, from the start of the actual campaign the leftists, rightists and everybody else who supported any kind of 'ism' within the Party had basically, 'gone it alone'.

Thus the Party stood for unilateral disarmament to some, to others re-armament; on the one hand it was religiously committed to Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution – written by Sidney Webb in November 1917 and chiselled in metaphorical tablets of stone 1918 - demanding '*for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service*', nationalising everything; and on the other there was a caucus of 'socialist' free-marketeers who believed, like leading figures in the Party allied to Roy Jenkins, in what a turn of the century Liberal would have considered an essentially pragmatic laissez faire approach to industrial and fiscal policy, and a cautiously internationalist agenda. To an outside observer it might seem that the Labour Party stood for everything and nothing; that it was seeking to be all things to all men except with a hard, militant trades union core that gave every impression of despising what it described and viewed as 'middle class values'. The Party was at once the home of the bully boy unions led by avowed Marxists and the Fabian dreamers, pacifists and the revolutionaries, the lost and the found of British politics preoccupied with righting the wrongs of a World which no longer existed, having been devastated, and mostly swept away on that terrible night two-and-a-half years

ago in October 1962.

Jim Callaghan had been against profligately expending the Party's funds and energies in a handful of big, set piece 'events'. This jamboree – or as the 'Foot Wing' of the movement called it, 'a Gala', a thing borrowed from traditional working-class celebrations of solidarity like the Durham Miners' Gala and similar pit district and industrial city 'parties' – was the last, and culminating event in a series of five great rallies. The campaign had opened in Glasgow at the vast amphitheatre of Hampden Park, the caravan had moved on to the Arms Park in Cardiff – the temple of Welsh rugby – before the three-ring circus had moved on to Ayrsome Park, the home of Middlesbrough Football Club in the North East, thence to a poorly attended damp squib of an affair held at the Iffley Road athletics track in Oxford where Roger Bannister had broken the four minute mile barrier in May 1954. There had been nothing 'record breaking' about the 'disappointing Oxford meeting' eight days ago; although at the time the organising committee had comforted itself with the knowledge that the Sheffield finale was a 'sure fire thing'.

Which was true but only so far as it went; because nobody had satisfactorily – or at least, to *his* satisfaction – yet explained to Denis Healey, what exactly the Party was trying to achieve at these ruinously expensive to mount 'Galas'. It seemed to him that gathering the disparate 'tribes of the left', many of whom were paid or reimbursed all their expenses for attending from the Party's Union-subsidised coffers emptying the war chest carefully built up to finance the rest of the campaign – much though it cemented what the National Executive Committee described as the 'core' of the movement – would not, in these apocalyptic times have anything like the broader impact it might have had in pre-war days.

Far too much damned ideology and not enough common sense...

The World had changed.

The country had changed...

None of his colleagues seemed to recognise that there was a fundamental disconnect in holding great – and openly socialist rallies – in venues almost exclusively created by the treasure of the wealthy Victorians who had made Great Britain the greatest capitalist industrial empire the World had ever seen; and to him Bramall Lane painted those contradictions large.

It had begun as a cricket ground in 1855, leased by Michael Ellison, the

founding father of the Yorkshire County Cricket Club, from the Duke of Norfolk, originally sited in open ground south of the centre of the city.

Football had come to Bramall Lane – so named after the wealthy family of that name – soon afterwards and it had been the largest stadia in the north for many years. The original home of Sheffield Wednesday – originally the football team of the Wednesday Cricket Club – it had hosted England association football internationals, and in 1902, a cricket Test Match between England and Australia. In 1912 it had hosted the FA Cup Final replay in which Barnsley beat West Bromwich Albion by a single goal. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century it had been the home of Sheffield United, and in 1932 over sixty-eight thousand people had crammed into it to watch a cup tie between United and their fierce Yorkshire rivals, Leeds. Badly damaged by the Germans in the Sheffield Blitz of December 1940 the ground had been patched up, and sections of it rebuilt in the last twenty years. The place was a monument to working class sporting loyalties assuaged by the purses of rich men. To quote the Roman satirical poet Juvenal: '*from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions - everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things - bread and circuses...*'

Paying the owners of stadiums like Bramall Lane for the privilege of preaching to the already thrice converted was, to Denis Healey's thinking the modern day equivalent of paying Danegeld to the Viking oppressors of yore!

But the Party's orators – few of whom had a patch on Michael Foot, the one genuine article amidst the dross – never worried about a little thing like that. What they wanted was a big stage, a huge audience and to hear the sound of their own voices booming over the public address system.

There were colliery bands competing with each other – there was no fraternal solidarity in the brass band world – and sections within the crowd, numbering fifteen to thirty-five thousand, depending on whom one spoke to, baying for the blood of a Tory minister. Speaker after speaker sneered at '*The Angry Widow*', not because she was angry but because she was a woman notwithstanding this was supposed to be the party which had backed suffrage in 1906, of Margaret Bondfield – the first woman to hold a Cabinet post, Ellen Wilkinson who had been a member of the Wartime National Government, Jenny Lee and Barbara Castle, who had fought the cause of her

voters as hard as any male Labour member of the post-October War administrations of either Edward Heath, or Margaret Thatcher.

The Party could get away with that misogynistic claptrap before October 1962; since then everything which had been set in stone before the war – instead of being under threat or beginning to be questioned as the post-World War Two generation came of age – had been thrown up in the air. Societal attitudes had been tested, twisted and re-modelled in the trials of the post-apocalyptic age, and everybody – men and women – had had to adjust to the new world in which they all lived. So many of the men who had previously held sway in politics, commerce and industry had died and, Healey suspected, many women had come – crudely put - to the conclusion that since everybody had had to 'muck in together' it was about time that they got their 'piece of the cake', too. There was no going back to the old 'normality'.

In the 1945 War women had filled the gaps left by the 'fighting men' in the factories and in the public services; afterwards, the returning 'heroes' had banished the majority back to the kitchen. That was not going to happen again, no matter how many brass bands played or how loudly speakers proclaimed a new 'socialist dawn'. Pragmatically, there would be no ongoing economic recovery, industrial resurgence or reconstruction unless everybody pitched in, men and women and when the Labour Party talked about 'education for all', and 'fairness in the workplace' it needed to convince women, as well as men, that it actually meant, and truly understood, what it said.

The wind was getting up, tugging at the banners as big, malignant drops of rain fell singly, then in stair rods as James Callaghan's turn at the microphones arrived, some thirty minutes later than scheduled.

Healey could tell that his friend was royally 'cheesed off' with the previous speakers had over run their allocated times, following Michael Foot's example, because in the Party Leader's otherwise lugubrious manner there was something like a spring in his heavy step as he approached the dais. Nothing short of incandescent anger had truly penetrated his gathering lethargy in the last few weeks.

Healey wondered, more in hope than expectation if Callaghan would deviate from the script he – or rather, his amanuensis, Peter Shore - had hammered out with the National Executive Committee. What was needed was a strident call to arms; not a victory speech gloating over the downfall of

the main party – the Conservatives – in the national government which had saved the country from starvation and countless humiliations in the last two years.

Margaret Thatcher had disparaged Labour's manifesto but by and large refrained from direct personal attacks on its big beasts. For example, she had even been civil to and about Michael Foot, most of the time. In fact, she had steered clear of normal 'party issues' and focused almost wholly on her personal vision for the nation's future.

Hope, hope, hope...

Was that too much to ask for?

"Comrades," James Callaghan called testily into the dazzle of the floodlights. The stage was covered to a fashion, but only 'to a fashion', now the rain began to slant across it, infiltrating the wings and making a score of dignitaries pull their coats close, their cloth caps and homburgs down on their brows, as they edged away from the periphery. Spits of moisture were obviously smearing the Party leader's horn-rim glasses. He took them off for a moment, re-positioned them on his nose. "I speak to you this evening on the verge of a victory for our great cause second only to that of Clem Atlee and Aneurin Bevin in 1945!"

Denis Healey somehow resisted the temptation to put his head in his hands.

His friend was invoking the name and memory of Aneurin Bevan...

Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot's mentor, Minister of Health under Atlee and the great hero of the left; *not* Ernest Bevin, the larger than life mighty Trade Unionist anti-communist man of international affairs whom the left had never forgiven for championing a British atomic bomb, and for being the figure on the World stage none of them had ever been, or ever would be: '*we've got to have this thing* [the atom bomb] *over here whatever it costs and we've got to have the bloody Union Jack flying on top of it!*' Bevin had fought his corner and lived with the opprobrium it brought down on his head; in contrast Nye Bevan had guarded his 'purity of principle' by resigning from Government when Atlee diverted funds from the National Insurance Scheme to pay for post-war re-armament.

That was the problem with the Party.

The 'social justice' argument always won out over the need to deal with the harsh realities of the World as it was, as opposed to how they all wished it

to be.

"We have fought a good fight. We have taken that fight to our political foes' territory..."

Denis Healey could not stop himself scowling.

We have done nothing of the sort!

"And we have won the debate on the future of our great nation. I say to those who honestly and sincerely believe that we remain one of the World's peacemakers to face up to the realities of the present day. Even as I speak the Government to which I belonged until recently..."

Actually, you are still the Deputy Prime Minister, Jim!

"...has opened the floodgates to countless unfortunate refuges from the continent whom we have nowhere to house, nor the capacity to feed. It is not heartless to maintain that it is wrong for our Government to 'invite' onto our shores tens of thousands of persons who bring with them nothing other than the clothes in which they stand to contribute to our ongoing struggles. Yes, it is our Christian duty to help those in need; no, it is not our duty to take upon ourselves the woes of the World!"

Denis Healey viewed the now massive rescue mission in the Channel as the truest measure of the country's recovery from the cataclysm of October 1962. That it was capable of offering a helping hand to those in such desperate straits was the mark of a nation which had not just sustained its civilization but retained its conscience under the direst of conditions.

His friend and Party Leader had given in to the insular, xenophobic prejudices of the flag waving idiots out there in the falling rain and in so doing turned his back on basic human decency just to appeal to the legions of the faithful.

And it was a disgrace...

"On the morning of Friday 12th March, I will order the Royal Navy to return to port. I will recall the troops we have sent to France. I will not lead this country into a new foreign war!"

Problematically, this was not a message that found universal favour in the stadium; an awful lot of the jobs held down by the men in it depended on Government spending on things like warships, fighting aircraft, tanks and all the components and equipment modern armies, navies and air forces required. Moreover, there was a lot more money to be made selling guns than ploughshares; and while the leadership of the Party might not understand

the economics of these things – or turn a blind eye to them – the less dedicated socialists in the audience were a lot more worried about where their next pay packets and ration coupons were coming from, than the fine detail or the morality of British foreign policy.

But then the Party Leader's words were mainly addressed to the men upon whom his position depended, his MPs and the hard core of activists who had conceived and implemented the dog's breakfast that passed for the Party's 'election strategy'. Ever since the Landslide of 1945 it had been accepted wisdom that great swathes of the country would *always* vote Labour, and that the people – almost exclusively men – who 'represented' those areas and controlled the block votes of the trade unions within the councils of the Party, constituted the *only* constituency that a Labour Leader had to carry with him.

So tonight, James Callaghan was talking to that particular constituency confident in his conviction that the electorate would swing in behind him if for no better reason than pre-war class loyalties would inevitably, prevail.

"Our opponents have scare-mongered about the creation of a socialist state after the election. That it would only be a matter of time before we resorted to some kind of British Eastern European model. It may be that in due course responsibility for the disaster of October 1962 will be assigned..."

Denis Healey tried and failed to stop himself shaking his head; around him men who ought to have known better were nodding like obedient donkeys.

What next?

Show trials to appease the hotheads?

A distant flash of lightning lit the city to the north.

The crash of its thunder rolled over Bramall Lane.

Another huge flash, virtually overhead momentarily painted the nearby football stands blue-white, before its deafening crescendo drowned out all else.

And then, as the banner-waving faithful scurried for cover, the stage party scattered and James Callaghan was left standing forlornly on the dais, the heavens broke asunder and a downpour of Biblical proportions flooded the stadium.

As the giant blue-white electrical tridents of the gods stabbed down into the surrounding streets men and women were trampled in the rush to get

under cover, water soon stood ankle-deep on the field, which instantly became a quagmire and the Labour Party’s great march began to flounder in the mud.

The city’s lights went out.

The floodlights went dark.

And all was chaos...

Chapter 65

Tuesday 9th March 1965
Saint-Germain-des-Fossés, France

‘We will winter here and consider our options in the spring,’ Major General Sergey Akhromeyev had decided. ‘In the meantime, we will send out foraging parties. We will not steal from people in this region. People who share their supplies with us or bring useful skills to our ‘commune’ will be protected. Anybody who picks a fight with us will be liquidated.’

Vera Bertrand had found herself appointed Mayoress of Saint-Germain-des-Fossés where within forty-eight hours of the fighting ending in Vichy, some sixty members of ‘Colonel Krueger’s 207th Cavalry – a band of murderous brigands by any other name – had surrendered, along with over a hundred camp followers and a baggage train bearing enough food, mostly grain and canned produce, to help eke out the starvation rations in Vichy for at least another two months. Akhromeyev’s men were still inspecting the formidable miscellany of American and French military hardware they had captured in the village without a shot having to be fired.

The 207th Cavalry had seized Vichy with just the forward echelon of its three hundred men – and as many camp followers – without waiting for the rest of his ‘column’ to catch up.

Word having got around that Akhromeyev had executed Krueger, halted the killing and was offering unconditional amnesties to any former member of the 207th who handed himself in and surrendered his personal weaponry, the Russians were having trouble getting used to the idea that Krueger had outnumbered them in ‘effectives’ ten or twenty to one.

In any event, Vera now had the power of life and death over the surviving villagers and a detachment of two dozen former ‘brigands’ under the command of two of Akhromeyev’s men - who were already treating her like she was their chief’s second-in-command - to keep the peace and to obey her every whim.

‘What happens when a country falls apart,’ Akhromeyev had told her, taking her into his confidence without apparently, a qualm, ‘is that for a while bandits like Krueger seem unstoppable. But,’ he had qualified, ‘after a while

they so waste the land that they have to keep moving and sooner or later they run into somebody stronger, or better organised. And then they are fucked because by then they have left only scorched earth behind them and enemies to either side of their only route of retreat. When the summer comes we will send emissaries to the north east back along Krueger's line of advance seeking alliances and new friends.'

The man's clarity of thought and fast-developing appreciation of what he liked to call the 'tactical situation' had, more than once, taken Vera Bertrand's breath away.

She had asked him if he wanted to sleep with her again.

'Only if it gives you the pleasure it gives me, Madame Bertrand.'

Obviously, it did.

Nevertheless, she had been livid when he had shut down her 'business' in Vichy.

'Decent communities don't have brothels!' He had declared. 'There are better things your girls can be doing than lying on their back all day.'

Needless to say, he was probably right.

She had reacted badly because she thought he was taking away her 'power'; not realising that he actually regarded her as his partner, his 'second-in-command'.

And now she was mistress of all she surveyed in the village of her birth...

Akhromeyev was right; healthy young people were in short supply in the new Vichy- Saint-Germain-des-Fossés Commune.

'We can build a community here or we can become another, stronger armed band of criminals like the 207th Cavalry. I prefer the former; not for any high-flown moral reasons, simply because the latter is inherently unsustainable in the long run.'

There were M-48 tanks blocking the roads to the north of the village, soup kitchens functioning in the main square, as they were now in Vichy and Bellerive. Russian troopers paired with French-speaking former 207th men patrolled in pairs, barely noticed by the locals. Several work squads of disarmed former 207th men were clearing the streets of Vichy, unblocking drains, repairing roofs and boarding broken windows. Every lump of coal, cut wood, and cupful of diesel and petrol was being collected at centralised communal dumps and the remaining adult citizenry was being processed to identify useful experience and individual practical skills. Old soldiers,

plumbers, carpenters, mechanics of every kind, teachers, clerks and civil servants were required to re-activate essential town hall functions, the list of ‘things that had to be done’ was potentially endless; and everything needed to happen as soon as possible.

And, Akhromeyev had admitted: ‘If the people are kept busy enough they won’t think too hard about what has just happened. In a couple of weeks, they’ll get used to the idea that the Russians are in charge and they are living in a safe place. But we need to get there first!’

Vera had asked him why he was so untroubled by the threat posed by the Front Internationale in Clermont-Ferrand less than fifty kilometres to the south.

The man had laughed.

‘Have you met *those* people down there?’

‘But there are thousands of them?’

‘If they all came north at once there is nothing we can do about it except run away,’ Akhromeyev had explained patiently. ‘That is why we must make alliances with the communes to the north either side of the route of the 207th Cavalry’s march south, and why, until then we must prove to our neighbours that we are not brigands.’

Having installed her as Mayoress in Saint-Germain-des-Fossés, he had appointed the pompous little man who had been Town Clerk some years before the Cuban Missiles War, Henry Seligny, Mayor of Vichy itself. Bellerive, on the western bank of the Allier opposite Vichy was fast turning into a military camp and vehicle park.

Vera had told the Russian that she detested Henry Seligny.

Akhromeyev had had no time for old animosities.

‘Try harder to get on with him; we don’t have time for all the normal small-town shit,’ he had informed her brusquely. She would have made a scene if she had not assumed he would already have read the riot act to her counterpart in Vichy. This was a thing the man immediately confirmed: ‘He doesn’t like you either but he knows *exactly* what I will do to him if he upsets you...’

Vera heard the sound of a car crunching raggedly across the gravel outside the Town Hall, forced herself not to go to the window. Only Akhromeyev had the use of a car, an old abandoned Renault his ‘boys’ had got running again. The Russian’s ‘boys’ all had the look of real bandits,

killers every one; albeit they all had other gifts; most of them were backwoodsmen, or miracle workers with any kind of machinery, medics and some of them already spoke passably understandable French.

There was a commotion as the rag-tag group of former 207th Cavalry men scuttled to form an honour guard.

“Stop fucking about and get on with what you’re supposed to be doing!” The Russian barked at them.

Vera Bertrand chuckled to herself.

The men he had been bawling out probably did not have a word of Moskva Russian between them but every one of them had instantly understood what ‘the General’ had just said.

“My boys have got the telephone exchange in Vichy up and running again,” Sergey Akhromeyev announced as he marched into the first-floor room Vera had requisitioned as her office. “Hopefully, we’ll have a line up between here and the command posts in Vichy and Bellerive by tomorrow. Assuming enough of the cables between here and Vichy are still intact, that is. If not, we’ll string new lines.”

It was bitterly cold outside and the man had acquired a heavy greatcoat on his travels.

“You came all the way up here to tell me that?” The woman inquired tartly.

“No. We’ve been in radio communication with those arseholes down in the Auvergne...”

“Oh?” This, Vera suspected, was not good news.

“We told them we had encountered heavy resistance and were retreating west towards Cognat-Lyonne in the hope that we’d meet friendly forces in Gannet. We reported fifty percent casualties and a Yankee tank regiment dug in and holding both banks of the Allier south of Vichy.”

“Will they believe that?”

Akhromeyev shrugged.

“A couple of weeks ago *those* people in Clermont-Ferrand knew so little about what was going on up here that they sent a bunch of complete strangers to find out!”

The man grimaced, sighed.

“Anyway, I’ve sent a couple of my boys with half-a-dozen locals who know the country down the valley of the Allier to stake out the roads to the

south of Vichy, just in case the numskulls down there actually send somebody north to check out my story."

His tone left no doubt that anybody 'nosing around' would be 'dealt with' with deadly dispatch.

Vera had fished out the bottle of Cognac she had found in one of her predecessor's drawers in the old Mayor's Office, an altogether grander albeit ransacked room. She had only found a single unchipped glass. She poured two fingers of the dark nectar and passed it across to Akhromeyev.

He drank the first finger.

"What are we celebrating?" He asked, rising and pressing the glass back into the woman's hands, the second finger of alcohol untouched.

"I don't know. Hope?"

Akhromeyev walked to the window and stared out at the frosty vista through the grubby, misted panes.

"Back home you can fly for hours over country that's 'electronically dead', or as good as," he told Vera, his tone sad, resigned. "Do you know what that means?"

"Nothing good?"

"No, nothing good. It means that the modern world, perhaps, everything below has been wiped out. Wiped off the face of the Earth. This country is going the same way. There are still people out there broadcasting if you search the frequencies; but everything is slowly dying. France got all its oil from overseas before the war, and its coal from Belgium and the north-east where the bombs hit the hardest. People are freezing to death, or starving to death, or both, everywhere. Paris might not have been France but without Paris, what is France? Travel a hundred, maybe two hundred kilometres to the east and everything is gone, dead for a thousand kilometres, in some directions two or three thousand kilometres. Germany, Poland, Belorussia, most of the Ukraine, all gone. The Baltic States, the motherland to Leningrad all the way to the Arctic Circle, all gone; and here we are, alone in a country that is falling apart, in places returning to the Stone Age. So yes, I try to give my boys 'hope'. What else can I do?"

Vera Bertrand thought about it.

There was nobody the Russian could talk to except her.

It had been a mistake attempting to pursue her years' old feud with Henry Seligny; testing how far she could get with pillow talk. That would

have worked with many men but with this man she would not make that mistake again.

“In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king, Sergey Fyodorovich,” she said, joining Akhromeyev at the window. “You can be King, and I shall be Queen of all we survey.”

She handed the soldier the bottle of Cognac and raised her glass to her lips.

Chapter 66

Tuesday 9th March 1965
Cabinet Room, King's College, Oxford

"I summoned this emergency Cabinet Committee so that members could be briefed on the latest developments in London, the Channel and Northern France, and last night's bomb outrage in Southampton," Margaret Thatcher purred angrily, "even though," she added with barely concealed scorn, "certain parties have already turned their backs on decisions previously arrived at in good faith around this very table!"

"That's hardly fair, Prime Minister," Home Secretary Roy Jenkins objected urbanely as he removed his glasses and began to clean the left lens.

"Hardly fair!" Margaret Thatcher exploded. "How do you think our brave boys on those ships carrying sick and starving French women and children to safety will feel when they learn the Labour Party plans to stab them in the back?"

"Margaret," James Callaghan groaned. "We are in the final phase of a general election, Cabinet solidarity is..."

The Prime Minister was not in a listening frame of mind.

"Nonsense!" She snarled disgustedly. "At least I know where I stand with that buffoon Michael Foot, but as for the rest of you..."

Around the Cabinet table – an ancient, oaken structure which half-filled the former Fellows' Dining Room – nobody made a sound lest they be the next target for the Prime Minister's wrath.

Margaret Thatcher had got off on the wrong foot with Jim Callaghan and Roy Jenkins that morning, remarking that she was relieved to find them 'dried out' after the tempestuous conclusion of 'the Sheffield rally'. They had thought she was making fun of them when actually, she had just been inquiring after their health.

At least forty people had been trampled, crushed to death underfoot in the panic in the poorly stewarded crowd; a thing which would have garnered the Party's cause no little sympathy were it not for the accusations of 'gross negligence' and 'callousness' flying backwards and forwards in the Yorkshire press and on radio being so vitriolically stoked up by 'Labour

Party officials'. The early editions of the newly revived *Daily Telegraph*, now based in Birmingham was asking, rightly in her opinion: 'If Jim Callaghan cannot organise the stewarding of a Labour Party rally how is he going to feed the nation next winter?'

To Margaret Thatcher's right hand sat the unflappable, imperturbable presence of Sir Henry Tomlinson, Head of the Home Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, to her left the only other woman in the room, Alison Munro, the frighteningly competent, frequently acerbic Secretary of State for Supply, Energy and Transportation, the woman who kept the railways running, the power stations fed with coal, and was responsible for ensuring that famine no longer stalked the land. At the left-hand end of the table sat Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson, as always slightly, noticeably apart from his colleagues. Such was the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's way, and these days it no longer warranted comment. The Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Michael Carver sat across from the Prime Minister flanked by Airey Neave. Both the soldier and the Secretary of State for National Security were grim-faced. Nicholas Ridley, the Information Minister was blank-faced at Airey Neave's elbow. The two Labour Party men able to get to Oxford in time for the meeting; James Callaghan and Roy Jenkins had taken chairs at the right-hand end of the table, as far away as possible from *The Angry Widow*.

The Prime Minister took a series of deep breaths to calm her roiling outrage. Pat Harding-Grayson had clung to her arm ten minutes ago and not let her go before she promised not to lose her temper with 'those bastards'. Such talk coming from a lifelong supporter of the Labour Party had come as a little bit of a shock to her; but last night's veiled threats and the gloating, triumphal hubris of the Sheffield 'Soviet' had inflamed emotions and polarised opinions in Oxford. All of a sudden Margaret Thatcher was in the unusual position of being deluged with pledges of undying loyalty and support from the most unlikely corners of and characters within her own Party. She had never suspected there were so many Galahad-like backwoodsmen in the Conservative Party queuing up to be modern-day Sir Walter Rayleigh's, ready and willing to throw their metaphorical cloaks over the muddied waters beneath her feet.

But then in threatening 'those responsible' for the October war in such unambiguous terms with what *might* be 'inquests' or 'inquisitions' or even

‘show trials’, and loosely talking of ‘assigning responsibility’, Jim Callaghan could hardly have done her a greater political service.

She glared a while longer at the Deputy Prime Minister.

Never again!

Whatever happened on Thursday she would never again permit *these* people seats in *her* Government!

To all intents and purposes after this meeting closed *they* would have no substantive role in the last hours of *this* Administration.

“Never again!” She involuntarily murmured aloud.

“I beg your pardon, Prime Minister,” Sir Henry Tomlinson ventured, looking up from his notebook. “I didn’t catch that. Was it an observation you wished for me to minute?”

“Thank you, no, Sir Henry.” She turned to the Secretary of State for National Security, addressing a question that strictly speaking fell under the law and order brief and competence of the Home Secretary. “What is the latest on the Southampton outrage and the hunt for those responsible, Airey?”

Her friend glanced towards a red-faced Roy Jenkins.

“One of the bombs appears to have detonated prematurely,” he reported. “Or rather, while in transit in the city centre. Thankfully, at that hour, 10:40 in the evening there were few people in the immediate vicinity. Several people were injured by flying glass but it may be that the only fatalities were those of the bomber and his associates. The second explosion at approximately a minute past eleven o’clock occurred on the quay alongside the Queen Mary, which as you know is being employed as a temporary reception centre for refugees from France. This was a large car bomb comprising perhaps a hundred pounds of high explosives. The authorities in Southampton are now saying that as many as eighty people may have been killed and as many as three hundred injured so seriously as to require hospital treatment. The IRA claimed responsibility for both blasts by means of a telephone call to the *Manchester Guardian*. Although presently we hold fifteen suspects in connection with other terroristic attacks we have no leads at this time in regard of last night’s attacks...”

Margaret Thatcher hurled a venomous look at the Home Secretary.

“What are the Police doing about this?” She demanded.

“Presently, they are focused on public order issues in the city of Southampton,” Roy Jenkins stammered, his lisp very pronounced, with r’s

randomly becoming w's. "As I have said many times, the *cwossover* of the duties of my ministry and that of *Aiwey's* causes a great deal of *fwiction* on the *gwound* in the aftermath of these *dweadful* atrocities..."

The Prime Minister's eyes had narrowed.

"Nothing, then!" She rasped dismissively as if to say 'as usual!'

Eleven months ago, she had authorised the employment of 'special measures' to induce suspects to 'talk' in the wake of the Brize Norton and Cheltenham attacks; and one self-confessed IRA man had died in custody. Since then she had forbidden the 'torture of prisoners' held by either the civil or the military authorities at home or abroad. 'Special Measures' had previously been employed against the conspirators behind the attack on Balmoral in December 1963; that had not been her decision to make at the time but in retrospect she knew it too, had been a misstep.

We are better than that; we will not stoop to the level of our enemies.

"For the record," she informed the two socialist representatives at the table – the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary openly evinced socialist sympathies but he was not actually a member of the Labour Party, like his wife having let his membership lapse after the October War – "I have not been asked, nor have I sanctioned extraordinary measures to be taken against any of the men or women in custody at this time."

Judging by last night's 'rally' the Labour Party planned to put its opponents in the dock; presumably, because that was so much easier than actually trying to win the argument!

"I will travel to Southampton this afternoon," Margaret Thatcher decided abruptly. She turned to Michael Carver. "CDS, will it be possible to organise a helicopter or a flight from Brize Norton at short notice?"

"Yes, Prime Minister," the cool, patrician General with the steely, hawk-eyed visage nodded. "If I might be excused a moment I shall instruct my Staff to make the necessary operational and security arrangements directly."

The Chief of the Defence Staff only left the room for thirty seconds.

"Rather than have you go out to Brize Norton; one of the new Sea Kings will be tasked to pick you up at The Parks at your convenience, Prime Minister," he reported.

Another of Lyndon Johnson's 'good will gestures' last autumn had been to promise the supply of a dozen Sikorsky SH-3 Sea Kings (the Marine Corps variant of the helicopter) to the RAF 'to assist in logistical and VIP

transportation roles'. British crews had gone to the United States for familiarization training and the first of the big, long-range machines was now coming into operational service in England.

Margaret Thatcher allowed herself a ghost of a smile.

'The Parks' was seventy acres of parkland and woods by the river. It was the University's sports arena, and only a short car ride from King's College.

"Thank you, Sir Michael. Would you be so good as to bring us all up to date with recent developments in London and in the Channel please?"

The Chief of the Defence Staff briefly ordered his thoughts.

"It is now evident that the hostile forces commanding the interior all along the French Channel coastline are deliberately driving the citizens of the coastal margins into the sea. My Staff have considered several scenarios; the most likely is that the newcomers only have sufficient resources for themselves and it is easier to expel resident populations than to butcher them."

The Home Secretary frowned and muttered something under his breath.

The Chief of the Defence Staff viewed him dead-eyed.

"Massacring civilian populations is a messy business, Mr Jenkins," he observed didactically. "Even the SS found it corrupting and deleterious to unit cohesion in the forty-five war. Moreover, efficiently getting rid of large numbers of cadavers inevitably presents almost insuperable public health issues. Hence, we believe that the people pouring into the Channel ports are not so much refugees, as persons systematically 'displaced'. Semantically, none of this really matters other than in the sense the enemy forces occupying the margins around the still functioning ports are harassing, rather than attempting to capture those towns and by and large, avoiding contact with our ground forces at this time."

"They're driving out the existing population en masse?" James Callaghan queried redundantly.

"Yes, sir," Carver confirmed tersely, before continuing, "I suspect their motivation is pragmatic, not ideological although there is a corpus of evidence that the newcomers are from Germany and the Low Countries, so there may be some element of nationalistic, cultural or racial motivation. That will become clearer in due course. More pressing at the moment is that the 'enemy', if I may use that term, has withdrawn his guns some miles

inland and hidden the same, and begun to shell the entrances to the ports of Dunkirk, Boulogne and Calais in the hour either side of high tide. Yesterday and last night this caused us great difficulties and resulted in an as yet unknown number of casualties."

Michael Carver paused, collecting his thoughts, steepling his long fingers before him.

"The destroyer Chequers was hit by two rounds and sustained damage to her machinery spaces. Before she could be taken under tow she drifted onto sand banks off Calais. Operations are ongoing to rescue her crew. At Boulogne the anti-submarine frigate Ashanti was badly damaged by several near misses, fouled a submerged wreck and subsequently had to be grounded within the harbour in a sinking condition."

The Chief of the Defence Staff pursed his lips.

"The most notable incident overnight occurred at Dunkirk where the steamer Arromanches sustained damage to her steering gear, and after losing power collided with the wreck of another vessel as she was exiting the outer harbour. HMS Cavendish, like Arromanches loaded 'to the gunwales with refugees' according to the First Sea Lord, somehow managed to get a line onboard the steamer and to drag her clear of the sea walls. Regrettably, the tow line had to be cut when the two ships were some two miles out to sea. Cavendish, a ship of similar tonnage to the Arromanches, in her overloaded condition, was in danger of capsizing under the pressure of the tow line in the prevailing seaway – the wind is blowing Force Seven from the south west – and was ordered to abandon Arromanches."

Carver looked around the table before refocusing on the Prime Minister.

"However, in the event the captain of the Cavendish subsequently disobeyed his orders and took his ship, which had sustained splinter damaged and an unknown number of casualties while alongside the Mole at Dunkirk, back inshore to pass a new tow line bow-to-bow between the two ships and proceeded to tow the steamer 'backwards' away from shoaling waters until in deeper water the much larger destroyer HMS Hampshire was able to take over the tow." The Chief of the Defence Staff allowed himself a fleeting smile. "You may be interested to know that the captain of the Cavendish – who displayed such cavalier 'independence of mind' – was formerly the Navigation Officer of HMS Talavera at the Battle of Malta, Prime Minister."

Margaret Thatcher nodded, found herself thinking of her stay in

Philadelphia with Peter and Marija Christopher, and holding her god-daughter to be in her arms...

She smiled; felt like she was invincible.

"Do we have a count for the number of refugees landed in England yet?" She inquired, her voice suffused with pride.

The soldier nodded to Alison Munro.

The Secretary of State for Supply, whose Department had taken on the civil organisation of the 'Channel Emergency' consulted her notes.

"The daily 'uplift'," she prefaced, very much the schoolmistress demanding the attention of her recalcitrant classroom, "has increased from six thousand a day to twenty-two thousand yesterday in the course of the last ten days. Presently, my department has processed one hundred and thirty-one thousand persons. That's in the last fortnight. Now the Navy has put all those mothballed channel steamers back into service we're a bit overwhelmed, frankly," she confessed wryly, with no hint of complaint. "The unfortunate 'incident' in Southampton doesn't help, of course. The Admiralty has made available HMS Victorious and the old cruiser Sheffield – they're both moored in Fareham Creek awaiting repair or disposal – as accommodation ships and opened up all the old forts around Portsmouth as reception centres, which has greatly helped my people. Ships returning from Le Havre are now being diverted to the facilities at Weymouth and Portland; Southampton, Portsmouth and Dover are all flooded with new arrivals. I'm in the process of running special rail services from Southampton to the Midlands to alleviate the strain on the 'reception ports'. We are expecting the daily uplift from the French ports to exceed thirty thousand persons today. The Navy is doing a sterling job..."

"Can we actually feed and house all these people?" James Callaghan asked grimly.

"Yes. The arrangements we have put in place are not elegant, but they will suffice for the present," Alison Munro retorted. "When the weather gets better we will set the new arrivals to work building living quarters. So far, the winter has been relatively mild and our strategic food and fuel depots are in a much better state than I had any right to hope three months ago. Yes, we will pull through even if we have to feed hundreds of thousands of new mouths."

"What can you tell us about the refugees, Alison?" Margaret Thatcher

prompted.

“Of the one hundred and thirty-one thousand figure I quoted earlier fifty-two thousand were adult women, eighteen years of age and above, thirty-nine thousand adult men, and forty thousand are ‘youths’ of seventeen years or younger roughly in the proportion sixty to forty, boys against girls. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence now that the ‘invaders’ in France prey disproportionately on adult males and adolescent girls,” the Secretary of State for Supply remarked acerbically. “How on earth any civilized person can refuse to help these people defies decency,” she concluded, hurling a contemptuous glare at the two Labour Party politicians at the end of the table.

“Nobody is suggesting anything of the sort!” Roy Jenkins replied, seething with indignation.

Alison Munro was famous for not tolerating fools.

“What on earth do you think will happen to all those poor people in France if the Navy is ordered to return to port on Friday morning, Mr Jenkins?” She demanded angrily.

“Dammit!” James Callaghan complained. The Deputy Prime Minister’s face was flushed with anger. “Whatever happens on Thursday you don’t think any Government under my leadership would just call a halt overnight?”

Michael Carver coughed.

The Chief of the Defence Staff sighed: ‘Forgive me, sir. But that is not what you said last night.” His reflective gaze fell sadly on the Leader of the Labour Party’s face. “You will understand that in the circumstances - after what we have all been through - if recent events have not given me,” he shook his head, “and the other Chiefs of Staff, certain pause for thought.”

The hairs on the back of Margaret Thatcher’s neck were standing on end.

Had the CDS just thrown down the gauntlet to the next Prime Minister?

She did not dwell on it.

“Please share the good news you brought me last night about the fight to secure the London Corridor, Sir Michael?” She invited the professional head of the Armed Forces.

“Resistance has crumbled everywhere north of the River Thames, Prime Minister. Areas on the South Bank are now secure and the Commissioner for London County is in communication with the main groups of survivors living therein.”

Miriam Prior, notwithstanding she was a candidate on Labour’s ‘Outer

London’ lists in the forthcoming election, had been the obvious candidate as the first Commissioner for London County.

“I am delighted to report that there is no significant fighting in progress anywhere in the former Greater London Area,” Michael Carver emphasised. “Moreover, preparations are being made for ground forces held in reserved during Operation Poplar to be transferred immediately to the South Coast to assist Mrs Munro’s Department in the current emergency.”

Chapter 67

Wednesday 10th March 1965
Offices of The Washington Post, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia

Ben Bradlee, the Managing Editor of *The Washington Post* was still a little bit shocked by the political earthquake he had triggered. The trouble was that now he had put a bomb under the new Administration everybody was looking to him – and the *Post* – to join up the pieces.

"What can I do for you, Mort?" He asked, distractedly staring into space before blinking back to weary, inconvenient reality. Right now, he had time and energy only for the 'King Scandal' and the FBI's unconstitutional spying operations. His journalist's gut feeling was that the thing went way beyond J. Edgar Hoover but how the heck was he ever going to prove that?

As for Judge Warren Burger, he really did not envy any 'Special Prosecutor' walking a tightrope between warring House factions and a newly installed White House 'gang' who had already demonstrated a tendency to cut up rough whenever they were challenged...about anything.

Whatever he thought, or believed, he had no real expectation that this thing would do more than claim a couple of sacrificial 'rogue' middle-ranking FBI agents. Sure, it was going to leave a really bad taste in the mouth and maybe, tarnish Richard Nixon's reputation but more than that, well, right now that was wanderlust.

Forty-three-year-old Morton Mintz was an old-fashioned investigative journalist accustomed to working alone. Right now, all the team players at the *Post* were working full time on the 'King Scandal'; while he quietly got on with what he did best.

Mintz had started his reporting career working for two St Louis newspapers, the *Star-Times* and the *Globe-Democrat*; before moving to DC to work for *The Washington Post* in 1958. Back in 1955 while at the *Globe-Democrat* he had set a precedent by writing the first newspaper series about the mentally retarded; then at the *Post*, he had made his reputation reporting on the malign aspects and practices of the pharmaceutical, tobacco, oil, auto and insurance industries.

In 1960 Morton Mintz had accused the Federal Drugs Administration of

launching the greatest uncontrolled medical experiment in history by approving the contraceptive pill for use in the general population. Two years later it was Morton Mintz – again – who Cassandra-like had broken the Thalidomide story; about the drug that had caused thousands of major birth deformities around the World.

So, when the *Post's* star defender of the American consumer walked unannounced into Ben Bradlee's office with a determined look on his face, it behoved the paper's editor to sit up and take notice.

"I'm working on my own projects," the reported prefaced, slumping into one of the two chairs across from Bradlee's desk. "Just so you know I'm not trying to muscle in on the 'big deal'."

"Sure, no problem, Mort."

"You're right about the King scandal not smelling right," Mintz observed ruefully. "Heck, it feels like you're right, leastways. The FBI, Hoover and his guys, and the White House, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and that crew, they're operating the way big drugs companies, motor manufacturers, and the oil combines work. I guess that's what you get for bringing so many advertising guys into the Administration. One for all, all for one, all the dirty little secrets stay inside the 'family'. From *our* point of view the trouble is always getting inside the 'family'; in finding and persuading somebody who has the inside line to blow the whistle on the bad guys."

Mintz shrugged, grinned.

"Sorry, I don't need to tell you any of this."

Bradlee half-smiled, knowing that Mintz was making sure he had got his editor's attention before he wasted his breath saying what he really wanted to say.

Not so long ago Bradlee had been a Kennedy Administration insider. He still regarded Bobby Kennedy as a close personal friend although he had had no contact with JFK since last summer, and many of his old 'friends' from the Camelot days now publicly shunned him.

"No offence taken, Mort," he assured the other man. "All we've got so far is a gang of hapless 'contractors' who were 'probably' hired by the FBI to conduct illegal surveillance of Doctor King. We don't even know if it was the Feds who leaked – well, it was more likely a third party, not even the Feds would have been dumb enough to have done it themselves – who leaked the tapes and wire taps to the papers in New York. People are telling me that

Nick Katzenbach has got sworn affidavits detailing the occasions he specifically instructed Hoover to lay off Doctor King and the Civil Rights Movement going back to before the October War, so we can be confident he didn't give the old monster any kind of green light on this. You know how the Bureau works; nobody sneezes without Hoover or Clyde Tolson signing an authority in triplicate. It's a no brainer that Hoover went after Doctor King – illegally, unconstitutionally, the way he's always got away with before – but that's not the thing..."

"The thing is who gave him the green light?" Morton Mintz agreed, conversationally, mulling the question unhurriedly.

"Like I said, we know it wasn't Katzenbach," Bradlee went on, "so that doesn't leave an awful lot of candidates with the clout to get J. Edgar's attention."

"If somebody in the White House gave the old bastard the go-ahead before the Inauguration we're screwed," Mintz remarked. "Whatever goes on before Inauguration Day doesn't count. Everything's a mess during the transition; people say dumb things to each other, nobody remembers the next day, nobody's taking contemporaneous notes. It's a minefield. But once a President steps into the Oval Office, well, that's a whole different ball game."

Ben Bradlee was ahead of the other man.

"JFK had a voice-activated tape recorder system in the Washington Oval Office. It didn't always work that well, from what I was told at the time. Whether all the tapes really got destroyed during the battle of Washington, that's anybody's guess," he guffawed. "Lyndon Johnson always planned to put a new recording system at the Broad Street Oval Office but he never got around to it..."

His voice trailed off because Morton Mintz was shaking his head.

Bradlee leaned forward, eyes narrowing.

"What?" He asked, his pulse quickening.

"The way I hear it," the other man reported dead pan, "Bob Haldeman got some of his buddies to install recorders in the Oval Office, and in the Situation Room in the basement on the afternoon of the Inauguration. The story is that Nixon wants everything on tape for when he writes his memoirs. Apparently, he told Haldeman he doesn't want anybody saying he made stuff up."

Ben Bradlee was suddenly light-headed.

“The White House flatly denied they had tapes?”

“Haldeman brought in the same guys J. Walter Thompson use. They’re probably CIA contractors, too. They work cheap and nasty because they’re installing Government equipment that didn’t cost them a dime!”

Ben Bradlee still did not want to believe this.

It was way too good to be true...

“Yeah, but anything taped in the Oval Office would be protected by Executive Privilege, wouldn’t it?”

Mintz shrugged.

“Not if the DOJ’s Special Prosecutor subpoenas the President to release the tapes!”

Chapter 68

Wednesday 10th March 1965
Fort Ricasoli, Rinella Point, Malta

Two of Denzil Williams's tough guys had driven in front of Dom Mintoff's bodyguards' car. Not only were the MI6 man's 'tough guys' trained killers, they were also armed with semi-automatic pistols. The Maltese Labour Party Leader's 'tough guys' could not stick up their hands fast enough; but that was what you got when you were too mean to employ professionals.

Mintoff's driver had tried to outrun the chase car.

It was a pointless exercise, there was a roadblock two corners farther down the road and as the car skittered to a halt in a cloud of dust Denzil Williams had stepped forward, opened the front passenger door and with a smile explained: 'We can do this like civilised people; or we can be beastly about it. Personally, I have no preference in the matter. The choice is yours, sir.'

Rachel had waited patiently in the 'Cage' – the name MI6 had given to the cellar when it had been used as an interrogation room last year after the Battle of Malta - twenty feet below ground in the bowels of the old fort. The air in the dungeon – a powder store in the last century – was chilly and a single electric light bulb hung from a cord in the middle of the vaulted ceiling.

There were two hard backed chairs placed beneath the light, facing each other about four feet apart.

Theatre mattered on these occasions.

She had dressed in black slacks, a black polo-necked top and she was wearing black, calf-skin gloves. Her hair was swept back and she had foregone makeup for the occasion. A black leather coat was arranged over the back of one chair.

"Did everything go according to plan?" She inquired as Denzil Williams stumped clumsily into the Cage.

"Like clockwork. Obviously, his Excellency is bleating about how outrageously he's been treated."

"Is he scared?"

“Oh, I should think so!”

The corners of Rachel’s mouth began to frown.

“Not,” the man went on, “wetting his pants and soiling himself scared.”

“Well,” she murmured, “we’ll have to do something about that, won’t we?”

“Do you want us to keep him stewing a little bit longer?”

“Yes, a few minutes please.” Rachel had been letting her thoughts drift and churn; now she cleared her mind. “When you bring him in leave the hood over his head and leave me alone in the Cage with him. Lock the door. I don’t want any witnesses.”

Denzil Williams raised an eyebrow.

“You’re certain that’s the way you want to play it?”

She nodded.

“Okay, that’s what we’ll do.”

Rachel paced the stone floor until the prisoner, his hands cuffed behind his back was half-escorted, half-carried in and placed on one of the chairs. The guards departed, clanged the iron door against its rusty frame and clunked home the locks.

Hooded, Dom Mintoff looked very small and crumpled. He was desperately trying to cling onto his dignity, not to mention the contents of his bowels in the cool silence.

Rachel moved to the chair opposite the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party and sat down; she waited, in no hurry to see if the man had anything to say for himself.

It seemed he was unusually untalkative today.

“Welcome to ‘the Cage’, Mr Mintoff. If you ask me nicely I’ll remove that hood the boys put over your head in Mosta,” Rachel announced pleasantly.

“Ask you?” Came the muffled response.

“Yes. I know you won’t know what I’m talking about but I find that if you ‘ask nicely’ it often saves a lot of trouble later.”

There was a breathless interregnum.

“I would be obliged to you if you removed this hood,” the man ground out resentfully.

“Nicely,” she reminded him.

“Please,” Mintoff grunted.

In a moment the forty-eight-year-old former Prime Minister of Malta was squinting myopically into the light. Rachel reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and recovered his spectacles – which his abductors had considerately placed there for her to find – and carefully arranged them on the man's nose.

"There, that's better. We can both see each other now," she grimaced ruefully. This said she settled back onto her chair and viewed Mintoff much in the fashion of a cat thinking of new and bizarre ways to torment a bird with a broken wing.

"Who are you?" Mintoff demanded eventually, showing hugely more courage than she had anticipated at this early stage in their 'conversation'.

"You don't know who I am?"

"You are an agent of the British Secret Service..."

Rachel shook her head.

"No. In most respects that would be an entirely false characterisation of my relationship to my, er," she hesitated, "employers. Strictly speaking, it would be more correct to describe me as an assassin for hire who just happens to have worked, now and then, for the British Government." She smiled wanly, sat back and crossed her right leg over her left knee. She folded her arms across her breasts; watched the man's facial muscles moving in oddly contrary patterns as he tried to unravel the conundrum she had set him. "It goes without saying that nobody in 'the Government' in Oxford knows who I really am, or any particulars of the work I have carried out for 'the Crown', in the past."

"So, who do you work for?"

"That's none of your business. If you ever found out I would have to kill you," Rachel thought about it, "your wife, and probably several of your closest associates." She sighed. "We won't go there. Well, hopefully not. It depends on whether or not you and I can come to a satisfactory accommodation which will be acceptable to my *principals*."

Mintoff's face contorted with pain.

"I can hardly feel my hands," he complained.

"Sorry. I can't remove them yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't decided if I am going to need to hurt you – quite badly – before you listen to what I am about to tell you with sufficient

attention, Mr Mintoff."

Inwardly, the man shrank away from her.

"I will be missed; people will come looking for me!" He stated truculently, covering his fear with a veneer of defiance.

"Probably," Rachel conceded. "But why would I care about a thing like that?"

Dom Mintoff did not have an answer to that.

"See," she chided him, almost playfully, "that's what I mean. You still don't understand what is going on here. When our business is completed you will either understand that I am here to help you to fulfil your ambitions; or you will suffer a great deal before tomorrow morning, your mutilated body is discovered floating in the Grand Harbour."

The man's eyes were momentarily wide with panic.

"The thing you need to bear in mind is that while my *principals* are not monsters; *that I am*. A monster, that is. While recruiting you to our cause is in many ways the cleanest of solutions; at the end of the day if you die, your successor may actually be a better 'fit' in the great scheme of things. Personally, I have an open mind."

Rachel stared unblinking at the man until he began to wilt and a tic began to twitch erratically beneath his right eye. She leaned towards him, he flinched.

Good, he was definitely taking her seriously.

"Stand up. I'll get rid of those handcuffs. If I need to hurt you I'll do it later, there's no need for you to be in any physical discomfort until then."

She retrieved the key from the back pocket of her slacks.

Unlocked the restraints and dropped them on the floor by Mintoff's chair.

"Sit down again please. If you need to relieve your bladder, you'll find a bucket over there in the corner."

Mintoff shook his head and eased himself back onto the chair, vigorously massaging his wrists as circulation stabbed needle-sharp in his hands.

"Thank you," he hissed.

"The thing you need to understand is that Lady Marija Christopher and her brother Joe are very important people to my *principals*. Presumably, they are important people to you also, since you seem intent on undermining their reputations..."

"That's not..."

“Shut up!” Rachel snarled softly, dangerously. “I am doing the talking and you will listen, very carefully, to what I have to say to you. When I have finished, you will either convince me that my *principals* can depend on you in the future or I will kill you. Do we understand each other?”

Dom Mintoff nodded jerkily.

Beads of sweat ran down his face in the coolness of the Cage.

“As you have surmised, or have been ‘informed’, Samuel Calleja was a traitor, a Red Dawn agent of many years standing who was involved in numerous murders after the Cuban Missiles War; and instrumental in the sabotage and sinking of HMS Torquay. He was executed for his crimes at Paola Prison last April. The matter was investigated more deeply than you can imagine at the time and no other members of his extended family were in any way implicated in his crimes. However, in recent months you have been spreading rumours designed to disgrace Joe, whom you see as a potential threat to your stranglehold over the General Workers Union; and Lady Marija whom, presumably, you believe to be a long-term obstacle to your ambitions to be the first leader of an independent Malta.”

Mintoff just watched her stone-faced.

“The future will be what it is,” Rachel continued, “but my *principals* have determined that when Marija and her brother return to Malta to fulfil their destinies – perhaps, not for very many years yet - that nothing shall stand in their path. Moreover, they have determined that at such time as Malta gains its independence it will remain ‘unswerving in its loyalty and devotion to the Crown, the United Kingdom’s staunchest and most reliable ally in the Central Mediterranean’. If you are the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party at that time it will be *your* job to ensure that this comes to pass. In return, here and now your life continues, and in due course you will receive ample recompense for your services. In the meantime, you should regard yourself as the implacable guardian of the good name of the Calleja clan.”

Rachel smiled an ice maiden smile.

“I’ve finished. What do you have to say for yourself, Mr Mintoff?”

“I cannot control rumours!”

“You’d be surprised,” she whispered.

“How do you know independence will come?”

“I just do. The decision has already been taken.”

“How can that be, nobody knows what will happen in the British general election tomorrow?”

“I don’t know what the outcome of that election will be, Mr Mintoff. Neither do my *principals*. They have no interest in ephemeral things like ‘elections’.”

The Leader of the Maltese Labour Party was reeling, shocked into near insensibility, battling with his incredulity and his terrors.

“What if I said I believe that you are making hollow threats?” He demanded, as Rachel had known he would.

“If I thought you really believed that I’d have to kill you.”

Rachel rose to her feet like a Leopardess rising to take down a Gazelle and began to pull on her coat.

“So that’s that?” The man half-queried, half-pleading and rooted to his chair.

“Yes. Get down on your knees!”

Dom Mintoff looked down the barrel of the Beretta M1951 9-millimetre pistol for a moment and then, dumbly, unprotestingly he went down onto his knees on the unyielding flag stones. He bowed his head, heard himself beginning to murmur the words of a prayer he had not uttered since childhood.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

Everything was happening too quickly...

CLICK!

The hammer came down on an empty chamber.

It took several seconds for him to acknowledge that he was still alive, staring at the floor in front of him.

He looked around.

The gun was in the woman’s hand; pointed at the ground.

“Here on the Archipelago I am Sally Beard,” Rachel explained, “the mistress of the Governor. If we ever meet again I will be your worst nightmare come true. If anything happens to me; there will be others. Break your ‘accommodation’ with my *principals* and your family will be liquidated.”

Rachel stepped over to the door.

She rapped lightly with the butt of the Beretta.

“When I have gone please take Mr Mintoff home to his family,” she

instructed, stepping out of the Cage, “his wife will be worried about him.”

Chapter 69

Thursday 11th March 1965
Town Hall, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

"Ah, there you are, Colonel!" Margaret Thatcher called as Frank Waters blundered into the cavernous, presently very nearly deserted auditorium where overnight ballot boxes from the surrounding wards of the Cheltenham constituency would be brought to be counted in the small hours of tomorrow morning.

The former SAS man waved and smiled toothily as he marched purposefully towards the Prime Minister.

"I'm off duty today, Prime Minister," he reported, stopping in front of her. "The DG says the Corporation has got plenty of library footage of the punters disappearing into voting booths and what with the purdah on electioneering today, I'm at a bit of a loose end."

"Jolly good! You can keep me company. You don't know how nice it is to be with somebody who has a sunny outlook on things!"

The old soldier puffed out his less than muscular chest in pride. As always, the lady was immaculately, perfectly coiffured and attired, today in a tasteful dark blue two-piece jacket and calf-length skirt, swinging a black, well-used hand bag from the crook of her left arm. Somebody had told him women 'of a certain age' were continually sending *The Angry Widow* their second-hand and sometimes brand-new handbags; it seemed odd to him but then he was a man, so what did he know about these things?

"I've never been one to mope over things one can't do anything about," he guffawed, smiling broadly. The lady's auburn hair was almost blond in the big lamps technicians were raising and testing on tripods near the stage. The DG had informed him that the 'Cheltenham Declaration' would be covered by 'another outside broadcast unit'; he ought to have been upset but he had had his fill of his perfectly good 'reports' being cut to ribbons on the editing room floor back at New Broadcasting House in Oxford. A curse on all their houses! "A dash of optimism goes a long way when one's in a tight corner, what!"

"Exactly!" Margaret Thatcher's eyes gleamed with blue steel. "That's

what I've been telling everybody for the last few weeks. After all we've been through in the last couple of years, whatever happens in the election, we all ought to be thankful that we are still here!"

She found herself observing the man who had contrived to insinuate himself into her life without ever once making any kind of demand on her, other than that she be herself. She had got used to him being 'around' and now she missed him when he was absent. It was the oddest thing; she knew he was a man with a past that would bear absolutely no scrutiny, and that behind the puckish charm was an incorrigibly roguish 'character'. Airey Neave had once confided to her that there were people of his acquaintance who thought Frank Waters was a tad 'mad'. And yet there was just something about him that drew her in...

"Nick Ridley says you've been given an awful 'ear bashing' by senior people at the BBC over your marvellous work during the election?"

"Oh, that!" The old soldier chuckled. "Please don't give it a moment's thought. To be *frank* with you," he went on mischievously, "I'm not really cut out for this reporting lark. I've never been impartial about anything in my life; and I'm too old a dog to change his spots now!"

The lady was about to disagree with him; changed her mind and discovered she had no idea what to say next. Her brief confusion was like lighting the blue touch paper for the man snared within her thrall.

"I confess I stand before you something of a changed man," Frank Waters admitted in a guilty rush. "It may be a passing fad, I don't know; but I don't think I can go back to being the chap I was a year ago. Might just be anno domini catching up with me, I don't think I'm losing my marbles. I was a bad husband, and not always a good man. I was a damned good soldier, perhaps. Presently, I find myself betwixt and between..."

What the Devil am I saying?

He actually wanted to stop talking; except the harder he tried the more the words spilled from his lips.

"Dammit, ever since I met you," he blurted, "I've just wanted to be of service, Ma'am."

Margaret Thatcher's expression was quizzical, possibly amused but the man was in no state to tell which it was or what it might signify.

"As I keep telling Steuart Pringle," she said sternly, "only Her Majesty the Queen is 'Ma'am', Colonel Waters. For another day at least, I am the

‘Prime Minister’, or ‘Mrs Thatcher’, or to my closest confidantes, ‘Margaret’.”

Frank Waters studied his feet like a guilty schoolboy.

“Sorry, sorry...”

“If you and the BBC part company what will you do?” The lady inquired.

The ex-SAS man sucked his teeth.

“Goodness knows, I’m sure something will turn up. I’m sure Airey could find me a niche in an Embassy somewhere...”

“Airey and I might find ourselves out of Government by tomorrow morning,” Margaret Thatcher reminded him.

“Yes,” he agreed reluctantly. “There is that...”

“Seriously, what will you do?”

Seeing the man was at a loss she re-phrased the question.

“What would you do if you could do anything you wanted to do, *Frank*?”

It occurred to the ex-SAS man that he had never known such trepidation in all the times people had been trying – quite hard sometimes – to kill him.

Dammit, are you a mouse or a man?

Tell the woman!

“Anything?” He checked. It paid to be sure of one’s facts. His hearing was better some days than others.

“Anything,” she confirmed.

“Oh, that’s easy,” he declared, straightening to his full height and looking the Prime Minister in the eye. “I’d seek to be of utmost service to you by inflicting my beastly presence on your person until death us do part, and all that tosh!”

It was some moments before Frank Waters realised the lady was not looking at him with anything like the horror and repugnance he had anticipated; to the contrary, she seemed – all things considered - not at all entirely unhappy with what she had just heard.

“That,” she retorted presently, “would of course, make your position at the BBC untenable. Quite apart from ruffling a few feathers in the Party; however, if the pollsters are to be believed and I am about to preside over the biggest electoral disaster in the history of the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, then that is academic since my colleagues will, no doubt, consign me to internal exile anyway!”

“Disgraceful!” Frank Waters grunted.

“No, no, it is just politics,” she comforted him. “It happens that my Party can forgive almost anything but failure and eventually, as I think my late would be nemesis Enoch Powell once said ‘all political careers end in failure’.” The lady’s tone was brisk, no nonsense. She had made a decision. “Be that as it may, any minute now Nick Ridley will want me to say a few words to the local newspaper people and to record a few words for posterity in the event everything goes against us tonight.”

The man hung on her words like a puppy hoping to be thrown a bone.

“I strongly suspect that you and I are completely unalike other than in that, neither of us has ever been impartial about anything, Frank.”

She called me ‘Frank’ again!

“It has not gone unnoticed – by me – that you are ‘partial’ to my presence and I confess, I enjoy knowing that you are close to me.” Margaret Thatcher hesitated. “Oh dear, how does one say this...”

Frank Waters had spent most of his adult life dodging bullets and generally risking life and limb in the service of his country. That he had survived when so many of his fellows had not, was ample testimony to his uncanny knack of identifying fleeting ‘tactical’ openings and opportunities and in that split second, he glimpsed his chance.

Possibly, the only chance he was going to get.

He swallowed hard, his throat horribly dry.

“When one’s in a tight spot,” he decided, re-discovering his inner lion heart, “one keeps things simple, one concentrates on the things that matter.”

“Yes, but...”

Damn and blast it, I ought to get down on bended knee but if I do that I’ll probably fall over with my gammy shoulder.

He grasped his courage in his hands.

“Margaret,” he said with a quaking voice. “There are no ifs or buts, you must marry me!”

Chapter 70

Thursday 11th March 1965
Labour Party Offices, Headington Road, Oxford

Barry Lankaster had felt the mood of the Party, its officers and workers changing as the long hours of waiting dragged past. He and his BBC crew had been following on the coat tails of a six week long euphoric victory march right up until the storm that had resulted in what many were now calling the 'Bramall Lane Disaster'.

The death toll in Sheffield had risen steadily in the last two days. Now it stood at forty-nine, with several dozen people still in hospital with 'very serious injuries'. Several of the dead had drowned in two or three inches of water, crushed beneath other bodies. Lankaster and his colleagues had only avoided the stampede because they were near the stage when the storm broke. Many times, during the rally he had commented, on and off 'air', that the event was something of a 'free for all', with very little crowd marshalling or organisation in the stadium other than directly on, or around the stage where the speakers and the senior Party officers were seated.

However, the 'Black Monday' of the campaign was not the only thing depressing the expectations and the emotions of the staff at the Party's makeshift headquarters on the outskirts of the city. The big problem was that the returns telephoned into HQ from workers outside polling stations all over England, Wales and Scotland were widely at odds with the latest national polls – which showed an eight to ten percent lead for Labour over the Conservatives – and the even more optimistic projections of the Party's 'private' polling. It was not that these polling station returns – compiled by Party workers asking voters who they had voted for as they left the station – worried the staffers crunching the numbers and trying to guess how many Parliamentary seats they added up to, but the fact that at least four women to every three men were actually voting. Given that there was a general sense that things were not going according to plan, this unexpected voter demographic threw into question a raft of basic assumptions that everybody had taken for granted until...today.

Barry Lankaster had attempted to talk to senior figures about the 'mood'

of the Party. Only Denis Healey had thus far made himself available. In his normal effervescent, bullying way he had professed himself ‘confident of the outcome’ and bantered his way through an entertaining, thoroughly inconclusive interview.

Now Lankaster and his crew were drinking over-stewed tea and munching curling sandwiches in the smoke-fugged ‘press room’ located in one of the wartime Nissen huts taken over by the Labour Party while it acquired ‘more suitable premises’ in the city.

New offices were being built a quarter of a mile away, a relatively minor construction project in comparison with the majority of those under way in and around Oxford. The sites for several large Government compounds had been cleared all along the Headington Road, in the north of the city, and in the environs of picturesque Woodstock. The talk might be of a return to ‘the Garden City of London’ and the Mother of Parliaments in Westminster but everybody knew that was a generation-long aspiration, rather than any kind of plan to re-establish the long-term seat of the Governance of the Realm.

“Hello, Barry,” Michael Foot smiled. “I’m told nobody will talk to you,” the leading man of the so-called Bevanite left of the Labour Party remarked sympathetically. “I’m happy to have a chat. But not in here, all this smoke will set off my asthma again.”

As if to emphasise this he coughed bronchially.

Lankaster enormously liked the courteous MP for Ebbw Vale. Away from a public stage Foot was a charming, personable man whom very few people, opponents included, found it possible to dislike. Moreover, from a journalist’s point of view he was always marvellous value because he seemed pathologically incapable of telling a lie.

The day had dawned frostily across much of the country, warmed a few degrees and stayed mainly dry, with widely separated outbreaks of squally rain in the Highlands and Islands and showers along the Channel Coast. Good weather for an election; with little climactically to discourage electors from exercising their democratic mandate.

“Turnout is quite high?” Barry remarked rhetorically as he and his people lugged the clumsy camera and sound-recording equipment out into the cold of the evening.

Michael Foot knew the drill; he waited patiently while the technicians quickly set up the equipment, tested it cursorily, and did a quick sound check,

pulled focus and got ready to roll.

He was happy to make conversation while they waited.

“So they tell me. I was asked to delay my return to Wales for my own count to fraternise with the press.” He shook his head. “Many of my esteemed colleagues have gone to ground. I don’t know if that means they know something I don’t.” He shrugged. “We shall discover overnight and tomorrow morning. It is the will of the people that counts.”

Barry Lankaster made no comment.

Michael Foot believed what he had said; he hoped to win but if the people decided it was not to be then that was all right, too. He was a true democrat. Whatever happened, he would fight on for what he believed.

“What will happen if there is no clear majority?” Lankaster asked, previewing a question he planned to ask on camera in a few minutes.

“I honestly don’t know. I can’t see the Tories forming a new national administration. Not under any circumstances while Mrs Thatcher is in charge. Although, I should imagine her days are numbered unless she wins a landslide,” a wan smile, “but I don’t think that’s on the cards.”

“READY! THREE... TWO... ONE... WE’RE ROLING!”

“I am speaking to Mr Michael Foot, the MP for the Welsh constituency of Ebbw Vale,” Barry Lancaster prefaced. “How do you think it is going tonight, sir?”

“I won’t say ‘as well as expected’ because things never go exactly to plan,” Michael Foot replied with unforced jocularity. “We live in interesting times; I maintained all along that it is mistaken to take anything for granted in this new epoch. The October War changed many things; perhaps, it changed the psychology of the British people. I think that after tonight we will understand ourselves a great deal better.”

“Will the Labour Party govern alone if it only gains a small majority?”

“Preferably, we will govern alone in that circumstance. Our opponents, the Tories, envision a future in which there will always be a bomber above our heads, or a nuclear submarine beneath the waters off our shores, and British troops keeping the peace in lands where we have no right to be. Mrs Thatcher has spoken many fine words about building a better future for coming generations; what about the current generation? Yes, we should begin the reconstruction of our destroyed cities and towns; but no, that should not be at the expense of those which survived the war. Personally, I find it

inconceivable that any Leader of the Labour Party could again co-operate intimately with a Conservative Party led by *The Angry Widow*."

The campaign was over, the votes were about to be tallied and Michael Foot was still fighting the good fight.

Barry Lankester decided to return to the most contentious of the issues of the final days of the campaign.

"Much was said by Labour candidates about the need for there to be a reckoning, and for the 'guilty parties' to be named and shamed? Was that a direct threat against the Prime Minister and her closest colleagues in Government, Mr Foot?"

"Moral blame, yes."

"Mr Callaghan seemed to be hinting at more than just apportioning 'moral responsibility' at the end of the Sheffield rally?"

Michael Foot shook his head.

"A lot of things are said in the heat of the moment."

"Do you not think that remarks of that type have soured the atmosphere and disillusioned some traditional labour supporters?"

The MP for Ebbw Vale gave this earnest consideration.

"I don't know. I hope not because that is not what the Labour Party stands for. After tomorrow when, all being well, we are in Government our energies will be directed to improving the lot of all our people. I very much doubt we will have much time for retrospective contemplation, other of course, in instances where the former administration went beyond its legal bounds in executing its duties. I certainly think we shall have to look into breaches of The Hague Conventions and so forth in respect of the actions of both Edward Heath's and Margaret Thatcher's regimes..."

"Are you accusing Mr Heath and Mrs Thatcher of war crimes?"

"Accusations have been made. Regardless of the provocation the conduct of our soldiers, airmen and sailors is mitigated by those and related conventions..."

Barry Lankaster was so flabbergasted he forgot what his next question had going to be. The country had been half-wrecked in a nuclear war in which millions had been killed and had been fighting for its very survival ever since.

"I don't recollect you, or any of your senior colleagues raising this possibility during the campaign?" He forced out.

“We don’t know what we will find in Government.”

“But several Labour Party ministers sat in that Government?”

“Not in the relevant departments.”

“So, the Labour Party bears no responsibility for anything the Interim Emergency Administration of the United Kingdom under Mr Heath, or the Unity Administration under Mrs Thatcher did?”

“Obviously, the Party did what it had to do in the dreadful circumstances of the immediate post-war period. That said, the real issue is how this country allowed itself to be drawn into the situation in which we found ourselves in October 1962.”

War crimes and inquests into the actions of a generation of dead Conservative politicians!

“We must never again make the mistakes that the MacMillan Government made before the October War. The nuclear crow was perched on the cradle for many years and we were all led, blindly into the maelstrom!”

“Surely,” Barry Lankaster reminded Michael Foot, knowing he was letting his infuriation run away with him, “it was a Labour Government that built the British bomb that may, or may not, have made this country a target in the Cuban Missiles War?”

“I and people like me recanted that folly many years ago!”

“And that absolves you of all blame?”

Michael Foot was not used to a BBC man asking him *that* sort of question.

He hesitated.

“Well, no, but...”

Barry Lankaster was scenting blood in the water now. He had been a witness to a grubby, sometimes squalid campaign in which the rhetoric had been dominated – at least on the side he was covering – with recriminations, high-sounding principles that were unlikely to be adopted in government, and blatant bribes to the electorate in the form of handouts and welfare benefits paid for by scrapping most of the armed forces and abandoning the Commonwealth to its fate. He had found the experience unsettling, distasteful and characterised by an insular, little-Britain sneering disdain for foreigners, including those who had fought and died beside British forces on so many battlefields in recent times.

Perhaps, he wondered, it might be that the electorate had rumbled the contradictions of the Labour message; guessed that the Party was such a broad church that it bent over backwards to accommodate every strand of leftist thinking from Maoism to Stalinism, Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy to liberal social democracy, grasping militant trade unionism to Fabian reason, and tacitly attempted to embrace both misogyny and feminism.

What did the Party really stand for?

Everybody knew what Margaret Thatcher stood for.

Chapter 71

Thursday 11th March 1965
RAF Luqa, Malta

Rachel Piotrowska had not been surprised to encounter Major Denzil Williams in the small, modestly appointed VIP Lounge at RAF Luqa. The Head of Section of MI6 on Malta was wearing his Ghurkha Rifles uniform.

"You wanted to make sure I left," she chided the man. She was standing by the window in the dusk watching one of No. 617 Squadron's great bat-winged Avro Vulcan V-Bombers taxiing towards the northern threshold of the main runway. The aircraft lined up for take-off; with the whistling thunder of its four axial-flow Bristol B.E.10 Olympus turbojets spooling up to maximum power washing across the airfield.

"No, I just thought I'd say goodbye."

The man and the woman stared out across the airfield as if in some kind of mutual trance. The bellow of the Vulcan's engines reverberated against the windows as the bomber began to move forward, accelerating fast. Barely two thirds of the way down the runway it lifted into the air and its red navigation lights ascended steeply over the sea to the south of the island.

"Some people don't like the idea of there always being a bomber somewhere above our heads," Denzil Williams said, with a feigned indifference. "Me, it makes me feel safer. What about you?"

"I can't claim that knowing there's a bomber above my head and a gun in my handbag has ever made me, or any of the people around me, any safer, Denzil."

The man laughed lowly.

"Are you sure that going back to England right now is a good idea? The way things are shaping up back home, tomorrow could be the day the great witch hunt starts."

"Oh. So now I'm a witch?" But Rachel was not offended.

"Well, you know what I mean. Now it looks like peace has returned all the useless pricks who've been in hiding are starting to come out of the woodwork. The bloody unions were stuffed full of fellow travellers before the war, and as for the Labour Party..."

Notwithstanding their repaired relations and recent collaboration Rachel knew Denzil Williams had not come out to Luqa just to wave her off.

"The Dom is insecure, paranoid, I suppose," she explained. "I didn't have to lay a finger on him. I told him what he already knew about Sam Calleja and then I painted a picture of a world populated by people like him. He is now the guardian of the Calleja good name."

"How the hell did that happen?"

"He believed the story I told him. I told him that one day quite soon Malta would be independent and that if he wanted a piece of the action he needed to be on *my* team. That was a lie, obviously. I also said that when Marija and Joe returned to Malta their 'destinies' would be attached to his. That may not turn out to be a lie. You've never met Marija, she's." Rachel turned away from the window to meet the MI6 man's stare, "a very special person. The nearest thing to a Maltese Princess, her homecoming will be like Cinderella going to the ball. The shoes might even fit her feet. But I could be wrong. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that Mr Mintoff believes that if he doesn't keep his side of the bargain I'll kill him, his family and anybody else I feel like killing at the time; me, that is, or somebody else who works for the people that I work for."

"He swallowed all that?"

"I think so. I hope so, otherwise I'll have to come out of retirement, fly out here and liquidate the entire Mintoff family."

"Retirement!" Denzil Williams scoffed. "What will you do in retirement?"

"I liked being Dan French's mistress," Rachel smiled momentarily before consciously brushing it and the hair off her face. "Maybe I'll like being Lady Rachel French. Daniel's posting ends in July. He wants to marry me as soon as he gets back to England."

Denzil Williams was staring at her like an idiot.

"Seriously?"

"I've been an assassin since I was fourteen years old," she murmured very, very confidentially. "How hard can it be being married to a good man and attending occasional Mess dinners?"

"What does Dick White think about all this?"

"It's none of his business. I don't work for him."

Denzil Williams blinked incomprehension.

A week ago, Rachel would have enjoyed his confusion; today she felt a little guilty.

"I *never* worked for him."

The man opened his mouth to speak, said nothing, realising intuitively that it would have been a bad mistake to say a single word until he had given his brain a chance to fully assimilate the possibilities.

Passengers were being called to board the BOAC shuttle to Brize Norton.

Rachel and the MI6 man did not move.

"Then who?" Denzil Williams asked hoarsely.

"You don't need to know that," she replied, half in apology. Very, very slowly she raised her right hand and touched his arm with her finger tips. "Believe me when I say, you do not want to know, my friend."

The man had inwardly flinched at her touch.

He nodded.

"Okay. Okay. That works for me, too," he assured her, recovering his composure now he was getting used to the idea he had inadvertently crossed a very dangerous line and he was still alive.

"Thank you," Rachel whispered.

In a moment she had turned on her heel and disappeared through the door into the night.

Chapter 72

Friday 12th March 1965
Town Hall, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

The last of the ballot boxes had not been received and authenticated by the Returning Officer, until three o'clock in the morning some five hours after the polls had closed across the nation.

Because Cheltenham had been the first post-October War seat of Government, the building of the RAF base and an influx of refugees the Parliamentary constituency – the town and surrounding hamlets – had over eight thousand more registered voters – a total of 59,113 - than it had had at the last General Election in 1959, of whom 51,087 had turned out to vote the previous day in one or other of the constituency's fourteen polling stations, several of which had had to remain open another hour so that everybody who was 'in the queue' was able to cast their ballot.

Back in 1959 the Conservative incumbent, fifty-two-year-old William W. Hicks Beach had claimed over fifty percent of the vote and won by a majority of 9,272 over his nearest rival, the Labour candidate. In that election the Liberals had polled some eight thousand votes.

Defending her massive by-election majority Margaret Thatcher had had no reason to be concerned about retaining her seat in the new House of Commons. However, she would not have been human if she had not worried that a nationwide resurgence by Labour would seriously dent her personal and political prestige ahead of what might well be a traumatic post-election fight to retain the leadership of the Conservative Party. Make no mistake she intended to fight tooth and nail to stay at the helm, whatever happened across the rest of the country, and whoever was Prime Minister.

As the hour struck five o'clock that morning a nervous Returning Officer, the deputy Town Clerk who was unaccustomed to speaking in public, less still to a packed and impatient crowd of over a thousand people, stepped up to the single microphone at the front of the stage.

He tapped it clumsily and the reverberation echoed and crackled around the hall. People had wandered in all night, patiently waiting to be searched and 'cleared' by Steuart Pringle's hard-eyed Royal Marines. The AWPs were

edgy, ultra-suspicious, patrolling inside and outside the Town Hall hefting their freshly acquired US-supplied M-16 assault rifles.

"It is my duty to announce that the total number of ballots cast in the General Election of 11th March 1965 for the Parliamentary constituency of Cheltenham was as follows..."

The four candidates: Margaret Thatcher and her Labour, Liberal and an Independent Liberal - which to the Prime Minister said everything that needed to be said about Jo Grimond's Liberals - waited expectantly even though they already knew the result.

That was a British tradition; once the votes were totalled the candidates were consulted to ascertain if they had any 'issues' about the count. The Independent Liberal had a list of issues pre-prepared but none of his complaints was judged 'legitimate' by the Returning Officer, since eccentricity was not of itself a good reason to order that all the votes should be recounted.

"Debbs, Douglas Armitage, Independent Liberal Party of England and Wales: three hundred and eighteen votes..."

There was a polite round of applause, another British tradition was honouring a loser; even a bad loser.

"Gray, Hugh, the Labour Party: three thousand, seven hundred and ninety-two votes..."

That was down nine thousand on the 1959 result.

"Lemkin, James Anthony, the Liberal Party: two thousand and sixty-nine votes..."

Margaret Thatcher tried not to smile.

It was not easy.

"Thatcher, Margaret Hilda, the Conservative and Unionist Party: forty-four thousand, nine hundred and eight votes..."

Bedlam!

The moment was not as sweet as it had been in Finchley in 1959, and last May's by-election win had come and gone before she knew it but this morning she was grimly excited as she stepped up to the microphone to address a hall now packed with her supporters. She had no doubt that they were *her* supporters, some of whom as chance would have it, were probably also 'Conservatives'.

The switchboard at Cheltenham Town Hall had begun to be

overwhelmed by the volume of incoming calls shortly after three o'clock.

Everybody had expected a landslide.

And that was what was going on, a landslide.

Just not the one *everybody* had predicted.

The Labour vote had collapsed – there was no other word for it – across the English Midlands and Scotland, and elsewhere the Conservatives were holding every seat the Party had won in 1959. In Wales and the North East, the Labour vote had slumped, although without wiping out a raft of previously ultra 'safe' seats, and in the South where many of the seats surrounding Greater London were being decided on the basis of 'lists', her Party was sweeping the board. Nobody dared to speculate on exact numbers but it was clear that the next Conservative Government would have over – well over – four hundred seats in the House of Commons when it re-convened in a week's time.

The Queen's Private Secretary had already called Margaret Thatcher's Private Office in Oxford to make the necessary arrangements for her to attend Woodstock Palace to 'kiss' the Queen's hand that afternoon at three o'clock.

The Prime Minister cleared her throat, tried and failed to stop herself looking to the wings where Frank Waters, nursing a glass of whiskey was beaming like a Cheshire cat; and a less than Prime Ministerial grin involuntarily quirked at her lips.

This was a good day...

A day *nonpareil*; incomparable if her schoolgirl French was to be trusted!

"I would like to thank the Returning Officer of the Cheltenham Constituency and his excellent staff for the efficient and prompt way they have organised and conducted the count tonight." The civilities had to be observed, another British tradition. "I would also like to thank my opponents for the dignified manner in which they have campaigned locally."

The crowd was hushed, hanging on her words.

"Tonight, it seems as if – against the odds - we have won a remarkable victory..."

More bedlam; no dissenters!

It was so noisy for a little while that Margaret Thatcher could hardly hear herself think.

"Today we embark on a new era in British history and national life. We

have so much to do; so many debts to repay, and so many hopes to fulfil. We *will* recover what we have lost; we *will* build Jerusalem amidst the ruins of our bombed cities..."

Eventually, she had to hold her arms up, palms forward to quieten the faithful.

"Now is not the time for long speeches. Now is the time to ready ourselves for the great tasks before us. We have but a short time to reflect on our triumph; then we must get down to work, for the future of our children and grandchildren..."

Mercifully, the men and women before her were growing weary, and their acclaim a little more...measured, economical.

"This is not a time for hubris; this is a time for humility. If I may I will paraphrase the Prayer of St Francis..."

She waited patiently until the hall was stilled.

"*Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith; and where there is despair, may we bring hope...*"

Chapter 73

Friday 12th March 1965
Kalkara, Malta

The afternoon sunshine bathed the USS Independence as she slowly passed between the Grand Harbour breakwaters. Her flight deck was dressed with a whole air force of modern, deadly interceptors, bombers and helicopters with possibly as many as fifteen hundred of her five thousand or more crew, lining the rails. The great ship was a statement of power incarnate and she was bound for a war thousands of miles away to the east, Vice Admiral Bernard Cleary, the commander of the Sixth Fleet having transferred his flag to the USS Coral Sea.

The Independence and the command and communications ship, the USS Northampton which was shortening her cables ready to follow the newly designated Flagship of Carrier Division Seventy-One out to sea, were bound for Suez, there to transit south to the Indian Ocean en route for the Sea of Japan where the US Navy was preparing for the biggest amphibious landing operation since the end of the Second World War; the first phase of a summer campaign to wrest back the Korean Peninsula from the Reds.

But that was all just grand strategy.

To some among the observers watching the most powerful warship in the World gliding past in the cool of the clear early spring Mediterranean afternoon, the fate of nations seemed unimportant that day.

"I'd apologise for being late," Lieutenant Heidi Takawa announced brightly, interrupting Guy French's reverie, "but I guess you've figured out by now that I'm not the sort of girl who plans to spend her life apologizing for *anything*."

The man smiled sheepishly.

The woman walked into his arms and on tip toes greeted him with a smacking kiss on the mouth which he returned with enthusiastically compounded interest. Her lips tasted sweet and she smelled of roses and it was all he could do not to maul her.

Presently, they stepped apart and stood a while taking in the vista of the harbour below and ahead of them. In the middle distance the great ramparts

of Valletta reared out of the waters; behind the Independence a tiny fishing boat idled, awaiting the passing of the behemoth to bring her catch ashore. Somewhere high overhead the faraway rushing of turbofans proclaimed the approach of an aircraft from the east.

"Before the Chelyabinsk raid," Guy French said, for no particular reason, "the Squadron flew long-range practice missions from Cyprus to attack that breakwater over there," he explained, pointing at the King George V breakwater extending from the seaward end of the Valletta peninsula to protect the Grand Harbour. "The aircraft with the most accurate bombing scores got to carry the biggest bombs on the operation a few days later."

Heidi moved to stand in front of him with her back to the harbour down below the cliff top concrete pathway on which they stood. She raised her left hand and patted the medal ribbons on his chest.

"If I can put up with that moustache of yours," she declared, "I'm okay with you being a hero, too."

Guy French chuckled, shook his head.

"I hear that handle bars," he confided, stroking the slowly developing right wing of his post-Persian Gulf war 'bar', "are going out of fashion back home these days."

Last July the field hospital at Dammam had shaved his face clean to try to get a better idea of the damage. Given that he had ejected into a supersonic airstream only days before and that every blood vessel in his face and eyes had ruptured, their predilection to work with the cleanest possible canvass was entirely understandable in the circumstances...

"I think I knew 'the plan' I had in my head was screwed when I met you," Heidi said with a self-conscious shrug.

The man smiled.

"That sounds suspiciously like an apology."

She gave his arm a playful punch.

"Don't get me wrong. I still plan to be a doctor. But maybe I don't have to do everything at once. I guess I didn't know how you really felt about," another, little girl shrug this time, "stuff," she confessed.

Heidi had been detained onboard the Independence for twenty-four hours after she arrived in the Grand Harbour. Leaving a ship was never a straightforward business.

Last night they had very nearly hugged themselves to death, kissed like

they were never going to come up for air and afterwards she had run like a scalded cat back to her temporary ‘bunk’ in the nurses’ dormitory block of nearby Bighi Royal Naval Hospital. If they had exchanged more than half-a-dozen words she could not remember any of them other than that they had agreed to this rendezvous to watch the Independence sail out of their lives.

“But now I do,” she declared, “know how I feel about stuff.”

The man bent his face to hers and kissed her tenderly.

“When you sailed away on the Dewey I thought I’d lost you,” he murmured.

Heidi pulled a face.

“Hey! You don’t get rid of me that easily, mister!”

Chapter 74

Sunday 14th March 1965
Embassy of the United Kingdom,
Montgommery County, Philadelphia

It had been a weekend to remember. Yesterday was a blur, today had been a little less hectic; although no less emotional. At the airport there had been a horde of photographers and TV crews to greet the 'George Cross Hero of Malta' as one of this morning's newspaper headlines had proclaimed.

Joe Calleja had emerged into the arrivals lounge a little dishevelled and bleary-eyed after spending the last twenty-four hours in transit, and the cameras had documented the rest.

'Joe!' The Ambassadress had squealed and the next moment the weary traveller was wide awake and smiling the broadest smile in America.

Brother and sister had hugged and the roar of clicking camera lenses and the explosion of flash bulbs had immortalised the moment as Marija's feet quite literally left the ground.

Peter Christopher had stepped forward and shaken his brother-in-law's hand, towering over the stocky, unshaven newcomer. Alan Hannay had come forward next, and then, a little diffidently, his customarily effusive wife, Rosa.

Petty Officer Jack Griffin, crew cut and somewhat gnarled, a look he seemed to cultivate, and Joe had eyed each other wryly for a second before embracing in a crushing bear hug; the two men who had fired the torpedoes that decided the Battle of Malta re-united, blood brothers.

Marija had jabbered questions at her little brother all the way back to the Embassy. Her husband, and Jack Griffin, nominally their bodyguard, had not even tried to get a word in edgewise, periodically exchanging resigned looks. At the Embassy Elisabetta Margo had been introduced to her uncle, and Nicko Henderson had presented his wife and daughter to the visiting hero as if he was minor royalty. It was all rather bewildering for the displaced Maltese trade union activist and dockyard electrician.

'I know the sun is barely over the yard arm,' Peter had decided, eventually judging the moment to interject a few words, 'but I think you need

a stiff drink, *brother*," he had commanded.

Thus fortified Marija had led Joe on a grand tour of the Embassy, a convoluted, round about journey to the room prepared for his arrival.

That morning Joe had joined his sister and brother-in-law at a Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, where once again he had experienced the down side of the celebrity of the day before; having to be escorted through the waiting crowds and running the gauntlet a second time departing the Cathedral an hour or so later.

'Does this happen every time you go out?' He had asked in the car on the way back to Montgommery County.

"Yes, a lot of the time," Peter had chuckled.

That afternoon he and Marija had taken his brother-in-law aside.

'You are in demand,' he had told Joe, adopting what his wife called his '*kindly captain tone*'.

Marija was still playing the mother hen role, clinging to her brother's arm, constantly introducing him to embassy staffers, explaining this, and that, bouncy and irrepressible.

'It is entirely up to you which invitations and engagements you accept but presently, Marija's Appointments Secretary, a very sensible lady called Mary Drinkwater, is fielding all enquiries on your behalf. She will be back on duty tomorrow morning. She'll talk you through things. To start with you'll be accompanied by a couple of Jack Griffin's security people wherever you go. That's standard procedure, not negotiable.'

Joe had nodded, his sister was the mistress of the Embassy but his brother-in-law was the captain of the ship.

'Something you may want to think about,' Peter had continued, 'is the offer of places at several universities...'

Joe had looked dumbfounded.

'University?'

If Joe Calleja was to live in the United States it could not, long-term, be as the idle guest of the Embassy. Nor would he want to be any kind of burden on his 'family'.

'We have made many friends in Philadelphia,' Peter had explained, 'and it has been suggested to us that you might like to consider studying, say Political Science, or Journalism, or a combination of the two, or some other subject of your own choosing. Through the good offices of the *Betancourt*

Foundation tuition fees and living costs would not be a problem...'

Now, nearly thirty-six hours after being re-united with her little brother Marija was finally coming back down to earth as she snuggled into the crook of her husband's protective arm in their big bedroom.

"I know you have bad dreams," she murmured in the darkness. They had made love unhurriedly and afterwards she had draped herself across him beneath the warm covers. "When you are asleep, and sometimes, when you are awake."

Peter Christopher nuzzled the top of his wife's head, buried his face in her fragrant hair and kissed her, not knowing what to say. She knew him too well to be bought off with a white lie, or false bravura. He had known that sooner or later she would speak of the demons that, now and then splintered his normal equanimity. He was the luckiest man in Christendom, feted and honoured in his own country, loved by the most remarkable woman in creation, and yet he was terrified that by speaking of his evil spirits that he might let them out...

His wife sighed, propped herself up, struggling until she was spread-eagled on him, supported by her forearms, which lay resting on his chest. Just enough light from the security arc lamps outside seeped into the room through the heavy curtains for Peter to look Marija in the face.

He looked away for a moment.

"I have bad dreams," he confessed. "Now and then, often the same one; I'm on the bridge of the Talavera and Miles Weiss is standing in front of me with his head bandaged. Except I know he's dead and from the look in his eyes so does he." He was astonished how easily the words escaped his lips. He could not tell his wife about the blood and gore at his feet or the sickening thud of projectiles punching straight through the unarmoured hull of the old destroyer. "Lately, when I'm alone I find myself back on the Talavera. Just for a split second. In the middle of the fight at Lampedusa or looking up at the fires on the flight deck of the Enterprise, or staring down the barrels of the big guns of the Yavuz, so close that Talavera's anti-aircraft cannons are raking her deck. It's sort of like a momentary absence, a flashback, I suppose. An 'absence' and then I'm back in the here and now."

Marija lowered her face to her husband's and kissed him slowly, her hair falling like a curtain over them.

Miles Weiss, Talavera's executive officer had been her husband's best

friend in the Navy, possibly in the World.

"The worst thing is the guilt," he explained. "I'm here, I've got everything. You, Elisabetta, all our friends, our new life in America and yet so many of *my* men, *my* Talaveras, are dead. I think about Nick Davey, Captain 'D' of the 7th Destroyer Squadron. The first time I met him was the day I first met you, face to face, at St Catherine's Hospital..."

Marija giggled.

"I had just fallen on my face because of you," his wife teased him fondly.

Peter chuckled.

"I told him I'd just got engaged. He asked if I'd known you very long and I said, like an idiot, no, I'd only just met you that day..."

Peter's wife giggled again and his terrors retreated.

Now he had started talking he could not stop.

"I remember Spider McCann, Talavera's Master at Arms. He died with Nick Davey on the Tiger last July. Just before the Battle of Malta I asked," he hesitated, corrected himself, "I pretty much ordered John Pope, the captain of the Yarmouth, to charge at those Russian ships. I didn't know what to say to his widow at that 'party' in Oxford last April, I couldn't look her in the eye. I just keep seeing his children's faces..." He fought to pull himself together. "I'm sorry. You lost Margo, other people you knew. You've had to live with what happened to Sam. I'm being selfish..."

He would have gone on had not Marija covered his mouth with hers for an age. Presently, they gasped, sucking down air.

"We promised we would live our lives without fear, husband," Marija reminded him. "Without fear and together always; on our wedding night when you saw my scars for the first time you loved me even more, you kissed me where I thought no man would ever kiss me and all the things I had been afraid of were suddenly so stupid..."

Peter folded his wife in his arms as she subsided onto his chest. She sobbed softly and he stroked her hair, and the warm curve of her naked spine.

"I remember everything about the night of the war," she said, much later. "Joe and I went down to the waterfront. The ships of the 7th Destroyer Squadron were cutting their lines before they had enough steam to clear Sliema Creek. I think I knew then that the World would never be the same. You have been with me always, husband."

Marija rolled onto her back and he rolled with her.

They kissed, moistly.
Peter looked down into the lipid pools of her eyes.
“I will always be with you, wife.”

Chapter 75

Monday 15th March 1965
HMS Eskimo, Firth of Clyde

Rear Admiral Simon Collingwood watched the two submarines cruising to either side of the Tribal class frigate HMS Eskimo's wake through his binoculars; the Royal Navy's only operational nuclear-powered boat, HMS Dreadnought to port and on her starboard stern quarter the diesel-electric boat HMS Grampus. Both submarines were rolling in the moderate cross swell, their crews aching to dive. It would be dark in a couple of hours, the charade that this was just another exercise to carry on working up Dreadnought's new crewmen would be played out to the full until then; for the crew of the Eskimo, if not for the men on the two submarines.

With a sigh he stepped away from the rail and moved across to join the captain of the frigate, thirty-seven-year-old Commander Simon Cassels. Collingwood planned to bring Cassels ashore in the next few months, possibly as Navigation Staff Officer to the Nuclear Submarine Fleet – the new designation of his command – but first he wanted him to gain further command experience.

Everything he had done since he was called back from the Mediterranean, promoted Rear Admiral and appointed Flag Officer Submarines (Development) eleven months ago was with an eye to the medium and longer-term; and key to all his plans was the identification of the right men to occupy the key project posts.

If the election had gone the wrong way last week everything he had achieved thus far would have been for nought; but the woman who had given him the task of creating the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered undersea fleet of the future had been re-elected with an over-whelming majority. For the next five years he had her absolute, unqualified backing and he did not intend to waste a single minute of that eighteen hundred or so day long window of opportunity.

First, he had to accelerate the building programme; there were two boats under construction, the Valiant and the Warspite, in a year's time another two, ideally, three or four would be on the slips and he was looking for the

special officers he needed to command those boats.

He knew he already had three of them. Thirty-four-year-old Commander Max Forton had been his executive officer on both of Dreadnought's war patrols, now he commanded Dreadnought.

The second of his three 'nuclear boat captains' would, in time, be Commander Francis Barrington, the forty-three-year-old plucked from over a decade in the Reserve who had commanded HMS Alliance with such icy aplomb off Corsica and in the Bay of Lions last summer.

His third 'banker' was the thirty-two-year-old captain of the Grampus, Lieutenant-Commander John Forster 'Sandy' Woodward. He had a reputation for being abrasive, and for not tolerating fools gladly. That was all to the good in Collingwood's book. Cornish-born, Woodward had graduated from the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth in 1946 and fetched up in the Submarine Service in 1954, passing the Submarine Command Course – otherwise known as the 'The Perisher' because so many men's dreams of commanding their own submarine 'perished' during it – in 1960. Having cut his teeth on the old T class boat, HMS Tireless, he had been rewarded with command of the Grampus just before the October War. In 1963 he had taken the Grampus beneath the Polar ice cap, and last year he had conned her down to the South Atlantic to take part in the blockade of the Argentine-occupied Falkland Islands. During that latter 'adventure' he had successfully landed and recovered a detachment of eight Royal Marine Special Boat Squadron raiders on West Falkland, and reconnoitred Stromness Bay and West Cumberland Bay on the north coast of South Georgia under the noses of the Argentine Navy. Sandy Woodward had what the Americans called 'the right stuff' – and some to spare – and was already pencilled in for the command of HMS Valiant, the Royal Navy's second nuclear-powered hunter killer submarine sometime that autumn.

Francis Barrington was lined up to commission the next boat, HMS Warspite, probably this time next year. After the Warspite commissioned everything would speed up; and by then the crucial decisions about the type, and design of the United Kingdom's undersea nuclear deterrent would have been finalised. For a man like Simon Collingwood – essentially, he was an engineer – these were exhilarating times.

"Here comes your taxi, sir," Simon Cassels reported, tongue-in-cheek, indicating to port where a tiny speck, presently no more than a mote in a

man's eye at three miles range was swiftly transforming into the squat, ugly silhouette of a Westland Wasp anti-submarine helicopter. The closer it got the more it looked like an oversized bug.

"I better get my flying suit on, Captain," Collingwood guffawed. He was relieved for a moment to be able to think of a future that was minutes rather than years away.

Secrets were funny things.

Liberating and imprisoning at the same time; like responsibility. Things had been so simple before the October War. He had had his career, the job of overseeing the engineering side of the commissioning of the Royal Navy's first nuclear submarine; he had been a humble engineer never destined, or even considered fit to command Dreadnought. Then overnight the World had changed forever, and fate had decreed that he had brought Dreadnought into service and commanded the Navy's most potent weapon on two war patrols. His life had taken an extraordinary turn; he had won fame, promotion, inherited the greatest professional challenge of his generation of naval officers, and he had stumbled across the love of his life, and all because great men had blundered; and in their hubris blown away half the northern hemisphere of the globe.

Making his way towards the helicopter pad near the stern of the frigate he thought a moment about his wife, his baby daughter and *his* adopted children, distracted for a moment from the great project that was to be his life's work.

The bug-like helicopter flared out, settled, squatting down on its four wheeled legs as crewmen helped him into his tight, constricting flight suit and handed him his 'bone dome' helmet.

Onboard he touched the throat microphone toggle.

"Take us directly over Dreadnought, if you please."

His word was every man in his fiefdom's command.

He had shaken Max Forton's hand that morning on the casing of the Dreadnought at Faslane on the Gare Loch, where boats came and went visiting his ever-growing domain and tied up alongside the old submarine depot ship HMS Adamant.

Once Dreadnought and Grampus had dived their captains would open their sealed orders. Both submarines were to proceed via the North Channel to the Atlantic but not to exercise together with the Eskimo.

Dreadnought was to proceed to mid-ocean before turning south and running down to the South Atlantic; Grampus was to follow her on the first leg of her odyssey, ensuring she was not ‘tailed’ by the US Navy before ranging north towards Iceland and the Denmark Strait. Her role was no more than a diversion while Dreadnought made her eighteen-day non-stop passage down to 51 degrees south.

It was one small step towards avenging the most humiliating day in the nation’s post-October War history; the day the Argentine seized the United Kingdom’s South Atlantic territories.

That had been on the day of the Battle of Malta; the same day that the World learned of the nuking of Tehran and the Soviet invasion of Northern Iran.

The Royal Navy had finally been forced to withdraw its submarines from the blockade of the lost Southern Atlantic dominions last July. But that was then and this was now. And today was the first day of the campaign to take back everything which had been lost.

Dreadnought’s mission was nothing short of a simulated war patrol. An ultra-secret intelligence gathering operation; the first of many, and a vital training exercise for the day when the Royal Navy took back the Falklands Archipelago – and all the other stolen territories in the South Atlantic – from the Argentine.

It was a historic day; the first day of the next war.

Fittingly, it was the 15th of March; in the Roman calendar the *Ides of March*, the date when all debts are settled...

[The End]

Author's Endnote

'Crow On The Cradle' is Book 10 of the alternative history series ***Timeline 10/27/***62. I hope you enjoyed it - or if you did not, sorry - but either way, thank you for reading and helping to keep the printed word alive. Remember, civilization depends on people like *you*.

_____

These days I get asked a lot about my ongoing plans for *Timeline 10/27/62*; which is a bit tricky because obviously, one is always at pains to avoid putting inadvertent spoilers 'out there'.

Crow On The Cradle is the fifteenth instalment of the series – or rather, 'saga' as it has become - and the simple answer to the question: what do I plan to do with the series?

Is that I shall carry on!

To avoid confusion – and questions about which one to read first *All Along the Watchtower*, *The American Dream* and *Crow On The Cradle* are effectively direct sequels.

In the first half of 2018 there will be an excursion to Australasia in two books: *Cricket On The Beach* and *Operation Manna*, both will be departures from the style of the Main and USA series prompted by *Timeline 10/27/62's* loyal Australasian readership. These two books 'fill in' the gap between *Operation Anadyr* and *Aftermath* and their respective sequels, *Love is Strange* and *California Dreaming*, exploring what the post-October War looked like from outside the USA and the UK. I plan to publish these two books in the spring of 2018 (if all goes according to plan *Cricket On The Beach* in February 2018, and *Operation Manna* in April 2018.)

The Main Series will move on in 2018 with Book 11 '1966 & All That', Book 12 – 'Only in America' and Book 13 'Warsaw Concerto'. In the summer of 2018 I will also publish a 'standalone' Timeline 10/27/62 book

entitled ‘Football in the Ruins – the World Cup of 1966’.

Please watch my website for the latest news!

James Philip
December 2017

Other Books by James Philip

Other Series and Novels

The Guy Winter Mysteries

Prologue: Winter's Pearl
Book 1: Winter's War
Book 2: Winter's Revenge
Book 3: Winter's Exile
Book 4: Winter's Return
Book 5: Winter's Spy

Available 2018

Book 6: Winter's Nemesis

The Bomber War Series

Book 1: Until the Night
Book 2: The Painter
Book 3: The Cloud Walkers

Until the Night Series

Part 1: Main Force Country – September 1943
Part 2: The Road to Berlin – October 1943
Part 3: The Big City – November 1943
Part 4: When Winter Comes – December 1943
Part 5: After Midnight – January 1944

The Harry Waters Series

Book 1: Islands of No Return
Book 2: Heroes
Book 3: Brothers in Arms

The Frankie Ransom Series

Book 1: A Ransom for Two Roses
Book 2: The Plains of Waterloo
Book 3: The Nantucket Sleighride

The Strangers Bureau Series

Book 1: Interlopers
Book 2: Pictures of Lily

Audio Books of the following Titles are available (or are in production for release in 2018)

Aftermath
After Midnight
A Ransom for Two Roses
Brothers in Arms
California Dreaming
Heroes
Islands of No Return
Love is Strange
Main Force Country
Operation Anadyr
The Big City
The Cloud Walkers
The Nantucket Sleighride
The Pillars of Hercules
The Painter
The Plains of Waterloo
The Road to Berlin

Until the Night
When Winter Comes
Winter's Exile
Winter's Pearl
Winter's Return
Winter's Revenge
Winter's Spy
Winter's War
Winter's Nemesis

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NON-FICTION CRICKET BOOKS

FS Jackson
Lord Hawke

Cricket Books edited by James Philip

The James D. Coldham Series
[Edited by James Philip]

Books

Northamptonshire Cricket: A History [1741-1958]
Lord Harris

Anthologies

Volume 1: Notes & Articles
Volume 2: Monographs No. 1 to 8

Monographs

No. 1 - William Brockwell
No. 2 - German Cricket

No. 3 - Devon Cricket
No. 4 - R.S. Holmes
No. 5 - Collectors & Collecting
No. 6 - Early Cricket Reporters
No. 7 – Northamptonshire
No. 8 - Cricket & Authors

Details of all James Philip's published books and forthcoming publications can be found on his website
www.jamesphilip.co.uk

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