

THE PILLARS OF HERCULES

TIMELINE 10/27/62
BOOK THREE



JAMES PHILIP

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The Pillars of Hercules

TIMELINE 10/27/62 – BOOK THREE

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The Pillars of Hercules

[TIMELINE 10/27/62 – BOOK THREE]

Chapter 1

03:45 Hours EST

Saturday 7th December 1963

Second Floor, Executive Residence, White House, Washington DC

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America, peered blearily into his younger brother's face. He heard the words, and saw his lips moving but for a long time nothing registered. The crippling stomach cramps, weariness and the cloying lassitude had hit him almost as soon as he got back from Texas where he had gone to make the 'Moon Speech'. He had had a bad feeling about going back to Rice University, and an even worse feeling all that day - Friday 22nd November - before he stepped up to the lectern. It was almost as if somebody had been walking on his grave. At the time he had put his misgivings down to the cocktail of drugs his doctors had fed him to keep him on his feet. He had been depressed and troubled that first time he met Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961. The Soviet leader must have thought he was dealing with a sulky kid who would rather have been somewhere else. Was it any wonder that the Soviets had not known when to stop pushing over Cuba?

"Jack, we've got a problem..."

The most powerful man in the world did not want to hear that. He had ordered the immolation of untold scores of millions last year. Ever since then his flawed body and his broken soul had been tortured by an insidious inner voice that reminded him – every waking moment of his cursed life – that he had failed...*everybody*. When he unleashed the fiery hounds of Hell on America's enemies he had believed that soon he and everything that was dear to him would be swept away. He thought his death was inevitable; that he had made the least possible worst choice. He had reconciled himself to the dreadful truth that if he was to save some small part of America, and preserve something of what was great about America, war was unavoidable. Knowing that he would not live to walk in the ruins of the World that was about to burn had been oddly comforting that late evening in October 1962. He would have liked to have sat with Jackie and the kids one last time but they had

been on their way to Hyannis Port by then; he would have liked to have received the last rites but as he waited with other Cabinet members in the White House Situation Room that night it would not have been appropriate, or seemly. He among all men, as the Commander-in-Chief, had owed it to the others to deny his own mortality. If he was without hope then why should any man follow him into the jaws of death?

A hand was gently shaking his shoulder.

Elsewhere in the room he heard muted voices.

“What the fuck did that quack give the President last night?”

Very few people knew that Jack Kennedy had been diagnosed as suffering from Addison’s disease in London in 1947, aged thirty, just after he entered Congress. The symptoms of the affliction included severe and often incapacitating pains in the legs, back and abdomen, random attacks of vomiting and diarrhoea, hypoglycaemia, fevers and at the extreme end of the spectrum, convulsions, psychosis and syncope. Fortunately, he had never suffered this latter symptom in public. Not even the great American media – who happily turned a blind eye to his womanizing - would have let a President get away with losing consciousness in the full glare of its cameras. However, he had suffered most of the other symptoms at one time or another since assuming the Presidency, sometimes several of them in combination. More than once during dealings with foreign leaders and ambassadors he had experienced relatively minor manifestations of Addison’s; confusion, slurred speech brought on by low blood pressure and sudden terrible bouts of lethargy that seemed to fall on him without warning. It was only after he had entered the White House that hypothyroidism, another rare endocrine disease, had been identified.

Jack had always been the sickliest of the Kennedy brothers but that had never really mattered until his elder sibling, Joe, had been killed in a flying accident in England in August 1944. Joseph Kennedy (junior) had always been his father’s anointed political flag bearer, rather than the fragile, reckless playboy second son...

“Jack, can you hear me?”

Robert Francis ‘Bobby’ Kennedy, the President’s thirty-nine year old younger brother, sounded increasingly alarmed. Notwithstanding the seven-and-a-half years difference in their ages, their divergent temperaments and the fact that many men in ‘Bobby’ Kennedy’s position would have chaffed to

have lived for so long in his brother's shadow; the siblings were the heart and sinew of what was left of the fractured Administration that had swept into the White House three years before with such great hopes. Back in the spring of 1961 the World had seemed to be full of possibilities; now there was just the foul taste of ashes in their mouths...

"The Vice President is on his way to DC."

They had had to let LBJ in on the secret – leastways, part of it – about the President's health after the Vienna Summit in 1961. Not that Lyndon Baines Johnson had not already scented blood in the water years ago. He had been Senate Majority Leader before he ran against JFK for the Democratic Presidential ticket in 1960; the wily Texan had made his career on Capitol Hill from knowing other men's dirtiest secrets. The only thing neither Kennedy brother understood was why LBJ had not turned on them, yet.

Jack Kennedy groaned and rolled onto an unsteady elbow.

Future historians would blame the 'Moon Speech' on the cocktail of painkillers, steroids, amphetamines and God alone knew what else they had pumped into his failing body. They would say he had been high when he unleashed Armageddon, and subsequently morbidly depressed and psychotic as he stumbled from one blunder to the next in the last thirteen terrible months. America had had a policy for winning a nuclear war; but no idea whatsoever how to deal with the aftermath. He thought he was saving the World for democracy; it turned out he had been personally responsible for auguring in a new, radioactively dark age. *And then he had let himself be convinced that America needed, above all, a unifying crusade against the Universe!*

He had considered suicide but that would be a betrayal too far and the Catholicism of his upbringing denied him that merciful release.

"Who else is coming over?" The President asked, his voice a hoarse, dry rasp pitched so low that only his brother caught his words. Bobby had been at his shoulder guarding his back throughout the last decade. In the Administration he held the post of Attorney General but everybody knew that his primary role at the White House was as the President's principal special advisor. Last year Bobby had almost done a deal with the Soviets over Cuba; he probably would have done a deal if that fucking maniac submarine captain had not unilaterally started World War III. Once that first shot had been fired – regardless of the missiles subsequently fired out of Cuba at the US

mainland – they had all understood that the genie was out of the bottle.

The side that launched first bought the best ticket in the lottery; a chance to survive. His had been a modern day judgement of Paris and he had given the order to hit the Soviets with *everything*...

“Who?” He repeated, waiting for the nausea to abate.

“Dean, Bob, McCone, General Wheeler...”

“Oh, fuck! What’s happened now?”

David ‘Dean’ Rusk was Secretary of State. Dean was the sort of ubiquitously able man who was, for some reason, the guy you went to when your first choice cried off. Born in Cherokee County, Georgia, in 1909, he was a former Rhodes Scholar who had joined the State Department after the 1945 war. He was the man who had suggested dividing United States and Soviet spheres of influence in Korea along the line of the 38th parallel. By 1949 he was a Deputy Under-Secretary of State and by the following year the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. A Rockefeller Foundation trustee from 1950 to 1961, he had succeeded Chester L. Barnard as President of the Foundation as long ago as 1952. Dean Rusk was exactly the kind of safe pair of hands America needed in a time of crisis. He was also exactly the kind of man who would *never* rush to the President’s sick bed unless the sky was about to fall in upon the beleaguered Administration.

‘Bob’ was forty-seven year old Robert Strange McNamara, the eighth US Secretary of Defence. Born in California, McNamara had been one of the *Whiz Kids* who rebuilt the Ford Motor Company after 1945, briefly serving as Ford’s President before taking over at the Pentagon with a remit – if not a blank cheque – to modernize and rationalise the nation’s military might. If Dean Rusk was not a man known for rushing across Washington in the middle of the night, off the cuff ‘fire fighting’ was absolutely *not* the style of the urbane and never less than brilliant Secretary of Defence.

Like McNamara, John Alexander McCone, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was another Californian. Born in 1902 he had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1922 with a BS in Mechanical Engineering, beginning his career in Los Angeles at the Llewellyn Iron Works. He had been executive Vice President of the Consolidated Steel Corporation; and founded Bechtel-McCone. He was a prominent and very wealthy industrialist whose natural political affiliations had always been with the Republican Party.

In 1946, Ralph Casey of the General Accounting Office implied that McCone was a war profiteer; nevertheless, he had gone on to be a key advisor to successive post-war Administrations, and in 1958 he was appointed Head of the Atomic Energy Commission. To Washington outsiders he had not been an obvious choice to replace Allen Dulles – sacked after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 – but the last thing Jack Kennedy had needed or wanted in the hot seat at CIA Headquarters at Langley was another spymaster like Dulles.

John McCone had tried to dissuade JFK from launching the first strike against the Soviets the previous year. He was the one ‘insider’ who had believed that even after the massive retaliatory strikes against Cuba the Soviets would want to go on talking. That said, he had also assured his President that if the United States of America struck the first blow then the war was in some sense ‘winnable’. However, not even McCone had believed victory would be so total, and yet so pyrrhic.

General Earle Gilmore ‘Bus’ Wheeler, the forty-five year old newly appointed DC born Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was the sort of soldier who radiated exactly the sort of calm, considered certitude and reliability that some of his more charismatic contemporaries – Curtis LeMay, for example – did not. Wheeler had stepped into his current post only five weeks ago after the sudden death of General Maxwell Taylor and several of his most senior staffers in an air crash over the Pacific coming back from a tour of inspection of US Forces in South Korea, Japan and Hawaii.

If Rusk, McNamara, McCone and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were on their way over to the White House in the middle of the night; not even a man under the influence of drugs needed to be told that he had a really bad problem.

The President swung his legs over the side of the cot, ignoring the spasms of pain that lanced from the base of his spine to his head, toes and fingers. There was the usual concern behind the apparently impassive eyes of Jack Kennedy’s forty-five year old, thickset African-American valet, George Edward Thomas. The big man loomed protectively over his charge, respectfully impervious to the presence of the Attorney General of the United States of America and the other mid-ranking VIPs who had followed the President’s brother into the second floor bedroom.

“If perhaps the President might have a little privacy while he dresses,

sirs,” the black man suggested in a gravelly voice to the room at large. Bobby Kennedy lingered but everybody else, backed out into the corridor.

The Attorney General, realising he was alone, whistled lowly.

“How do you do that, George?” He asked.

The other man remained poker-faced.

“Politely, sir.”

The President would have laughed but it would have hurt too much, so he settled for a grimace.

“What’s going on?” He demanded of his brother.

“That’s the thing, Jack,” Bobby Kennedy confessed, exasperation lighting his eyes and creasing his unnaturally youthful good looks. “I talked to Dean before I came over. He woke me up. He says Bob McNamara’s as angry as a bear with its foot in a trap. He was muttering about LeMay ‘going rogue’ again and...” He threw his arms in the air. “There’s something screwy going on and CIA keep telling me it is nothing to do with them!”

John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s head suddenly cleared. The pain did not matter, nor the sickness in his gut or the stabbing needles of guilt that would never go away. In a moment John Fitzgerald Kennedy, by a conscious effort of will, of pure mind over unkind matter, put aside the transient pains of his life and became again the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America.

He looked at George Thomas.

“A lounge suit and a Navy tie, I think.”

“Yes, Mister President.”

Chapter 2

Saturday 7th December 1963

Cambridge Barracks, Tigne, Malta

Vice-Admiral Sir Julian Wemyss Christopher listened intently to the measured, grimly matter of fact report of Air Commodore Daniel French, Acting Air-Officer Commanding, RAF Malta. The air was still heavy with dust – mostly pulverised limestone – thrown up by yesterday evening's attack. The stench of burning wafted into the partially wrecked office each time the wind fluked from the west to the south. Nobody had got around to sweeping up the glass or mopping the blood off the office's floor. Ironically, gazing through the now splintered windows the new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations was greeted with a view of a perfect azure afternoon sky. Albeit a vista somewhat spoiled by the smoke which drifted lazily across the idyllic blue waters beyond Dragut Point from the fires still burning in Valletta and in Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua across the other side of the Grand Harbour.

Regardless of how bad things were; the damage and the loss of life would have been immeasurably worse but for an outrageous happenstance. But then such was war. In war terrible things happen, things go wrong, no plan survives first contact with the enemy and whatever you did, people died. Not that today found the new C-in-C in any mood to be remotely sanguine about anything in particular, it was simply that in his position he could not afford to be angry; while every human instinct cried out for revenge and retribution he knew with utter, unequivocal conviction that this was the one time in his life that he could not afford to allow his emotions to sway his actions. Now was a time for cool heads to rule raging hearts; to content oneself that one day there would be a reckoning and that vengeance, when all was said and done, was a dish best savoured *cold*.

"Your chaps seem to have performed in the highest traditions of the service," he observed with an affable, manly cordiality that left neither officer in any doubt as to who was in sole command of the situation. "I look forward to meeting all those involved in due course to convey to them my sincere

admiration and congratulations, and my thanks, Air Commodore French.”

“The chaps will appreciate that, sir,” the airman retorted cheerfully. “Might I be so bold as to inquire as to your plans for establishing your Staff? Forgive my impertinence but the normal ‘venues’ are somewhat knocked about at the moment and the facilities at RAF Luqa, Hamrun and Ta’Qali are virtually undamaged, sir.”

Christopher smiled to himself. He had never met the other man face to face but his new Flag Lieutenant, an impossibly young-looking protégé of his old friend the First Sea Lord, named Alan Hannay, had provided – completely unprompted, apparently off the cuff – a brief character portrait in the two minute interregnum while the secure telephone connection to the command bunker at RAF Luqa had been established.

‘He flew a Lancaster tour in the last year of the 1945 war, sir. He was attached to the Valiant V-Bomber Program thereafter and subsequently, he commanded one of the first Vulcan Squadrons. His wife and daughter were, sadly, killed last year but his son, also an RAF pilot – currently based at Waddington – survived. The Air Commodore has been on Malta six months, is well thought of by his own people and maintains excellent relations with both military and civilian authorities with whom he has regular contacts...’

“Thank you for the offer,” Julian Christopher rejoined, “but I shall probably set up shop at the emergency command centre in Mdina. I gather that it is a tad dusty but we can live with that for the time being. How soon can you have copies of your Command After Action Report and all preliminary documentary and photographic supporting materials flown to England?”

“Assuming there is no follow up strike on my airfields I’ll have everything on the evening shuttle, sir. I’m having the gun camera footage copied *in toto* as we speak.”

“Good man. I shall let you get on with your work in peace, French.”

Christopher put down the black Bakelite handset and glanced at his hovering Flag Lieutenant. While he had been talking on the phone the young man who had remained unreasonably spic and span, and unruffled during their whistle stop tour of the carnage – ‘damage’ did not really describe much of what he had discovered in Valletta, on Manoel Island and along the shore of Sliema Creek - had acquired a clipboard. The boy was brandishing a freshly sharpened pencil as if he had been reading his Admiral’s mind.

“*Most Urgent,*” the new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations prefaced crisply, straightening his jacket. Unguarded movements sent splinters of, if not needle-like pain, then troublesome *discomfort* deep into his lean, bruised and battered torso despite the painkillers that Alan Hannay had been doling out to him every two hours ever since they landed yesterday afternoon. “*Most Urgent,*” he repeated, marshalling his thoughts. “*For the Attention of the First Sea Lord and the Chiefs of Staff Committee. It is now apparent that the initial low-level air attack by American fighter bomber aircraft bearing the markings of the Regia Aeronautica against units of the Fleet anchored in Sliema Creek, Marsamxett Harbour, and Kalkara, French and Dockyard Creeks; and against radar and communications targets across the Maltese Archipelago were conducted in support of a simultaneous high-level precision bombing assault aimed at destroying key military and civilian command and control facilities.*”

The older man paused while the younger man’s pencil scratched frantically to catch up with him. As he waited he looked again through the shattered windows of what had been the office of the base’s Transport Officer. Awnings were stretched from the sandstone cloisters of the one surviving large building. Other awnings were drawn between Bedford lorries, and tents had been erected on the far side of the parade ground. As he watched four stretcher bearers gently carried another litter towards the line of tents, a nurse walking alongside holding a transfusion bottle high above her head in the brightening December afternoon sunshine. There was still no reliable estimate of casualties but the dead alone would inevitably, run into several hundreds and the flood of the wounded and injured had overwhelmed the island’s civilian and military hospitals. Rescue parties were still digging the dead and the maimed out of the ruins of scores of buildings. Several times that day he had walked past lines of bodies draped with blankets and tarpaulins arranged by the roadside. Once again he silently promised himself that one day there would be a reckoning.

“*But for the fact that the attack coincidentally commenced in the middle of a major pre-arranged RAF ‘war game’ involving six Hawker Hunter interceptors based at Ta’Qali, two of the four V-Bombers based at Luqa, and a mixed force of Fleet Air Arm Sea Vixens and Scimitars attached to RAF Malta on an extended training deployment, the raid would have been*

virtually unopposed and incalculable damage might have resulted.” Christopher tried and failed to completely suppress a predatory half-smile.

The ‘war game’ that Air Commodore French had mounted ‘to keep the chaps on their toes’, had been specifically designed to counter the mood of despondency and, although Christopher hated to admit it, *guilt* that his predecessor Vice-Admiral Hugh Staveley-Pope had inexcusably allowed to permeate his whole command. This knowledge caused him pain of a kind much more profound than his cracked ribs, the superficial burns to his arm and the lingering ache of the severe concussion he had sustained in the attack on Balmoral Castle only a few days ago.

Hugh Staveley-Pope had been his closest friend at the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth; they had served together on the battleship Warspite in 1918 – when the great ship still bore proud scars of her pounding at Jutland two years before – and stood together on the lee rail at her stern beneath the barrels of her fifteen-inch guns to witness, awed and humbled, the entire German High Seas Fleet steaming meekly into captivity at Scapa Flow. Memories of that day remained crystal clear, he could still see the rust-stained, dirty battle line of the Kaiser’s beaten navy slowly cruising past the guns of the Grand Fleet, from which it had fled that day in 1916 when Warspite had fallen under the guns of a dozen German dreadnoughts and somehow, survived. Grosser Kurfurst, Derfflinger, Seydlitz and the Markgraf and a procession of other massive battleships and battlecruisers slowly, ignominiously churned into history whenever he thought of those days.

Now poor Hugh Staveley-Pope’s body was lying incinerated and crushed somewhere under the ruins of his Headquarters, HMS Phoenicia, several hundred yards away across Sliema Creek on Manoel Island. The letter that Her Majesty the Queen had written to Christopher’s old friend was still in his pocket, undelivered; the letter commending his predecessor for his service to his Queen and his country, and confirming his immediate dismissal from his command in Malta.

“Sir?” Alan Hannay asked, less anxiously than he felt.

The older man realised he had been wool-gathering.

That would never do!

Air Commodore French’s ‘war game’ had mimicked – uncannily in the circumstances - the characteristics of the actual attack on the Maltese

Archipelago. Things so often went awry in war that even an old salt like Julian Christopher sometimes forgot that luck was a coin with two sides. Yesterday, by pure chance over half the operational modern jet interceptors currently based at Malta had been in the air – and more importantly, they had already been at a ‘fighting’ altitude – several minutes before the first Douglas A-4 Skyhawks attacked the Battle class destroyer HMS Agincourt in Sliema Creek, and the old cruiser, HMS Sheffield, which had just commenced oiling in Marsamxett Anchorage below the Floriana bastion. Alerted to the presence of incoming ‘unknowns’ some minutes previously, the ‘war game’ had been abandoned, the two V-Bombers, a Vickers Valiant and an Avro Vulcan had made themselves scarce in the southern skies towards Tunis, leaving the fighters – some thirteen aircraft – to deploy to meet the interlopers. Most of the fighters had had at least twenty minutes fuel onboard as they manoeuvred into position. The Hunters had climbed to meet the four ‘large targets’ approaching at thirty-four thousand feet from the north-east; the Sea Vixens and Scimitars had raced to intercept the dozen aircraft coming in skimming the wave tops from the east. The RAF Hawker Hunters had not been carrying air-to-air missiles but as it turned out that had not mattered; their 30-millimetre ADEN cannons had been locked, fully loaded and primed for action. The Royal Fleet Air Arm De Havilland Sea Vixens and Supermarine Scimitars, equipped only with short-range Firestreak, and early variants of the American Sidewinder heat-seeking air-to-air missiles had *only* succeeded in shooting down five of the low-level attackers. However, their presence had by and large, broken up the attack within minutes and a short, savage dog-fighting melee had broken out in the skies over the Maltese Archipelago.

In Sliema Creek the Battle class destroyer HMS Agincourt had been hit twice and despite desperate attempts to ground her in shallower water she lay half-sunk at her moorings. HMS Sheffield, hit three times had eventually been towed into Lazaretto Creek, where, listing and fire blackened, the old warhorse which had taken part in the hunt for the Bismarck in 1941, remained for the moment, afloat. Elsewhere, the Skyhawks had liberally sprinkled five hundred pound iron bombs in and around the Grand Harbour, Dockyard Creek – where the modern anti-submarine frigate HMS Torquay had capsized in a flooded dry dock – and across Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Kalkara Creek, where one bomb had exploded within the grounds of the

Royal Naval Hospital Bigli blowing in scores of windows and temporarily rendering two wards unusable.

“In the event, RAF and Fleet Air Arm fighters disrupted and after a few minutes drove off the low-level raid at a cost of one Scimitar lost. I am happy to report that the pilot of this aircraft successfully ejected and suffered only minor injuries. As many as five enemy aircraft were shot down.”

Less than a minute after the first bombs fell on warships in Sliema Creek and Marsamxett harbour two large, probably guided munitions had fallen on Valletta. The first had penetrated twenty feet of rock and exploded in the Army War Room beneath the Grand Harbour Saluting Battery. The second weapon had penetrated the reinforced concrete cupola of Fort St Elmo – which housed the Central Staff of the British Military Administration of Malta – at the seaward tip of the Valletta peninsula. Moments later more huge ‘ground penetrating’ or ‘earthquake’ bombs began falling on other key installations. Two struck and virtually demolished the Royal Navy Headquarters at Fort St Angelo overlooking the Grand Harbour opposite Valletta. On Manoel Island HMS Phoenicia was effectively demolished by three large bombs, one of which was probably an example of the new ‘fuel air, thermobaric’ munitions Julian Christopher had known to be in development before the October War. Within less than three minutes the raid had paralysed the British military and civilian administration of the Archipelago.

“Significant damage was, however,” Julian Christopher dictated, his voice becoming colder, his spirit railing against the temperance he knew that he must exhibit at this time when all he really wanted to do was send Air Commodore French’s V-Bombers to wreak revenge on the fascist maniacs who now ruled most of the Italian mainland. “Sustained to many key installations. An unknown number of key personnel will have been killed and seriously injured in these attacks. At this time the only major viable land-based command and control facilities which remain intact are those at RAF Luqa, and the Emergency Command Centre at Rabat-Mdina which was last activated some ten years ago and has not been modernised since 1954. This said we will make the best of things. At this time I recommend against the urgent despatch of additional UK-based personnel and resources to this theatre of operations.”

Christopher stepped across to the window.

He noted the two women walking across the parade ground in his direction. A smile creased his pale lips for a moment as he recognised the one, and guessed the identity of the other, much younger woman.

“You will be in receipt of the RAF’s preliminary after action report by air courier later this evening. Please be aware that this report will confirm all – repeat all – prior indications of direct American involvement in yesterday’s attack on Sovereign British Territory. Included in the AAR will be incontrovertible evidence to this effect; namely, gun camera footage from three of the RAF Hunter fighters which engaged and shot down all four of the heavy bombers participating in the high-level element of the attack. I can further report that preliminary investigation of the crash site on the island of Gozo has provided evidence consistent with that of the gun camera record.”

The new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations hesitated, before adding one last clause to the – of necessity – somewhat terse and inevitably cryptic communication he was sending back to England.

“This morning at zero-zero-thirty hours local I issued the following directive to all units under my command: Malta attacked by American and Italian aircraft. Within the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations all American and American-allied forces are to be treated as hostile and may be fired upon without warning.”

Chapter 3

Saturday 7th December 1963

The Oval Office, The White House, Washington DC

Jack Kennedy walked stiffly into the room that had once seemed to him to be the nexus of *his* new Camelot. He and his knights – the best and the brightest America had to offer – were going to change the World.

Well, they had sure done that, hadn't they?

The thirty-fifth President of the United States hoped his hands were not shaking so visibly that everybody in the room would notice. Apart from his brother, none of the men who had risen to their feet from the semi-circle of comfortable chairs and sofas arranged around the great woven representation of an American Eagle, had known - although they might have suspected - that their leader had been virtually incapacitated ever since his return to DC after delivering the 'Moon Speech' in Texas a fortnight ago. They had all tacitly assumed somebody was at the wheel of the ship of state; and that somebody had noticed the big iceberg on the horizon as it got bigger and bigger as the vessel went faster and faster. However, if Dean Rusk, or Bob McNamara, or John McCone had noticed the boat was rudderless; none of them had made a grab for the wheel and now, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was afraid it might be too late.

In truth the Administration had ceased to be 'a team' as long ago as the spring. He was the one who was responsible for the untold millions of dead, for the obscene blunder - if that was what it was; only history would tell – of fighting a nuclear war. He was the man at the top, technically the buck stopped with him. Of course, nothing was that simple and every man in the room felt 'responsible' in his own way. Or rather, as Lyndon Baines Johnson put it, 'is working overtime trying to figure out why the other guys at the table did not say something sooner'. Whatever, the senior members of the Administration had not been singing from the same hymn book for a long time and now it looked like the American people were going to have to pay the price.

The Vice President was not in Washington and that was a problem. Jack

Kennedy and LBJ might be different kinds of men – they were certainly different kinds of politicians – who would never be friends, let alone trust each other unless the chips were down and they had no other choice, but right now the youngest man to ever be elected to the Presidency - Theodore Roosevelt had been nine months younger when he assumed the role following William McKinley's assassination in 1901 – badly needed the guile and the feral cunning of the man he had beaten to the Democratic Presidential ticket in 1960.

Jack Kennedy settled cautiously into the firmly upholstered, high backed chair at the apex of the semi-circle of armchairs and sofas and waved for everybody to sit down.

"We will consider the question of *why* we don't know what's going on another time," he declared in a flat, unmelodic monotone that conveyed to the men who had been awaiting his arrival some small measure of the violently seething displeasure he felt for them all. Even Bobby. While he was in his sick bed they had watched the shit hitting the fan and they had done precisely *nothing* about it. Except, he suspected, bust their collective guts keeping LBJ out of the picture. He scowled at Dean Rusk.

His Secretary of State pursed his lips but for the moment, did not speak.

The President's eye fell across other faces before settling on the taciturn, greying features of the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"What does the CIA have for me, John?" The younger man asked in a tone which suggested that what he was actually asking was: *What has the CIA been keeping from me?*

John McCone did not care for the younger man's implied criticism. The former industrialist who had, notwithstanding the niggling post-war accusations of war profiteering back in the 1940s been one of the men responsible for providing the steel and guns with which the United States had won the Second World War, regarded himself as a deeply patriotic man who had unselfishly devoted his life to public service. Moreover, the President could hardly – frankly, he did not want to – imagine the problems he was still having rooting out Allen Dulles's hard cases at Langley. His predecessor had run the agency like a state within a state, a law unto itself. Much in the same way Edgar Hoover still ran the FBI.

John McCone cleared his throat.

"What *the* CIA have got, Mr President," he replied, respectfully cool,

“will make a little more sense to you once Dean’s briefed you on the British *note*.”

Jack Kennedy’s attention snapped back to Dean Rusk.

“What note, Dean?”

Out of the corner of his eye the President had seen his younger brother, Bobby, and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff edging forward in their chairs.

“Things have been,” Dean Rusk prefaced, running a hand across his balding pate in a gesture of mild irritation, “*tense*, lately. Not helped by having a placeman like LB Westheimer in place over there as Ambassador.” He had wanted a professional diplomat installed in England, somebody who understood their old allies. “Nevertheless, at State we took the view that so long as we let the British get on with things, you know, Operation Manna and their independent military survey, and diplomatic and political expeditions in the north European sphere that sooner or later we, and they, would return to something like a normal, ‘business as usual’ footing. With this in mind State was, of course, opposed to initiatives like the building of the CIA compound outside Dublin and, as you recollect, against the pro-active re-establishment of military lines of supply and communication with the regimes in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, all of which were likely, sooner or later, to impinge upon the vital strategic interests of our allies, or rather, our former allies, the British in areas which traditionally, they have regarded their rightful sphere of influence. The British *note* is confirmation that the ill-judged meddling of our military and intelligence communities in matters of economic policy and post-October war diplomacy has now created a situation where, for all I know, we are effectively at war with the United Kingdom and possibly, several of its Commonwealth allies. The South African, the Australian and the New Zealand Governments have delivered notes to the State Department in the last forty-eight hours protesting about the trading practices of US companies on their soil, and reaffirmed two hundred mile territorial limits around their coasts...”

Jack Kennedy stared at the mild looking man in the armchair six feet away as if his Secretary of State had just proposed the slaying of all new born children. While he registered the words; their meaning completely eluded him in that awful moment when he realised that his worst fears were as nothing to the nightmare that was about to envelope his country. In

desperation he turned to John McCone.

“The Dublin compound was supposed to show the Irish we hadn’t forgotten about them. It was to get humanitarian and industrial development funding past Congress. Surely the British knew that all along?”

“The Brits are paranoid about this kind of stuff, Jack,” Bobby Kennedy declared before he had given his brain a chance to digest what Dean Rusk had just told the meeting. Unlike his elder brother he had never shaken off his inherited mistrust of British motives and never really questioned the perfidy of all British governments through history towards the downtrodden Irish.

The President’s stare slashed through the air.

“They lost over twelve million people in the October War, Bobby!” He rasped angrily. “Don’t you think they’ve got a right to be *paranoid*?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“The British, specifically the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration led by Premier Heath,” Dean Rusk announced, rejoining the fray feeling more confident now that the braying of the Attorney General had been briefly stilled. Practically everybody in DC thought Bobby Kennedy had far too much influence over his brother. Dean Rusk was not alone in thinking that lately, Bobby Kennedy had forgotten that the war had only happened because *he had* failed to broker a deal with the Soviets over Cuba. The Secretary of State was not the only Cabinet member irked by the fact that, scarcely more than a year on from the cataclysm, the Attorney General had recovered much of his pre-war confidence and his arrogance and started again undercutting each and every other senior member of the Administration. That was a Kennedy thing, something in their blood. None of them could stop themselves *interfering*. “The British,” Dean Rusk continued, daring Bobby Kennedy to interrupt, “believe that organs of the US Government may have been involved in the assassination attempt on the lives of the Royal Family in Scotland...”

Jack Kennedy exploded.

“What the fuck are you talking about Dean?” He demanded. Around the Oval Office eyes studied the carpet.

“Four Royal Air Force fighter bombers attacked Queen Elizabeth’s official residence in Scotland at Balmoral. At the time of the attack Premier Heath and several senior members of the UKIEA were also present. The

Queen's youngest son, Prince Andrew was killed, as was the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. There were also heavy casualties among the troops defending the castle..."

The President waited until John McCone braved his blazing glare.

"Were we involved, Mr Director?"

"I don't know," the older man returned poker-faced. "The Brits might be right. I don't know. My people don't have one hundred percent oversight over the Irish compound. If you remember, Mister President," the older man growled, "it was set up to placate certain Irish-American Democratic Party interest groups as a joint CIA, Pentagon and National Security Council project to hide the audit trail from prying Congressional eyes."

Jack Kennedy did not like being reminded that he had been warned the 'whole thing will probably end in tears' any more than the next man. He scowled at the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Dean Rusk had not finished.

"The British also believe we are behind the recent bellicose foreign policy initiatives of the Franco regime in Spain..."

"Bellicose!" John McCone scoffed. "Mr President," the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency said, aware for the first time exactly how disastrously out of contact the most powerful man in the free world had become in the last ten days. Pausing only to hurl an angry glance at the Attorney General, he went on: "Are we to assume that you've not received a full briefing on international developments for some days?"

Bobby Kennedy protested.

"The situation was under control. There was no need to..."

It was President Kennedy, not 'Jack' who silenced his younger brother with a single dismissive wave of his right hand.

"The Spanish mined the approaches to Gibraltar," John McCone reported grimly. "A British carrier was badly damaged and a destroyer sunk. The Spanish have also shelled the runway of the airport at Gibraltar and moved troops up to the border with the colony. The British retaliated by shelling Santander and Cadiz, and," he hesitated, "cratered the runways of the three air bases we share with the Spanish Air Force."

The President's eyes must have been as wide as saucers.

General Wheeler, who had thus far patiently observed the proceedings with a respectful aloofness, cleared his throat.

“No US personnel or assets were harmed in the British raids. Our preliminary assessment is that they were very careful about that. When I was informed of events in the Iberian Peninsula I conferred with the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General LeMay and informed him that until such time as I received a direct order to the contrary from the Commander-in-Chief, United States forces based in Spain should immediately stand down and cease to offer tactical and technical support to the Spanish authorities. I asked General LeMay to confirm to me that he understood this order to mean that all US aircraft in Spain were grounded during the current emergency and he confirmed that this was indeed, his understanding of matters.”

The President read between the lines, knowing that the worst news was yet to come.

“Following the attack on Balmoral Castle and developments at Gibraltar the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration,” Dean Rusk interjected with an uncharacteristic tetchiness, “sent a diplomatic note informing us that it was breaking off all military and diplomatic links. The note also gives warning of a maritime and air exclusion zone around the United Kingdom. As of midnight last night our Ambassador and all his accredited staff in England were declared *persona non grata*, Mr President.”

Jack Kennedy wondered if this was all just a bad dream. Some kind of drug-fuelled hallucination brought on by the cocktail of painkillers, barbiturates and amphetamines his doctors had injected into him to get him back on his feet. He was tempted to pinch himself, or to ask somebody to slap him. Just to be sure.

Bob McNamara had been writing notes in a hard-backed notebook.

He shut the book.

Jack Kennedy’s Secretary of Defence had wearied of the charade. It was clear that none of his colleagues had a grip on the situation; and that they were each as stunned as each other. It was also blindingly obvious that relatively senior members of the nation’s intelligence and military communities were conspiring to plunge the country into a new war. Moreover, it was likely that whatever anybody in the Oval Office did now it would probably be too late to turn back the tide towards another disastrous conflict.

“I am concerned that you haven’t been briefed on the current situation, sir,” he announced, his quiet, coolly precise voice breaking through the

atmosphere of near panic in the Oval Office.

The country had been drifting towards this or a similar crisis since the spring. In the immediate aftermath of the war massive Federal resources had been thrown, unavailingly, at the bomb-damaged cities of the Pacific North-West and the Great Lakes, in New York State, Boston and Houston. In the beginning the shock of the war had been a great force for national unity. It had not lasted. When it became apparent that rebuilding would be a long and impossibly expensive business, other priorities and vested interests had come to the fore; pork-barrel politics had resumed – with a cut-throat vengeance – by the early summer and the lawlessness in and around the blasted cities had spread like some terrible, creeping blight upon the land. While in Washington DC bitter battles raged over which constituencies got the largest slice of the multi-billion dollar Federal Treasury-busting – *Reconstruction and Renewal Program* – grants, the warring Democrats and Republicans had filibustered the legislative processes of both the Congress and the Senate to a standstill, frustrating the Administration's ability to offer vital succour not only to millions of its own people, but to hard-pressed former overseas allies like the British. The massive 'peace dividend' he had delivered – or rather, was in the process of delivering – by savagely slashing the size of the armed forces had been seized upon by other Government Departments like ravening wolves upon a dying buffalo. He personally doubted that a single dollar of the massive savings freed up by *his* bitter infighting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff had gone to the parts of the country that needed it most. Millions of Americans and former allies alike were starving while the Administration was propping up citrus fruit growers in California, ranchers and oil men in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, and was proposing to throw untold treasure at the Space Program! Farmers in the mid-west were being subsidised to grow bumper grain crops which the idiots in Congress would not allow to be exported 'in case of future national need'; the Government was buying thousands of tons of grain it did not need at inflated prices and letting it rot in silos while overseas survivors of the war went hungry! And now the jackasses around the Commander-in-Chief were trying to 'protect him' from the *truth*! The country would soon be bankrupt at this rate; the Administration was already morally bankrupt. It was a national disgrace and he was seriously asking himself how much longer he could, in conscience, remain a party to it. He took off his glasses, cleaned them with a pale yellow

cloth.

“No, that’s not true,” he corrected himself, “I am *appalled* that you have not been briefed on the *current situation*.”

Jack Kennedy thought he detected contempt behind his Secretary of Defence’s myopic eyes.

“Will somebody *please* tell me what is going on?” He demanded, his temper fraying.

Dean Rusk coughed.

“Yesterday evening, some hours before the British diplomatic note was received and digested by State, two Royal Navy warships were attacked off the Spanish Coast west of Ferrol. One is believed to have sunk, the fate of the other is uncertain. Shortly after the attack one of the ships, HMS Talavera, began broadcasting in the ‘clear’ that the attack had been carried out by four A-4 Skyhawks taking advantage of a decoy demonstration by Spanish aircraft which had enabled them to approach within less than a minute’s flying time of their targets without being detected.”

Jack Kennedy knew this had to be a nightmare.

His habitual poise cracked, his jaw literally dropped.

No, no, no...

“At approximately the same time at least a dozen US-supplied aircraft bearing the markings of the Italian Regia Aeronautica mounted a surprise attack on British shipping and other military targets on Malta.” Bob McNamara turned stone-faced to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “You can tell the President the rest, Earle.”

General Wheeler swallowed hard.

“We have no confirmation for this, sir,” he warned, unhappily, unwilling to look his President in the eye. “But Radio Malta is reporting that during the attack Royal Air Force fighters shot down four B-52s which had been dropping large ‘ground-penetrating earthquake’ bombs and what sounds like at least one of the Air Force’s latest experimental fuel-air devices on key command and control facilities across the Maltese Archipelago.”

Jack Kennedy had not been this horrified when he received the first reports of the Cuban missile strike on Galveston on 27th October 1962. At least that event had been in some way, explicable.

This was...*insane*.

“B-52s?” He asked, wide-eyed.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s not possible!”

“That’s what my people said when the reports came in,” General Wheeler agreed, his face downcast. “But the Maltese are claiming that one of the B-52s crashed on the island of Gozo, sir,” he went on, almost but not quite choking on the admission.

Chapter 4

Saturday 7th December 1963

Cambridge Barracks, Tigne, Malta

The woman was in her late fifties or early sixties, sun-tanned and sinewy with a bird-like sudden sharpness of movement. Her head turned at the sound of another helicopter swooping down onto the makeshift landing platform almost on top of the hastily erected tents of the emergency casualty clearing station. She saw the angular figure of the base medical officer, whom to her surprise she had found to be a more than competent surgical registrar, striding purposefully towards the pad situated between the crumbling wreckage of the nineteenth century gun pits of the Cambridge Battery.

Six Royal Marines - she could tell by their fair skins and how they sweated under the weight of combat fatigues designed for a north European winter, and webbing festooned with all manner of containers and ammunition pouches, that they were newly arrived from England – watched over the new Commander-in-Chief. Each man, even their officer, carried a Browning pistol holstered at his waist and cradled a Sterling submachine gun his hands. The Marines had flinty, suspicious eyes that never stopped quartering their surroundings.

Doctor Margo Seiffert was glad she had ordered Joe Calleja to stay with the other volunteer porters and orderlies. Out of sight and mind, that was the best thing if one was in doubt. Her companion had thought she was being overly cautious which was not at all like Margo; but then Marija was one of those beautiful people who had a happy knack of always looking on the bright side of things. Margo Seiffert was not.

The Royal Marines parted to form a protective phalanx around their charges as two men emerged from the door next to which a blast-pocked sign read 'Transport Officer'.

The first man to emerge was a slightly built boy in a sub-lieutenant's uniform with a mop of mildly rebellious black hair that constantly threatened to flop over his brow. His uniform was a little dusty but otherwise crisp,

fresh from the cupboard. The second man to step, blinking into the brightening sunlight of the Mediterranean day was several inches taller than his Flag Lieutenant.

Margo Seiffert noted the bruises on the tall man's positively god-given weathered good looks, and the upright, commanding bearing that no amount of pain from his unhealed injuries could touch. He was in pain; it was obvious in the way he held himself, moving minimally when possible. He was older than she remembered; but unlike any normal man in his position, it was evident that he was *not* remotely weighed down by the crushing burden of his responsibilities in this time of clear and present crisis.

The man who had been Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations for less than twenty-four hours put a hand on his Flag Lieutenant's arm when the younger man attempted to bar the women's way.

"It is all right, Lieutenant Hannay," he murmured drily. He had already decided to promote the boy to full Lieutenant. Not just because he could – now that he had assumed a major independent command he could have promoted the boy two or three ranks if he wanted – but because he had seen enough of Alan Hannay in the last twenty-four hours to know the youngster was destined for great things in the Service. The sooner he started climbing the promotion ladder the better. "Surgeon Commander Seiffert, United States Navy, *Retired*, poses no threat to my personal safety."

"Don't be so sure of that, Julian," Margo Seiffert snorted, halting before the famous 'Fighting Admiral' with her hands on her hips. "When a man ups and goes without saying goodbye *some* girls tend to take offence!"

It was said with a wry smile.

"I seem to recall," Julian Christopher chuckled, stepping forward and extending his right hand, "that by that time we'd already mutually agreed to differ over practically everything that actually matters."

The man and the woman locked eyes.

Margo Seiffert was a full head shorter and still wearing the stained and blood-spotted white coat Marija had discovered in the bomb damaged barrack stores. Her young companion blinked incomprehension at the nuances underlying the short exchange.

"You're quite the hero now," Margo said simply.

"We do what we must do," the man retorted softly. "Is there anything I

can do to assist your work here?”

Margo shook her head, and then reconsidered.

“We’re critically short of blood products.”

The man nodded.

“Would it help if every member of my party,” he counted numbers before going on, “young Hannay here, myself and sixteen or seventeen great big hulking Royal Marines like these excellent fellows,” he indicated his bodyguards, “donated a pint or so of blood before we move on?”

“Yes,” the woman agreed, trying not to sound too surprised. “It would make a big difference.”

“Most of my headquarters facilities are out of commission,” Julian Christopher explained, matter of factly. “There seem to be good telephone links from the barracks hereabouts. If we are delayed I shall be able to keep in touch with things in the meantime.” Even as he spoke his gaze kept falling back onto the dark-haired slim young woman attired in the pale blue uniform of an auxiliary nurse who, thus far, had said nothing.

Margo Seiffert accepted his remark with a pecking nod of her head. In a moment she stepped aside and gently pressed her protégé forward.

“The last time I saw you, young lady,” Julian Christopher said, quietly paternal, “you were in a hospital bed in the Children’s Ward at Kalkara.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember meeting you, sir,” Marija Elizabeth Calleja apologised. Her English was touched by a faint trace of a Home Counties accent, her pronunciation clipped and precise, not quite natural but somehow...enchanted. Julian Christopher had not expected her to be so *enchanted*. None of the reports he had received had prepared him for that. “I don’t remember much about a lot of the things that happened when I was a girl.”

Marija shrugged and shook the great man’s hand. His grip was dry, and very careful.

Julian Christopher studied the young woman.

At a first glance she was no eye-catching natural beauty, but a second look gave the lie to first impressions. The apparent plainness of her features framed by the nutmeg darkness of her hair drew one’s attention to the quizzical, bright intelligence and compassion in her almond eyes. There was serenity and knowingness in those eyes that seized and transported the emotions of those around her. Instantly, he understood how she had become

the de facto leader of the ‘Women of Malta’ protest movement, and why so many people on these islands already looked to her for leadership.

“My late wife would be,” the man found himself struggling for the right words, “quite beyond herself with delight to see you as you are now, Miss Calleja,” he said eventually. “And to learn about everything that you have achieved in your life.”

Marija cast down her eyes for a moment in embarrassment.

“Peter’s mother was a very nice lady,” the young woman murmured. “I was so sorry to hear of her death.” She raised her eyes. “As *my* mother constantly reminds me, there is no justice in the world.” To the man’s astonishment she quirked a shy, distinctly mischievous smile and added: ‘but then when was it ever otherwise in any age, Admiral Christopher?’

“When indeed?” He echoed.

“Forgive me, I must return to my work,” Marija decided.

“Of course.”

The new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations watched the young woman walk away. She limped a little, favouring her left side, and there was a pained weariness in her gait that spoke both of her horrific childhood injuries and also of an innate defiance, an implacable determination not to be defeated by those old traumas.

“Well?” Margo Seiffert asked. Beating about the bush had never been her style. “Now that you’ve met our little Princess, what do you think of your prospective daughter-in-law, Admiral Christopher?”

The man did not speak for several seconds.

“I think she is *enchanting*,” he said frankly in a voice that was close to a whisper.

“But?” The woman asked, detecting an unlikely dissonance in him.

“Peter’s ship was one of two Royal Navy destroyers attacked by at least four Douglas A-4 Skyhawks fifty miles off the north-west coast of Spain. The attack was timed to coincide with the raid on Malta.”

“Oh, God!”

“There was a full winter gale blowing in that part of the Atlantic last night and Peter’s ship reported heavy damage before contact was lost with her shortly before midnight.”

There was a sickening deadness in the way he said it that told Margo

Seiffert that the father thought his only son was dead.

She patted Julian Christopher's left arm.

He winced, instinctively drew away.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I got a bit knocked about when a castle fell on me last week. Perhaps, when things have settled down a little I might tell you all about it over dinner?"

Margo Seiffert pursed her lips.

"I know you don't place much faith in these things but I shall pray for Peter and his crewmates."

"Yes, if you would please. That would be good."

Chapter 5

Saturday 7th December 1963

RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

Captain Walter Brenckmann, USN (Retired), did not object to being ostracised by practically every member of staff of the now defunct United States Embassy to the Court of Balmoral. He had not made many friends in his time in England. Leastways, not with his countrymen and women at the Embassy, or with any of the people attached to the various trade and cultural legations, the very existence of which in their hosts' eyes added insult to injury.

There was no public lounge at Brize Norton, just a couple of big hangars where departures and arrivals were processed. It was not cold but it *was* damp and the amenities were basic. Career diplomats did not like having to queue for the wash rooms or for the vile stew the Brits called 'coffee' dispensed along with curling sandwiches and soggy digestive biscuits by the female auxiliaries of the RAF Catering Corps. There were bags and sacks strewn randomly on the concrete floor of the hangar, personal possessions hurriedly and hopelessly mixed up with heaps of confidential papers that there had been no time to burn, all haphazardly bagged by the armful. The Brits had confiscated all the firearms at the Embassy and respectfully, but very insistently requested that *everybody* surrendered their 'personal firearms' before being processed into the departures hangar.

Nobody knew when the first flight would be leaving.

'That's for your people in Washington to arrange,' the Ambassador, or rather, the former Ambassador, Loudon Baines Westheimer II had been politely informed when he had tried to make a scene.

The British had provided an RAF Group Captain with a magnificent handlebar moustache to act as the Embassy Party's *Departure Liaison Officer*. Group Captain Harold – 'Oh, by all means call me *Harry*' – Verity, a marvellously amiable and friendly man of advanced middle years, with a chest full of weathered and somewhat faded medal ribbons below an equally aged pilot's wings on his left breast. He had been so unflappably cordial and

sympathetic, and so apologetically unmovable in his dealings with Loudon Baines Westheimer II, that the Texan oil man who had been posted to England to pay off a political debt, had very nearly reacted in the way that most very rich Texan oil men tend to react when they cannot get their own way. At one point Walter Brenckmann had thought he was going to hit the British officer. However, he had not, so that at least was one diplomatic faux pas – possibly the only one – *former* Ambassador Westheimer had not committed in his short time in England.

Walter Brenckmann would have despaired of his countryman but for the fact none of them would have noticed. Perhaps, alone among his former colleagues he was not remotely surprised that, after the events of the last thirteen months, he and his fellow Americans found themselves cooling their heels in a dank hangar in the English countryside. The only thing that really surprised him was that the Brits had not actually shot anybody at the Embassy; he would almost certainly have started shooting by now if he had been in their shoes.

‘The bastards are supposed to give *reasonable notice* of the withdrawal of diplomatic accreditation!’ The Ambassador had complained to anybody who was prepared to listen. Unfortunately, nobody outside his immediate Staff was prepared to listen.

“Sorry about the coffee, old man,” Group Captain Harry Verity sniffed, dumping his large frame into a chair beside the ex-US Naval Attaché. Walter Brenckmann had wired his resignation to the Navy Department along with a frank appreciation of the diplomatic and military situation from the British point of view. He had included a warning that *‘if urgent steps are not taken the United States of America will find itself at war with the United Kingdom and (probably) with several of its Commonwealth allies. Even if the United Kingdom ‘goes it alone’ American influence, business and cultural interests and the freedom of US-registered merchant ships to navigate large parts of the world’s oceans will inevitably be curtailed. In the event of war the armed forces of the United States will eventually prevail but only at a terrible cost. The United Kingdom’s military is ready for war; our front line forces are not.’* He would probably have faced a court martial if he had not already resigned his commission.

Walter Brenckmann broke out of his thoughts and glanced at the Englishman.

“This is a bad business,” Group Captain Harry Verity declared.

“Your version of coffee? Or the latter-day bankruptcy of American foreign policy, sir?”

The RAF officer guffawed.

“I was at the Embassy in Washington at the time of the Suez debacle. Never felt more ashamed in my life,” Harry Verity confessed. “But Suez was just a blip on the old national escutcheon. The things that have happened since hardly bear thinking about. This is a bad business, a very bad business...”

Loudon Baines Westheimer II, presumably having seen Walter Brenckmann fraternising with the enemy was stomping across the hangar with a party of pale faced, disorientated acolytes in tow.

The *Departure Liaison Officer* and the former US Naval Attaché rose to their feet with a mutual groan.

“I demand to be furnished with a direct line to the State Department in DC!”

Walter Brenckmann thought that was a bit like asking your congressman for Santa Claus’s zip code; or asking Edgar Hoover to produce a rabbit from a Homburg in the middle of a Senate hearing.

“I’ll pass your ‘demand’ on to the appropriate authority, sir,” Harry Verity assured the former Ambassador.

Loudon Baines Westheimer II was a large – obese really – man who was accustomed to cowing subordinates into acquiescence by dint of his sheer physical presence.

“When?” He growled like a bear with a hangover.

“When what, sir?” The Englishman parried with a baffled smile. “*When* will I communicate your ‘demand’ to the appropriate authorities? *When* will those appropriate authorities investigate the practicalities of the matter? *When* will the appropriate authorities communicate their conclusions to me?”

“*When* can I fucking talk to the State Department in DC?”

“Oh, I see.” Harry Verity ruminated for some moments, turning the possibilities over with meticulous care. “Frankly, I haven’t a clue, sir,” he admitted eventually. “But as I say, I shall certainly pass your ‘demand’ on to the appropriate authorities. In due course. I’m led to believe that your State Department has been informed of your present situation, whereabouts and immigration *status*. In the circumstances I’m sure they’ll want to get you all

back home as soon as possible.”

Loudon Baines Westheimer II had gone very red in the face; a vein throbbing at his left temple as he leaned threateningly towards the RAF officer. Observing the scene from only two paces away Walter Brenckmann wondered, briefly, if Harry Verity was deliberately goading the other man.

Ex-American Ambassador assaults senior RAF officer!

No, the British did not operate that way.

But it would still be a helluva headline!

Every American in the hangar had been declared persona non grata by the UKIEA, and that was that. Nobody in the hangar had any special rights or privileges. Harry Verity was trying to be decent about the whole disastrous mess and Walter Brenckmann’s former colleagues did not get it. They did not even begin to ‘get it’.

“We’re going to be here forever,” he remarked to the *Departure Liaison Officer* after the Ambassador and his coterie had retreated to the farthest corner of the hangar to discuss the feasibility of insurrection against the brutal, unfeeling dead hand of British imperialist oppression.

“Afraid so, old man,” Harry Verity agreed. “I’m trying to beg, borrow and steal enough mattresses for your countrymen to sleep in shifts. The girls from the Catering Corps are trying to rustle up some rations to keep bodies and souls together for a day or two. After that you are the responsibility of your ‘State Department’. Nobody expected you to be dropped in our laps here, you see. I cannot really ask the Station Commander to empty his stores for a crowd of people he would rather see starve. Besides, he won’t have his own people go hungry. Not after Washington’s failure to make good on its post-war promises...” The Englishman stopped, held up his hands. “Forgive me, from what I hear *you* are the sort of fellow who doesn’t need to be told how wrong-headed things have been, on *both sides* of the Atlantic, lately.”

The two men lapsed into silence for a minute.

The RAF man made no sign of intending to move on.

Walter Brenckmann conditioned by his years before and between wars as a Boston lawyer – even after all his years in the Navy he still regarded himself as a litigator first, an Officer and a gentleman a poor second – waited patiently, sensing that the other man had something he wanted to get off his chest.

“There are rumours about *incidents* in the Atlantic and the

Mediterranean,” the Englishman murmured presently, almost inaudibly. “The upshot is that I’m afraid nobody’s coming to collect you or your fellows. Right now any American aircraft approaching these islands would be shot down. I’ve been ordered to keep the peace as long as possible and to avoid unnecessary unpleasantness.”

“Okay...”

“We don’t want war, Captain Brenckmann.”

“Nobody wants war.”

“Quite. I think that is why I’ve been instructed to put a very odd request to you.”

Okay, I didn’t see that coming!

“Go on.”

“Hypothetically speaking, you understand,” the RAF officer qualified, “would you be prepared to return to the UKIEA Government Compound at Cheltenham to speak to, er, *certain parties?*”

Chapter 6

Saturday 7th December 1963

HMS Talavera, 33 miles NW of Vigo

The wind had touched hurricane force just before dawn but during the morning the fury of the cruel iron grey seas had slowly abated. Unable to make more than steerage way into the teeth of the gales HMS Talavera had been driven thirty miles back towards the rocky Atlantic coast of northern Spain. Now at least, she was holding her own as she pitched and rolled like a drunken matelot after a run ashore, her pumps straining to keep her afloat as each long, uncaring swell sweep under her keel. Big waves had flooded the upper deck and inundated the wrecked Combat Information Centre during the night; the ship was blind, defenceless.

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher – cuts, bruises, a bump on the head and a very sore shoulder apart – was among the fittest of the destroyer's walking wounded. Knowing that he was the only surviving watch-keeper that the Captain, David Penberthy, trusted to stand a bridge watch in these seas he had volunteered his services, vehemently insisting – mutinously in hindsight - that he was fit to stand a watch. This had allowed the Old Man a chance to go below decks – where he was desperately needed - to save the ship.

It was over twenty hours since the attack.

Another spume-topped wave threatened to break over the bow. The whole ship shuddered, seemed to stop dead in the water then after a long, heart-stopping hesitation, she lurched ahead again. After several aborted attempts they had succeeded in welding a crude patch over the jagged hole behind B turret where the unexploded five hundred pound bomb lodged in the flooded bilge abaft the main battery magazine bulkhead had crashed through the fo'c'sle. Guns – Talavera's Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Miles Weiss – had packed the space around the bomb to stop it rolling with the ship's motion, before minutely examining the missile and declaring that 'messing around with the bloody thing is probably the worst thing we can do in the circumstances'. Nobody had cared to debate the point. If the bomb

went off it went off, there was nothing anybody could do about it.

Two of the four Douglas A-4 Skyhawks had gone for the big County class destroyer HMS Devonshire, and two for Talavera. Devonshire, the bigger, less handy ship had burned in the night for several hours before the fires had disappeared from view. Talavera had been in no position to offer aid or comfort to her larger consort.

The initial attack had happened so fast that it was only later that they had been able to piece together the sequence of events. Each Skyhawk had dropped two iron bombs – a five hundred pounder and a thousand pounder, an odd loading but then airmen were an odd breed – and escaped out to sea before returning a few minutes later to strafe the two crippled and burning destroyers.

Both of the five hundred pound bombs had hit Talavera: the one lying malevolently like a ticking time bomb next to her 4.5 inch magazines; the other exploding on contact somewhere in the vicinity of the base of the main mast. One of the thousand pounders had detonated alongside the stern of the ship; the other...well, they had searched the vessel from stem to stern and not found it so basically, it did not matter what had happened to it. At the time it had seemed academic; because when the mainmast went over the side it had fouled the port shaft and destroyed the port reduction gear, while simultaneously the near miss had swept the stern with a blizzard of supersonic shrapnel spontaneously igniting the fuel and the warheads of two unfired GWS 21 Sea Cat surface-to-air missiles. Among the dead was Talavera's Executive Officer, Hugo Montgommery. It was a miracle that the ready lockers containing a dozen charges for the stern-mounted Squid anti-submarine mortar had not blown up. Such small mercies tend to be lost, instantly forgotten in the general mayhem that ensues in the minutes after the first, catastrophic impacts. When the Skyhawks had commenced their strafing runs Talavera was dead in the water, and the destroyer's only working weapons system had been a single heavy machine gun lashed to the amidships deck house roof manned by a pair of suicidally courageous Royal Marines.

The Skyhawks had made two strafing runs. Approaching from astern they had raked the destroyer from end to end. The Combat-Information-Centre, the fighting heart of the ship, had been demolished during the first run; Peter Christopher had watched the CIC disintegrating around him as if in

slow motion. Sparks, flames, blinding flashes and billowing smoke had concealed the blood and body parts randomly splashed on the walls, and running, falling dark and evil on the deck. If Leading Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin – who had always enjoyed the reputation of being the ship’s roughest of rough diamonds – had not rugby tackled him out of his command chair he would probably have been cut in half by a cannon shell.

Over half of HMS Talavera’s crew were dead or seriously wounded. The destroyer’s doctor, a nervous young man who had been drafted into the Royal Navy after the October War while in his penultimate year at Medical School – and therefore deemed under the War Emergency Powers Regulations a ‘qualified medical practitioner’ – had been killed attempting to minister to the handful of survivors on the stern as the Skyhawks had made their first strafing run.

Peter Christopher tried to focus on the feel of the ship under his feet.

“Try to bring her head around to two-six-zero!” He called, sensing that Talavera might ride a little easier if her bow could be persuaded to point a few degrees further south of south-west. He eyed the leaden skies, his gaze flicking slowly from the heavens to the seas and back again. The glass had been rising slowly for the last three hours as the storm front passed over, raging north into Biscay. With luck the sea state would moderate a little that evening. He guessed the wind was blowing at a steady force six, gusting now and then to force eight; but always out of the west-south-west.

“SURFACE CONTACT!”

Peter Christopher swung around so fast he lost his balance and had to make an undignified and painful grab for the bridge rail to avoid taking a tumble. Wrapped in layers of cold-weather gear beneath his oilskins, keeping his feet on the wet, wind-blown, pitching open bridge required care and attention, both of which he had been neglecting as his mind ran through the uniformly bleak likely outcomes of his, and his ship’s current predicament.

“SURFACE CONTACT BEARING THREE-FOUR-FIVE DEGREES

Peter Christopher raised his binoculars.

A first he saw nothing but the churning grey sea, the spray of enraged white horses breaking from the crests of countless wild waves, and the gloom and the rainy haze that hung like a mist across the middle distance. He kept looking, searching for a shape with hard edges, a wisp of smoke, lighter or darker than the gun metal greyness of the sky and the sea.

“CONTACT BEARING...THREE-FOUR-SEVEN DEGREES!”

Peter Christopher stared down the compass bearing as the ship rose and fell. The waves were so big an aircraft carrier a thousand yards away would have appeared and disappeared in their troughs.

“RANGE?” He shouted over the whistling, rippling roar of the wind.

“FIVE MILES, SIR!”

He raised his glasses to find the swooping and gyrating horizon.

Still, he saw nothing.

And then...

Was that the black lattice of a frigate’s foremast?

He lowered his binoculars for a moment and squeezed his eyes shut. He had banged his head last night, passed out for a while; concussion, most probably. His temples thumped and although he had stopped throwing up several hours ago he was having trouble forcing his vision to focus for more than a few consecutive blinks. He picked up the glasses anew.

He saw the mast rise, roll and fall once, and rise again.

“Runner!” He yelled. The ship had virtually no electrical power and practically all internal communications lines were shredded. “Find the Captain. Give him my compliments and report that we have an unidentified surface contact approaching our position from the north.”

“SURFACE CONTACT IS SIGNALLING BY LAMP, SIR!”

The big Aldis signal lamps bolted onto each wing of the bridge were undamaged; unfortunately, they were useless without electrical power.

“FIRST LETTER IS ‘F’!” Reported the lookout who had made the initial sighting. “SECOND IS ‘ONE’!”

Peter Christopher watched the winking light.

“F-One-Two-Six!” He chuckled, suddenly relieved as if all the weight of the World had suddenly been lifted off his aching shoulders. “That’s the Plymouth!”

Within seconds the lookout had confirmed it.

The other ship was much closer now, corkscrewing and pitching sickeningly as she quartered the mountainous Atlantic swells.

HMS Plymouth was a Rothesay class anti-submarine frigate commissioned some eighteen months before the October War. With a displacement several hundred tons lighter than Talavera but with more or less the same general hull dimensions, Plymouth was handier ship than the older

converted Battle class destroyer; even so, her Captain was battering south with a fearsome bone in his teeth and life onboard the frigate must be as *interesting* as it was *precarious* for her crew. The approaching warship was closing the distance at in excess of twenty knots.

There was a clunking noise on the deck behind Peter Christopher.

Leading Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin smiled piratically at his divisional officer through his thick red-black beard. At his feet lay two large battery boxes; while snake-like coiled cables terminated by wicked-looking crocodile clips were draped around his broad shoulders.

“These boys,” the newcomer declared, flicking a glance at the two battery boxes, “should have enough juice left in them to let us talk to our new friend, sir.” He coughed, still struggling to recover his breath. The batteries weighed over thirty pounds each and were normally stowed in the aft electrical locker in the bowels of the ship. “Give me a jiffy and I’ll strip the cables off the bridge lamps and we’ll be up and running, sir.”

Peter Christopher suppressed a conspiratorial grin.

A few minutes later Captain David Penberthy came onto the bridge as Jack Griffin was standing up to admire his handiwork. Below the signal lamp mount the deck was a riot of severed and stripped back wires, flaked paint and crazily uncoiled cables.

HMS Talavera’s exhausted commanding officer eyed the mess for a moment before he took the binoculars Peter Christopher offered him and studied the approaching frigate.

Plymouth was flashing her pennant number – F126 – every few seconds.

“Number Two Bridge Lamp is back in commission, sir,” Jack Griffin boasted.

“Acknowledge with our Pennant number,” David Penberthy ordered.

HMS Plymouth turned a long, slow circle around the stricken destroyer after ranging alongside so that the two Captains could exchange megaphone pleasantries. Then Plymouth manoeuvred to within fifty feet of the Talavera’s port side.

“MY! MY!” Boomed the hearty voice from the bridge of the frigate. “YOU CHAPS REALLY HAVE BEEN IN THE WARS! NEVER MIND! THEY SAY THAT WORSE THINGS HAPPEN AT SEA!”

There followed a cheerful discussion as to how best to proceed.

Talavera needed fit men to help her stay afloat and whatever medical

assistance Plymouth could render. The problem lay in the practicalities of the transference of the one to the other. In the end the two captains agreed that ‘this was no time to be pussyfooting around worrying about the paintwork’ of their respective commands.

Talavera would make whatever revolutions she could and attempt to hold her present course; Plymouth would, literally, ‘bump against her windward flank’. Every available mattress and life jacket would be strewn on Talavera’s amidships port main deck and Plymouth’s people would – all being well – jump from the deck of one ship to the other.

In the middle of an Atlantic gale it was insane.

However, it was no less insane than the world in which they had all lived these last thirteen months.

First across the lethal gap between the rising and falling, erratically rolling warships was HMS Plymouth’s Executive Office – Lieutenant-Commander Edward Perry - a small wiry man with beetle brows and a stern smile that radiated confidence in everybody he met. He slightly mistimed his leap, stepping off the cliff-edge of the frigate’s bow at the very moment Talavera’s deck fell off the crest of a particularly tall swell. He and the destroyer fell into the trough of the waves together as Plymouth’s plates ground loudly, horribly against the destroyer’s rail, ripping away a ten foot section. The falling man hit the pile of mattresses and lifejackets hard, rolled and was grabbed by the waiting hands of the reception party that, to a man, fell unceremoniously on top of him to stop him sliding between the screeching hulls of the two ships.

In a moment the newcomer was on his feet, brushing himself down and shaking Captain David Penberthy’s hand.

Chapter 7

Saturday 7th December 1963

UKIEA Government Buildings, Cheltenham, England

It had been a very long day and nobody around the Cabinet table had slept in the last twenty-four hours. The leading members of the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration waited patiently, welcoming the respite, while the technicians in RAF blue uniforms set up the projector and loaded the first spool of film.

The Right Honourable Edward Richard George Heath, for most of the last year the acknowledged, if not ever formally constitutionally appointed let alone anointed Prime Minister, spent the idle minutes writing slow, deliberate notes in the small pocket journal he had kept, sporadically, over the last few terrible months. Up until the October War he had been a man who had methodically, perhaps a little obsessively documented his life. Famously, he was reputed to have never parted company with any correspondence he had received and habitually kept copies – even of personal letters – of everything he wrote. This old habit had lapsed after the cataclysm. His records, the precious correspondence which had catalogued and validated his life had been destroyed and for a while, he had felt a little bereft, as if the foundation of his life, of his very personality, had been somehow eroded. A man with a lesser sense of mission, lacking in his almost religious – although he had always been a very secular sort of Christian – sense of duty would have been weighed down forever by that loss of self, the sudden absence of the physical evidence of the life he had lived up until then.

Aware that the RAF technicians were tidying up and preparing to leave the room the Prime Minister collected his thoughts as he eyed the other players around *his* Cabinet table.

To his left sat his nominal deputy, the Right Honourable Leonard James Callaghan, the fifty-one year old Member of Parliament for the constituency of Cardiff South East, and the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party of the United Kingdom. Jim Callaghan also held the post of Minister of Defence in the UKIEA. A big, lugubrious man his slowness of speech and

apparently unhurried manner veiled a keen intellect which was as equally attuned to the strategic as the tactical side of politics.

Beyond James Callaghan sat the new Home Secretary, thirty-eight year old Margaret Hilda Thatcher. The Prime Minister's relations with the woman many people called 'the Angry Widow' – although always out of her hearing – had been distantly cordial for many years before the war but they were not, and probably never would be true friends or confidantes. Nobody had been more surprised than he when belatedly, he had realised that he had no greater ally in the fight to save the nation than Margaret Thatcher and Jim Callaghan, the erstwhile leader of Her Majesty's loyal opposition.

It was a funny old World...

To Edward Heath's right hand sat the constantly fulminating figure of fifty year old Iain Norman Macleod, the Chairman of the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, whom he had recently brought into his inner War Cabinet as Minister of Information. This latter title was a euphemism for a role that specifically combined overseeing both a political warfare function and the duties of the Government's official, albeit theoretically, non-political, propagandist. It was the Prime Minister's most fervent hope that his old but somewhat estranged 'One Nation Conservative' friend would henceforth, be too busy confounding their mutual foes to sponsor further conspiracies within the Conservative Party. Iain Macleod was a man who was constantly in motion. Partly, this was because he had never fully recovered from wounds received in the 1945 war; mostly it was because no other man in Government had such a brilliant, or such a restless mind.

Beyond Iain Macleod, George Edward 'Peter' Thorneycroft, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and now the Conservative Party's man at the Ministry of Defence viewed proceedings with his normal inscrutability. The fifty-four year old Tory Grandee was well liked in the ranks of what little survived of the pre-war party, and with the tragic death of Alec Douglas-Home, the Foreign Secretary in the recent treacherous attack on Balmoral Castle, he was the senior surviving member of Harold 'Supermac' MacMillan's old guard. Peter Thorneycroft would not have been human if he had not entertained ambitions – perhaps, the expectation – that he would step into poor Alec's shoes. However, if he was discommoded by the promotion of a career civil servant, Tom Harding-Grayson, formerly Alec Douglas-

Home's Permanent Secretary to the post, he had kept his disappointment to himself.

Tom Harding-Grayson, his mind uncluttered with political baggage, had been the logical choice to succeed Sir Alec Douglas-Home. This was not a time for politics; this was a time for hard-headed pragmatism and who better to inject that into the highest councils in the land than the man who had been shunned and sidelined as a Jeremiad in the years before *exactly what he had predicted might happen* had indeed, happened. No man in Whitehall had seen so clearly, or discussed the dangers so eloquently, as Tom Harding-Grayson. The catastrophic developments of recent days and hours only served to reinforce the Prime Minister's conviction that he had done the right thing in leaving Peter Thorneycroft where he was and bringing in Tom Harding-Grayson.

At the head of the table sat Sir Henry Tomlinson, the Head of the Home Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, the greying *éminence grise* of the UKIEA. Ironically, had it not been for the October War, Henry Tomlinson would have found himself overlooked – sidelined like Tom Harding-Grayson - for the job he now discharged with such effortless aplomb. Like his Prime Minister, Henry Tomlinson had spent the last ten minutes writing in his notebook. Unlike his Prime Minister, he had not looked up once in those minutes.

The chair directly opposite Edward Heath was empty, The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John 'David' Luce having absented himself briefly to acquire any new intelligence which had been received by his Staff since the commencement of the War Cabinet meeting some ninety minutes ago. The Chiefs of the Air Staff, and the Army, were at their respective war stations, the former in a bunker in Oxfordshire, the latter deep beneath the nearby Chiltern Hills.

There was a quiet knocking at the closed double doors to the room.

The sprawling mock Tudor mansion which accommodated the UKIEA had belonged to a Fleet Street press baron before the war. Built as recently as the late 1890s it was a building that gratuitously flaunted a Victorian imperial bluster and basically, shouted the type of profoundly flawed cultural peccadilloes that any student of art history would naturally associate with a less than half-baked mind. Externally the Tudor fascia was more mock Gothic than authentic Elizabethan, within the structure the rooms were

heavily wood-panelled and the walls were still hung with portraits and landscapes bought by a man with an indiscriminating eye and a purse far larger than his limited capacity to understand anything about *real* art.

A female secretary timorously entered the room and handed the Prime Minister a folded note addressed to 'M. Thatcher'. He passed it to his Home Secretary unread.

She frowned at the note for a moment. It was from her friend and former mentor, Airey Neave.

"Airey thinks we ought to talk to a man called Walter Brenckmann?" She announced, looking up. Clearly, the name meant nothing to her and she was a little baffled.

Tom Harding-Grayson cleared his throat.

"Captain Brenckmann was briefly the US Naval Attaché to the Court of Balmoral, Margaret." Even before his elevation to the War Cabinet, their mutual travails at Balmoral Castle during the attempted regicide had ensured that Tom Harding-Grayson and Margaret Thatcher would always thereafter be on 'Tom' and 'Margaret' terms. "He's a good sort. Not at all like most of the people in Ambassador Westheimer's inner circle. I fear that when he tried to open his colleagues' eyes to the dangers of the path they were on," he shrugged, "the poor fellow was treated like a leper. What pray is Mr Neave up to?"

For all that Airey Neave, the forty-seven year old escapee from Colditz who had been the man who read the indictments at the trial of the leading Nazis at Nuremburg was that rare thing, a living national treasure, there were times when the man who had become Margaret Thatcher's unofficial chief of staff, was an infuriating enigma. In the recent Government reshuffle he had been promoted to Secretary of State for Supply under the umbrella of what was in effect, a new Ministry of the Interior within the existing Home Office apparatus. It appeared that Airey Neave was now recklessly stepping on Foreign Office toes.

"I do apologise, Tom," Margaret Thatcher blinked with irritation as she tried to think what her friend was up to. "I hate to have to admit it but I have no idea what Airey is up to."

She stood up and passed Airey Neave's note across to the Foreign Secretary who glanced at it and smiled quizzically at the Home Secretary.

The double doors opened again and Admiral Sir David Luce entered the

room. He paused to ask the RAF technicians a question and resumed his chair at the Cabinet table.

“I have several updates and clarifications for the Cabinet, Prime Minister,” he said flatly. “If I might speak to these before we view the film footage from Malta?”

Edward Heath paused until he had considered whether he ought to intervene to curtail whatever wild goose chase Airey Neave had embarked upon *this* time. He made a mental note to speak to Margaret Thatcher about the man’s antics. It had not mattered that Airey was a loose cannon in the old days; however, if he wanted to stay in Government he needed to remember he was supposed to be a team player. This decided, he moved on.

“Yes, please carry on, First Sea Lord.”

“Western Approaches,” Admiral Sir David Luce prefaced, wasting no time getting on with business. Everything discussed in this room was suddenly very urgent. “The Enterprise Battle Group continues to cruise in a patrol zone which at its closest approach intrudes some seventy miles inside the notified Total Exclusion Zone. I have ordered HMS Dreadnought, tactical practicalities willing, to place herself between the Enterprise Battle Group and the most northerly surface units screening HMS Hermes off Cape Trafalgar.”

The First Sea Lord frowned.

“The latest report I have from the C-in-C Ark Royal Battle Group regarding the Talavera and the Devonshire,” he continued. Although the set of his jaw was stern none of the outrage that burned in his eyes touched his voice. “The sea conditions in the area off the north western coast of the Iberian Peninsula are atrocious and likely to worsen again overnight. Devonshire is proceeding under her own steam escorted by HMS Leopard. The ship is in a bad way with over a hundred casualties onboard. As for Talavera; over half her crew are casualties and she’s got an unexploded bomb wedged against the aft bulkhead of her forward magazine. HMS Plymouth is rendering all possible assistance and HMS Daring will be in the area by dawn. However, if it turns out that Oporto is not open to...”

Edward Heath interjected.

“If the Portuguese turn our ships away there will be Hell to pay,” he promised solemnly.

The First Sea Lord nodded. He moved on: “Gibraltar.”

Everybody around the table stiffened, leaned closer.

“Subsequent to air attacks against elements of the Hermes Battle Group and the destroyers and frigates in the gun line in the Straits,” Admiral Sir David Luce announced, “I regret I must now report the total loss of the frigates Hardy and Exmouth. Both vessels were engaged on anti-submarine patrol activities some distance from the main concentration of the Battle Group. It appears that after the Hermes’s Sea Vixens cut a swath through the first wave of attackers, a second wave of bombers ignored the main fleet and concentrated on the two relatively isolated units. Rescue operations are in hand but there are not expected to be a large number of survivors.”

Margaret Thatcher asked a gentle, quiet question.

“Did the Spanish really attack our ships employing their copies of German World War II bombers and fighters, Sir David?”

“Yes. They held back their American-supplied F-86 Super Sabres and somewhat older Lockheed F-80 fighters. We don’t know how many of these they have in their inventory or how many are likely to operational. I suspect that they didn’t have the stomach to risk them against Hermes’s Sea Vixens.” The First Sea Lord picked up where he had been interrupted. “Apart from HMS Hardy and HMS Exmouth, a number of our ships sustained minor damage – from splinters and near misses - but there were very few casualties. One Sea Vixen was lost due to an engine flare out; both crew members were recovered from the sea and are expected to return to duty shortly. About two hours ago ships from the Battle Group moved inshore and bombarded shipping in Algeciras Bay and Cadiz Roads. At this time the Hermes Battle Group remains on station controlling access to the Straits of Gibraltar.”

At this juncture the First Sea Lord hesitated and a flicker of a smile touched his pale lips.

“Malta,” he said portentously. “There have been no further air attacks this day and Admiral Christopher reports that rescue and recovery work is well in hand. I have no update on casualty figures other than to confirm that the initial estimate of one thousand five hundred dead, one thousand seriously wounded and as many less badly hurt but requiring hospital treatment may be unduly optimistic. Since the raid the RAF and the Fleet Air Arm are flying twenty-four hour combat air patrols out to a distance of one hundred miles around the Maltese Archipelago. Admiral Christopher reports an absence of

civil unrest and has made it known that henceforth he plans to institute more 'collegiate' working relationships with the leaders of Maltese civil society."

"More collegiate?" Margaret Thatcher queried.

"More *normal*, Mrs Thatcher," Sir David Luce replied. "That is, more akin to pre-war arrangements." He finished his briefing: "Sir Julian has ordered the C-in-C Hermes Battle Group to 'keep up the pressure' on the Spanish around Gibraltar without unduly risking his ships."

"Keeping up the pressure," James Callaghan sighed. "What does he have in mind, Sir David? More shore bombardments? Hit and run air attacks?"

The Admiral met his political master's steady gaze,

"Sir Julian has not confided specifics to me, sir. Likewise, I should imagine he's deliberately not tied the hands of the C-in-C of the Hermes Battle Group. Hermes's Sea Vixens will have exhausted most of the available Firestreak and Sidewinder reloads and some of the destroyers and frigates will be low on 4.5 and 4.7 inch shells. Until or unless the Battle Group can be resupplied or relieved by new ships, there is limited scope for sustained offensive action."

Edward Heath brought matters to a head.

"Thank you, First Sea Lord. Let's have the lights down so we can watch the film footage the 'Fighting Admiral' has sent us."

Even though everybody sitting around the table knew exactly what they were about to see the actual gun camera footage of the 30-millimetre ADEN cannons of RAF Hawker Hunter jets methodically blasting four Boeing B-52 bombers out of the sky, brought home to the War Cabinet like nothing else could possibly have brought it home to them that the World had finally, and incontrovertibly *gone stark staring mad*.

Chapter 8

Sunday 8th December 1963

HMS Hermes, 107 miles WSW of Cape Trafalgar

The first survivors from HMS Exmouth had arrived on HMS Hermes around dusk the previous evening. They were cold and battered; they had been in the water several hours and they had watched most of their comrades and friends, and all the more seriously injured men die long before the handful of search helicopters from the Hermes and her escorts fished them out of the frigid North Atlantic. During the day a trickle of injured and wounded men from the ships of the Battle Group had been carried, or walked into the flagship's sick bay and hospital compartments far below the armoured flight deck three decks above.

Clara Pullman had no real idea what her status on board HMS Hermes was; passenger, refugee, or suspected spy? The men who had greeted the Westland Wessex on the flight deck two days ago had taken one look at her partner, former KGB Colonel Arkady Pavlovich Rykov's state of near total physical collapse and rushed him down to the sick bay where until a few hours ago he and she had remained. When the first serious casualties arrived Arkady had insisted on freeing his cot for 'a man who needs it more than I', but she had remained. She had trained as a nurse a long time ago and although she could not do much more than smile and hold hands and utter reassuring words, in between the endless fetching mugs of steaming rum-laced cocoa from the nearby Petty Officers' Mess, she had felt like she was making herself useful and Surgeon Commander McKitterick, the ship's doctor had not objected to her ongoing presence in his domain.

Quite the contrary, in fact.

"I think you have made another conquest," Arkady Pavlovich Rykov observed when at around two in the morning Clara joined him in the claustrophobic two bunk cabin he had been allocated after he left the sick bay. They had both expected to be confined to cells on their arrival on the Hermes. Perhaps, to be interrogated, again and again before being dispatched, like parcels to England to confront whatever fate awaited them.

Yet ever since they had set foot on the aircraft carrier they had been treated with unfailing, good-humoured courtesy and offered every conceivable convenience available on a man of war about to go into battle. It was all very confusing.

“Do you think the people on this ship have any idea who we are?” Clara asked, ignoring the man’s teasing remark about the twinkle in Commander McKitterick’s grey green eyes every time she was in the vicinity.

“I’m sure they know *who* we are,” Arkady Pavlovich Rykov retorted ironically. “Whether or not they care *what* we are at the moment; well, that’s another thing.”

Clara looked at the man with whom she had shared the adventure of a lifetime – several probably – in the last thirteen months, and whose ‘real’ name she had only officially discovered in a fetid rock cell in Gibraltar days ago. The man who had claimed to be a British naval officer had turned out to be a senior KGB man who had been trying to defect to the West. He said he had been working for the Americans for years; she did not know what to believe. Or care. Some part of her loved him and one day she might even forgive him; but not yet.

She looked at his smashed face.

They had very nearly beaten him to death at Gibraltar.

He had been in the lower bunk reading when she had come looking for him. ‘They said we could have this compartment,’ he had explained, ‘for as long as we are onboard the ship.’

“What are you reading?” She asked.

He held the dog-eared Penguin paperback up for her inspection.

The Road to Wigan Pier.

“I found it in the locker under the bunk.”

Clara Pullman had carefully positioned herself, sitting as near the foot of the bunk as she could manage, mindful not to knock her head against the upper bunk. She had been surprised by how much a ship as big as the *Hermes* pitched and rolled, especially when she changed course. As if on cue the manoeuvring bell clanged and a few seconds later the carrier heeled into a turn to starboard.

“What else did you find in the cabin?” She asked, knowing the man would have searched every inch of the compartment before he attempted to make himself comfortable in the bunk. The fact that he could hardly walk

two steps unaided would not have stopped him crawling into every corner, running his fingers along every surface, and poking into every gap.

“A copy of *Murder on the Orient Express* and a couple of slim volumes of rather narcissistic poetry.”

“There were hardly any survivors from those two ships that were sunk yesterday,” she said, blankly as if she was making polite conversation.

The man put down his book and reached out for her hand.

She wanted him to fold her in his arms except she was afraid he was too badly beaten, too broken to contemplate attempting anything more physically demanding than quietly holding her hand.

“Such is the pity of war,” he murmured, betraying a trace of the accent of his Russian mother tongue.

Clara did not know if he was trying to be funny or just humouring her. While she thought about it the alarm bells they had grown so familiar with in their short time onboard the carrier began clanging insistently.

“ALL HANDS TO AIR DEFENCE CONDITION ONE STATIONS!”

Beneath their feet they felt the quickening of the engines, the screws biting deeper and faster into the water. The bells kept ringing as the ship heeled into a violent turn to the left. There were running feet in the corridor outside the open door of the cabin. A bearded man with Petty Officer’s stripes on his arm stuck his head into view.

“When I shut this hatch dog it behind me!”

Then he was gone before the metal door had clanged noisily against its steel frame.

“He wants us to clip the door so it cannot blow open if there is a nearby explosion,” the man in the lower bunk explained gently.

“Oh...”

Clara jumped up and dropped the clips on the door.

“Won’t we be trapped?” She asked.

“If something bad happens, you mean?” Arkady Pavlovich Rykov shrugged painfully. “Probably,” he conceded philosophically. “But at least we will be together, my love.”

The whole ship was beginning to tremble as more and more power was fed to her engines and her propellers thrashed her forward into the long North Atlantic swells. One moment the carrier was pitching over the crests of the seas, the next falling into the troughs; and then she was driving straight into

the waves, her bows thumping, cleaving aside the freezing dark waters, each new impact sending a shuddering shock wave down the whole length of the twenty-five thousand ton vessel.

Clara edged closer to the man.

“I haven’t heard the catapults,” she observed. Every time the carrier had worked up to top speed before, it had been to launch or recover its aircraft. Typically, each of the steam catapults would hiss and thud, sending a concussion through the fabric of the vessel ever few minutes. Sometimes, when a big jet fighter landed it sounded like a crash, the aircraft not so much landing as *hitting* the rear half of the flight deck.

The manoeuvring bell clanged.

HMS Hermes heeled into what seemed like an impossibly tight turn to port, as she came abreast of the seas she rolled five, ten then more degrees before righting herself with a slow, stately reverse roll that went almost as far in the opposite direction before a swell half-lifted, half fell upon her tall starboard profile. Clara heard heavy objects tumbling onto decks hundreds of feet away. She was convinced that she heard the whole ship groan in a great outpouring of protest to be so misused.

Clare found herself awkwardly circled in the man’s arms.

She leaned against him, afraid he would flinch with agony.

He simply let her meld herself against him, his cracked lips nuzzling her hair. All the troubles, the lies, the perils were as nothing in that instant because they both understood that no ship manoeuvred like this unless it was under attack.

They felt the underwater explosion before they heard it.

The shockwave punched the charging carrier’s flank; the dull, faraway boom of the detonation was a thing almost imagined. Something sensed through intimate contact with the very fabric of the ship.

Then there was another big explosion, closer than the first; and a silence of a loud kind as they strained to catch the next detonation.

When it came it was not alone

Whump! Whump! Whump!

Three detonations at a great depth, like the steps of a giant walking towards them. And again, afterwards there was a peculiar silence in which only the roaring of the carrier’s great engines and the noise of her battering-ram progress through the water filled the quietness.

Whump! Whump! Whump!

Farther away this time.

The manoeuvring bell clanged.

The ship's motion altered; she was taking the seas on her starboard stern quarter for the first time since she had gone to Air Defence Condition One. Five minutes later the pulse of her screws slackened and she rode the swells more easily. High above their heads an aircraft slapped down onto the flight deck, its engines briefing roaring like a great enraged beast before the arrester wire caught and stopped the plane dead on the deck, and the pilot throttled back.

"Back to normal again," the man said, thinking out aloud.

Later they were disturbed by a knock at the door. Clara started in alarm; she had been dozing contentedly in her lover's arms. The hatch opened.

"Excitement over," said the same bearded Petty Officer who had mandated the closing of the hatch earlier that morning. He was wearing a grim face. "The chopper boys will probably be bringing us more casualties soon. Surgeon Commander McKitterick's compliments, ma'am, but he would appreciate your presence in the sick bay at your earliest convenience..."

Chapter 9

Sunday 8th December 1963

The Oval Office, The White House, Washington DC

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy awakened with a start, calmed a little when he remembered where he was. He had fallen asleep at his desk, probably only for a few minutes. He tuned into the agitated, low voices of the men snapping at each other in the comfortable chairs nearby. He looked at his wristwatch. It was just after midnight; in England it would already be five in the morning.

One of his secretaries, a newly recruited dour, homely middle-aged woman who seemed on the verge of swooning every time he smiled at her, had placed a fresh cup of black coffee on his blotter and was in the process of making good her escape.

"It is Mrs Zabriski, isn't it?" The thirty-fifth President of the United States of America inquired of her retreating back.

The woman turned and in an agony of indecision nodded like a hen pecking the ground for grain.

"Why yes, Mister President."

"Your coffee is always the best, Mrs Zabriski," Jack Kennedy said, flashing the killer smile that had seduced heiresses, movie stars, shop girls and the occasional gangster moll alike for over a quarter of a century.

"Thank you, ma'am."

The poor woman sprinted from the Oval Office in disarray.

Bobby Kennedy approached the presidential desk wearing his serious face.

"Don't go puritanical on me, Mr Attorney General," his older brother cautioned him, still basking in the afterglow of the pleasure and the exquisite - entirely harmless - embarrassment he had caused Mrs Zabriski. "That lady makes a damned fine cup of coffee. That's not a thing to be underestimated." He sniffed. "Not the way things are at the moment."

The Vice President stamped into the Oval Office ten minutes later.

"The British Ambassador says he's been waiting to speak to you for four

hours, *Mister President*,” Lyndon Baines Johnson stated irascibly without bothering with the normal greetings and salutations. Storms in the Midwest and the tail end of an Atlantic hurricane system had delayed his flight back to Washington from Houston. “What in God’s name is Dean playing at? And whose idea was it to light a fire under that arsehole Franco’s arse? And while I’m on my feet what in the name of fucking...” Not a man usually given to profanity in his dealings with the President or his closest advisors, the Vice President, realising that he had lost his temper, shut his mouth until he decided he had got a grip on his ire. “Is it true about the B-52s out of Barksdale?”

“We don’t know anything for sure,” Bobby Kennedy said quickly.

“Don’t give me that lawyer shit, *Mister Attorney General*,” the tall Texan snapped, leaning towards the younger man as if he was bracing himself against a strong wind. At six feet and several inches tall LBJ was notorious for his tendency to loom over opponents and stare them down until they wilted or backed off. Other members of the Administration were usually exempt from ‘the treatment’, especially when the President was anywhere in the vicinity. Tonight the Vice President was beyond caring. “I swear to God you Ivy League rich kids have screwed the pooch this time!”

Jack Kennedy cleared his throat.

“Welcome back to Washington, Mr Vice President.”

The older man glared at the man behind the huge desk.

“Gentleman,” the President declared, “the Vice President and I need to have a frank exchange of views. Would you leave us for a few minutes please?”

The only other person in the room who thought that was a remotely good idea was LBJ. Nevertheless, within a minute Jack Kennedy was waving his Vice President – the man who was never farther than a heartbeat away from the chair he had just vacated – to sit down. The two men studied each other across the divide above the giant American Eagle woven into the carpet at their feet.

“This is my fault,” Jack Kennedy confessed.

“That ain’t no lie,” his Vice President agreed; but without sourness or censure. “I heard you got sick after that dammed fool trip to Rice two weeks back. I told you it was a mistake. If the Republicans can find somebody with the balls to run against you next year who is worth his salt, it’ll cause us a lot

of trouble we can do without. Now is too early for all that inspirational campaign trail shit.”

Jack Kennedy nodded thoughtfully, took a series of long, slow breaths.

“I will not be running for a second term,” he said.

The older man did not respond immediately. For one thing he did not actually believe he had heard what he had just heard, and for another, he did not believe in Santa Claus; or for that matter, the Tooth Fairy. He had been in politics – dirty, no holds barred winner takes all politics – most of his adult life and if he had learned anything it was that nothing was ever quite what it seemed. First impressions were the most dangerous things in Christendom and he never, ever trusted his or anybody else’s first take on a thing at face value.

“Last time I checked your name was on the ballot for the New Hampshire Primary in nine weeks time?”

“I was diagnosed with Addison’s disease in England in 1947,” the younger man replied. “Back in the mid-thirties when I was in my teens I almost died twice on the operating table when they tried to fix on my back.”

The revelation about Addison’s disease had not come as news to the Vice President. However, LBJ’s left eyebrow twitched with interest at the second admission.

“Getting bust up in the war covered up the back thing,” the younger man went on. “Ever since that night in 1943 when the *PT109* got rammed by the *Amagiri* I’ve had the perfect get out every time somebody asks me a question about my health. I was an all-American hero, wasn’t I?”

“You can only play with the cards you get dealt,” the Texan conceded, his oddly contemplative tone betraying the fact that he was beginning to ask himself where this increasingly surreal conversation was headed. He was viewing the younger man with narrow-eyed suspicion, confident that he understood John Fitzgerald Kennedy better, at some levels, than even his brother. The thirty-fifth President of the United States of America was – and at the same time – was not, exactly the man most people took him for. Anybody who took him for a rich kid who had bought the Presidency with his wit, charm and movie star good looks missed the point. While it was true he was a rich kid, a one-time playboy and a serial womaniser; he was also an undeniably talismanic, charismatic leader who might conceivably, be the only man who could rescue America from its modern day slough of despond. LBJ

had grown up in a harder political school than the scion of the ‘old bootlegger’ – old Joe Kennedy had never been that but he had had so many enemies on Capitol Hill that the lie would probably persist forever – and in the process developed a thick steely psychic carapace that made him virtually impervious to all knocks. Not that he had not very nearly shit in his pants half-a-dozen times while the Soviet ICBMs – thankfully only a handful – had fallen on and around the cities of the north-west and the Great Lakes and the strikes had crept towards the north east. He had flown over, and walked in the ruins of several of those shattered places in the last year and even a hard-hearted old dog like LBJ shivered every time he thought about what he had seen. Notwithstanding, he had been the one man who had kept his eye on the ball in the days after the October War. He had been the man who had led the ‘*it was us or them*’ campaign, while the ‘Whizz Kids’ were still wandering around DC with thousand yard stares or immovably hunkered down in their departmental bunkers. The Vice President sighed. “And you will run again next year, Mister President.”

Jack Kennedy sucked in his breath.

He had anticipated that there was a sixty-forty chance of the wily Texan calling his bluff. Neither man broke the lengthening silence, each man daring the other to pierce the quietness. Jack Kennedy, knowing this was a game he could not win allowed himself eventually to yield a small victory to his Vice President.

“The American people deserve a great national cause, Lyndon,” he said at last.

“Yes,” agreed the older man flatly. LBJ had no pretence at being any kind of intellectual giant, in fact he despised many of the characteristics of men who claimed or behaved as if they were the great minds of the age. For all the fanfare about the ‘new generation’ JFK had brought into his Administration he had never been seduced by any of that crap about a new Camelot, or some reincarnated round table whose members were the ‘best and the brightest’ of their era. What did the Kennedy Cabinet amount to? McNamara was a car dealer; albeit after Henry Ford one of the most successful car dealers in history. John McCone, who had inherited Allen Dulles’s nest of vipers at the CIA, was a shameless Republican war-profiteer. Dean Rusk was at the State Department because JFK had not had the cajonas to bring in the guy he had really wanted, James William

Fulbright.

Unlike many of the other members of a Cabinet made up of allegedly the ‘best and the brightest’, fifty-eight year old Southern Democrat Fulbright – currently representing Arkansas in the Senate, was a real force to be reckoned with. Unlike the Kennedy brothers who had come relatively late to their professions of liberalism, Fulbright had consistently and very publicly opposed McCarthyism and the Byzantine machinations of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Like so many members of the Administration Dean Rusk was a reliable go-to guy, but he was neither the ‘best’ nor the ‘brightest’. Rusk had sleepwalked with everybody else into World War III; it was hard to imagine Fulbright, a fervent multilateralist and a passionate believer in the United Nations, meekly sitting on his hands while the DEFCON numbers climbed towards the outbreak of nuclear war...

“Yes,” the Vice President went on, “but the Moon isn’t the right ‘great national cause’, *Mister President*.”

Jack Kennedy’s expression was momentarily quizzical; like that of a student who had been listening to a professorial dissertation with half an ear until suddenly, without warning and out of a clear blue sky, revelation had jabbed him hard in the ribs.

“And,” he began before he could stop himself, “what would be the ‘right’ great national cause,” he posed, “in your opinion, *Mister Vice President*?”

LBJ snorted.

“Putting that asshole LeMay up against a wall and shooting him would be a good start!”

No matter how much General Curtis LeMay had it coming to him neither man knew the Republican Party would ever forgive them, if they shot the ‘hero’ of the Cuban Missiles War who would inevitably sooner or later find his way onto their Presidential ticket. There was already loose talk on the Hill about the maniac running with Richard Nixon as early as next year, although, again, neither man thought Nixon would be that dumb. Poison was poison; whatever its colour.

“Apart from getting even with LeMay?” The President prompted.

“We should look to our own people. To our own *constituency*, *Mister President*. If we have to go to war with the Brits so be it.” LBJ shrugged. “If we have to, that is. And I mean ‘if we have to’ because if we end up fighting another war we later discover that we didn’t have to fight, and we

ought never to have fought, I'm gone, Mister President. This country is sick enough as it is with the fucking Air Force and Allen Dulles's 'stay behinds' at Langley screwing around like they've been the last few months."

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was oddly shocked.

"Not even LeMay's people would go so far as a coup," he objected.

The older man's brow creased with anger.

"Jeez!" He muttered in exasperation. "Didn't your daddy's mistakes teach you kids anything about politics?"

Much later Jack Kennedy realised this ought to have stung him a lot harder than it actually did at the time. He had revered and for most of his life, feared his father. Joseph Patrick 'Joe' Kennedy had been born into a well-connected Boston family in 1888. Still in his twenties, during World War I he had been an assistant general manager of one of Bethlehem Steel's Boston yards where he had met the then Assistant Secretary to the Navy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was later to become the thirty-second President of the United States. In the 1920s Joe Kennedy made a huge fortune in stocks and commodities, profits he invested in property and business acquisitions the length and breadth of the country. Later he became wealthier still refinancing and ruthlessly reorganising several Hollywood studios; merging his interests into the Radio-Keith-Orpheum – better known as just 'RKO' – studios. Joe Kennedy's breathtaking career seemed to know no bounds. When Federal Prohibition finally ended in 1933 he had headed directly to Scotland in the company of the son of his old friend, now *President* Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to buy up the American distribution rights for Scotch whisky. Overnight Kennedy became the North American agent for Dewar's Scotch and Gordon's Gin. By ruthlessly buying up a string of spirits importation contracts he became the first great mogul of post-Prohibition America, and not surprisingly, one of the richest men in the world at exactly the time his country was in the middle of the Great Depression. But Joe Kennedy never forgot politics because to him life, business and politics were all the same thing. In the 1930s he had owned the largest office block in America, and therefore the World; Chicago's Merchandise Mart which in time became the castle keep from which he built a formidable political base in league with the Irish-American political establishment of what, at the time, was probably the greatest industrial and commercial city in Christendom. That such a wheeling, dealing, billionaire freebooter like Joe

Kennedy could, at the height of the Great Depression, be appointed Head of the US Securities and Exchange Commission by his old friend, FDR, said as much about the realities of Democratic politics as about the ethics and mores of the age. American power politics had ever been thus.

Appointed Ambassador to London in 1938, Joe Kennedy had been the obvious shoe-in for the Democratic ticket when FDR's second term ended in 1940; but then the war had happened, FDR had decided it was his destiny to stay on and to steer his nation into calmer waters, and Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Senior, no friend of Great Britain, its ruling class or of anything to do with its Empire had in November 1940, in the third month of the London Blitz, declared: *'The whole reason for aiding England is to give us time... As long as she is in there, we have time to prepare. It isn't that Britain is fighting for democracy. That's the bunk. She's fighting for self-preservation, just as we will if it comes to us.'*

Jack Kennedy winced when he thought how those words had comprehensively wrecked his father's grandiose political ambitions.

It isn't that Britain is fighting for democracy. That's the bunk.

In political life ideas were the currency of success or failure. To suggest that – with the Luftwaffe raining nightly fire, death and destruction on the capital of the Empire – that the British were not fighting to preserve democracy was...*political suicide*. Thus, in a blink of an eye Joe Kennedy's ambassadorship had ended and his hopes of ever becoming President of the United States of America had been flushed down the toilet of history.

Now Joe Kennedy's eldest surviving son was asking himself if the 'Moon Speech' was his own political epitaph. Worse, he knew that Lyndon Baines Johnson, the acutest analyst of a chink in an opponent's armour on Capitol Hill had been asking himself exactly the same question for the last fortnight while he had been laid up, incommunicado in the Executive Residence.

"Anybody," the President decided, visibly straightening in his chair as if to support the decision forming in his mind, "who tells you that history repeats itself," he observed, the boyish wry charm that had captivated part of the nation in 1960 flickering in his eyes and twitching at the corners of his mouth, "doesn't know anything about history, Mr Vice President. Talk to me about what happens if I don't run for a second term?"

LBJ's left eye brow arched.

“We all get fucked backwards and forwards for all time, Mister President,” the Texan retorted. “If we lose the White House we lose the whole game. That’s it. We’re through. Most of us will be lucky if we don’t end up on death row.”

Jack Kennedy did not think it would come to that but then they lived in strange and troubled times. He was not personally afraid of accounting for his actions before the court of the American people. In many ways he longed to do just that; however, he was old enough and wise enough to know the difference between wanderlust and hard realities. No man who was not firmly rooted in practical, pragmatic realpolitik had ever, or could ever become the President of the United States of America.

“Okay,” Jack Kennedy declared, “so what do we do next?”

Chapter 10

Sunday 8th December 1963

The Officers Club, Mdina, Malta

Vice-Admiral Sir Julian Wemyss Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, walked out onto the battlement terrace of what had, until a few hours ago, been the Central Mess of all RAF commissioned personnel on the Maltese Archipelago. The late afternoon was hurrying towards dusk but from his vantage point he could see the whole vista of the main island laid before him from St Paul's Bay in the north – where legend had it that the saint had been shipwrecked - east along the coast to St Julian's, Sliema, Valletta, and around to the south-east past Marsaskala to Marsaxlokk.

His companion, a lean handsome man in his late forties with an understated handlebar moustache and weary grey-green eyes sighed.

"Hell of a view, sir." Air Commodore Daniel French observed. The first time I came up here I stood on this terrace for half-an-hour and just stared."

"I hadn't realised you were such a reflective soul, Air Commodore," the tall naval officer chuckled.

"Oh, I have my moments, sir."

Both men were nursing double whiskies in cut glass tumblers.

"I must confess I've had one or two myself lately," the older man confessed. He did not think it odd that he was chatting affably with the Acting Air Officer Commanding RAF Malta as if they had known each other for years. The two men had instantly recognised in the other a kindred spirit. They were warriors both. "In the last few days I've had a castle fall on me," another low, confidential chuckle, "met *two* extraordinary women, and made the acquaintance again of another extraordinary woman after a gap of more years than I care to contemplate. And, of course, I've visited the crash site of a B-52 shot down by the RAF. We are living through strange times indeed!"

The airman shrugged, raised his glass to his lips.

"Anyway," Julian Christopher went on. Both men were exhausted and there was business to be concluded. He waved to a table from which they

could sit down to enjoy the stunning panoramic view. The men settled, placing their caps on the table. “Thank you for rushing up here at such short notice.”

The younger man half-smiled, sensing that his new C-in-C’s courtesy was in this instance, personal rather than mechanical.

“I am at your command, sir.”

Julian Christopher did not beat around the bush.

“I’m appointing you as my deputy on Malta, Dan,” he said flatly. He paused: “my Flag Lieutenant says that nobody calls you ‘Daniel’ in service circles?”

“Your Flag Lieutenant is well informed, sir.”

“Unnervingly well informed,” Julian Christopher grimaced. “Things are a mess and frankly, you seem to be pretty clewed up on both the military and the civilian side of things. I want you to take command of the ongoing recovery operation. Further to that if ever I am out of contact or otherwise unavailable you will act in my name with my *full* authority in *all* military and civilian matters. My objectives in the coming weeks are to: one, defend and retain control of Cyprus, Gibraltar and of the Maltese Archipelago; two, promote and pursue a return to normal civil life on this island and if possible on Cyprus. In support of this latter object I have ordered the cruiser HMS Tiger and three of her escorting destroyers to return to Malta at their best speed. On arrival these ships will be replenished and dispatched to Cyprus in support of the forces on that island.” He met the younger man’s eyes. “Any questions?”

“Major-General Broughton outranks me, sir.”

The soldier in question commanded elements of the 6th and 23rd Divisions of the British Army, currently responsible for garrisoning the Archipelago and the acclimatisation, training and transfer of troops to wherever they were needed in the Theatre of Operations. Presently, the Malta garrison was fully occupied with maintaining civil order, and rescue and recovery work with and in support of the civilian authorities.

“General Broughton will be shipping out with 3rd and 4th Battalions, Yorkshire Regiment on HMS Tiger and whatever shipping I can rustle up. I’ve asked him to take command at Larnica and report to me on the military prospects of restoring our writ across the entire island of Cyprus. I’ve also cabled the Chief of the Air Staff in England requesting you be promoted Air

Vice-Marshal consistent with your increased responsibilities with immediate effect.”

Daniel French nodded thoughtfully. He was always pleasantly surprised, not to say impressed and reassured, when he discovered a superior officer who was actually one step ahead of him; not least because it did not happen very often.

The two men parted company shortly afterwards.

“Your next appointment is waiting downstairs, sir,” Lieutenant Alan Hannay reported apologetically after a brief interval during which Julian Christopher had stared out across his new domain. “Staff Sergeant Siddall, sir.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Wheel him in.”

The tall, muscular Royal Military Policeman in dusty khakis marched into the presence of the great man, saluted crisply, and stomped rigidly to attention before the new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations.

“Staff Sergeant Siddall, Intelligence Division, 2nd Platoon, Royal Military Police, on secondment to Internal Security, HMS Phoenicia, sir!”

Julian Christopher gestured to his Flag Lieutenant to remain before he turned to the Redcap.

“No notes, Lieutenant Hannay,” he said. “Stand easy, Staff Sergeant,” he said evenly, neutrally to the perspiring NCO.

The big man clunked to the ‘at ease’ stance, eyes to his front.

“I am informed that casualties among ISD on personnel on Manoel Island are extremely heavy.” Julian Christopher reported. He continued, making a second statement but also posing a question. “Your commanding officer was killed during the attack, as were several subalterns?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim Siddall acknowledged, staring at the wall above Julian Christopher’s head.

The older man studied the Redcap.

The man was thirty-four years old. Married. His wife and seven year old son survived in England; somewhat estranged it seemed. Siddall had been ostracised by many of his ISD comrades; notably for his part in ‘exposing’ abuses of Maltese civilian prisoners at the Empire Stadium in Gzira earlier in the year and effectively - by leading an intervention to put an end to the use of unauthorised ‘interrogation protocols’ - closing down the joint CIA-ISD

‘reception depot’ which had been set up there after the instigation of martial law in November last year. Julian Christopher’s predecessor, Hugh Staveley-Pope had ordered Siddall’s superiors not to take any disciplinary action against him. The C-in-C’s old friend had never had any time for strong arm bully boy tactics. He must have found the detention regime he inherited deeply distasteful...

“What remains of the Internal Security Department on Malta is to be disbanded effective as of midnight this night,” Christopher informed the Redcap. “You will be assigned until further notice to the Political Intelligence Section of my personal command staff with the brevet rank of Lieutenant. In the interim my staff will be operating out of this building. My people have identified several other vacant nearby properties we can use in this quarter of the Citadel. Pick one of those and get to work. I intend to normalise civilian relations between us – the British colonial power – and the representatives of the Maltese people at the earliest time. Your job will be to keep me informed as to the general political situation on the Archipelago. You are *not* a spy; you are a member of my personal staff whose job it is to support and inform *my* dealings with the legitimate representatives of the Maltese people. Do you have any questions?”

Former Staff Sergeant Jim Siddall – now brevet Lieutenant – did not understand what he had just been told and after a moment of hesitation, decided to confess as much.

“I don’t understand, sir.”

To the big Redcap’s astonishment the battered ‘fighting admiral’ with the ferocious reputation – who looked and held himself as if he had been on the wrong end of a bar room brawl in Strait Street, Valletta’s notorious red light district - smiled wanly.

“I want your insights on the way our Maltese friends,” he said the word ‘friends’ without any kind of varying inflexion as if he actually meant ‘friends’ when he said ‘friends’, “think about us and our intentions towards them. I was here during the forty-five war and afterwards and although nobody doubted who was the occupying power, relations were invariably on an even footing. One day Malta will be an independent country and when that day comes, I want, despite everything that has happened, for the Maltese and ourselves to remain ‘friends’, and to remain so for long afterwards.”

The big man ruminated.

Julian Christopher anticipated his next question.

“Martial law will be suspended in the next few days. In fact it will happen as soon as the roads have been cleared and the harbours are safe for navigation again.”

Alan Hannay guided the bewildered Redcap out of the great man’s presence.

Julian Christopher sipped his whisky.

He must have dozed off to sleep in his chair for a few minutes because when blinking, he awakened he was confronted by Margo Seiffert standing, hands on her hips, viewing him wearily with a long-suffering smirk on her lined and tanned face.

The man struggled to get to his feet.

A combination of lack of sleep and rest, and the stiffening of his mishandled torso meant he had only half-risen from his chair before he thought better of it and slumped back down.

“Forgive me,” he muttered.

The woman drew up a chair opposite him. The dusk had drawn down over the island and insects buzzed and flitted in the lights along the terrace. Elsewhere across the island street lamps blinked distantly in those areas where power lines had not been disrupted by the recent bombing.

“Why is there no black out tonight?” The woman asked, idly. As she asked the question she reached across and picked up the half-drunk whisky. She sniffed it, took a sip, nodded her approbation and put the tumbler back on the table.

The man smiled, shook his head.

Still the same Margo he had known all those years ago!

“If our enemies send more B-52s no blackout on Earth will save us,” Julian Christopher confided dryly. “Although, judging from the other day’s experience, the RAF might.”

Margo Seiffert nodded sagely.

“If your predecessor was still in the hot seat I’d probably have been locked up by now.”

Julian Christopher stared out into the gathering darkness of the cool Mediterranean night. He did not trust himself to meet the woman’s gaze; partly to hide the pain in his eyes in memory of his fallen friend, Hugh Staveley-Pope, whose body had been recovered from his day room at Fort

Phoenicia on Manoel Island earlier that afternoon, and partly because he knew why Margo had come to see him.

“There is no news about Peter,” he murmured. “The First Sea Lord sent me an emergency flash telex two hours ago informing me that Talavera was under tow by HMS Plymouth, a modern frigate, some miles off the Portuguese coast. Talavera and Devonshire are both trying to make Oporto before the next Atlantic storm system blows through.”

The woman reached across the table and gently patted the back of his left hand.

“Why did they send you here, Julian?”

The man looked to her.

“I think you know that, Margo.”

“It would be good to hear it from the man at the top.”

Julian Christopher shrugged off his foreboding.

“Here we stand,” he grimaced, “and here we stay. Here, Cyprus and Gibraltar. For better or worse we, the British, notwithstanding our many sins, have been the glue that has held this part of the World together for a hundred and fifty years. If we allow ourselves to be driven out, or worse,” he grunted, “if we just give up, this whole region will descent into chaos.”

“But before the October War you were going to withdraw from Malta next year anyway?”

“That was then and this is now.”

“Is it true that you plan to end martial law?”

“Yes. Sometime in the next forty-eight hours hopefully.”

“Because you’re an enlightened modern man?”

Julian Christopher drained his glass.

“Perhaps, I am, Margo. Perhaps, it might just be that I can think of better ways to employ the eight thousand British service personnel based on these islands than having them police a population that, with a few notable exceptions, doesn’t actually need to be policed? Not by my men, leastways. Make up your own mind. What do you think?”

Chapter 11

Sunday 8th December 1963

UKIEA Government Buildings, Cheltenham, England

The inky blackness of the winter night was rent asunder by the bellow of a jet airliner clawing into the night off the south western end of the great, concrete runway which now slashed across what until the previous year had been Cheltenham Race Course. The leaded windows of the mansion rattled. The central heating system – the one thing upon which the dead press magnate who had built the monstrous old country pile before the Great War had neglected to lavish either money or attention – had broken down again and wherever the hearths had not been bricked over, apologetic coal fires smouldered and glowed, smokily. Everybody was wearing coats, extra layers of clothing and still they shivered because nothing it seemed, could warm the chill out of the Portland stone blocks that formed the greater part of the building's structural fabric.

Tom Harding-Grayson stirred the coals in the grate of his first floor office and returned to his threadbare armchair. He surveyed his guest and reached for his cup and saucer. Tea without milk, and a slice of lemon was out of the question. A biscuit would have been nice. His stomach rumbled; the Government Compound was subject to the same rationing regime that was being applied in the nearby towns. That had not been a Cabinet decision. The Prime Minister had announced the diktat and that, was that!

Margaret Hilda Thatcher sipped her tea, viewing the recently appointed Foreign Secretary with hooded eyes. She had spent most of the afternoon trying not to worry about Malta, Julian Christopher and the fighting admiral's son's fate onboard the bomb-damaged HMS Talavera in the storm-swept seas off the rocky coast of Portugal.

Until a few days ago she had been the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration's Minister of Supply – essentially, the 'rationing queen' as Airey Neave was wont to quip – now she was at the heart of Government wrestling with a host of new and possibly, intractable problems. Not least among these were the infuriatingly contradictory reports from the

survey teams which had been investigating the bombed out, and it had been assumed, largely uninhabitable zones. The UKIEA's writ did not run very deep into what had once been Greater London, or along either side of much of the Thames Estuary, or Kent. In fact until recently the presumption had been that virtually nobody had survived in these areas; but it now seemed there were, potentially, significant numbers of survivors and possibly numerous coherent settled communities within the bomb-damaged areas of whose existence the UKIEA had had no inkling until the last few weeks. Army survey teams, mostly Royal Engineer-led, which had penetrated the 'destruction zones' had been mainly searching for recoverable strategic materials and industrial assets because there had been little expectation of finding hundreds, let alone tens of thousands of people actually living in the ruins. The most recent reports contained tantalising indications – anecdotal reports from people actually living many miles inside the 'dead' zones - that even within the inner districts of London there might be pockets of relatively light damage where, for example, archives and even gold or other valuable metals, or say, diamonds might remain untouched in vaults. More important, there were real hopes that large areas of the London docks and many major riverside quays identified by aerial reconnaissance remained intact, or easily repairable. Unfortunately, the photographic evidence was patchy and nobody cared to speculate on local levels of persistent radioactive contamination. Maddeningly, two naval salvage units which had been tasked to explore the Thames Estuary from the Medway as far upstream as was navigable had yet to report back.

The door opened to admit Airey Neave, who had replaced Margaret Thatcher as Minister of Supply, and a middle aged man in the crumpled uniform of the United States Navy. The Home Secretary had not been overly amused when she learned that her friend had been trespassing on Foreign Office territory rather than concentrating on his own duties; the trouble was that Airey Neave had not escaped from Colditz by 'waiting for things to happen' and was pathologically incapable of sticking rigidly to any 'assigned brief'.

"We meet again, Captain Brenckmann," Tom Harding-Grayson observed wryly as he shook hands with Airey Neave's 'friend'. The Foreign Secretary observed 'the Angry Widow' – everybody called Margaret Thatcher 'the Angry Widow' because she had never made any bones about how 'bloody

angry' she was that, for whatever grandiose geopolitical reason or mischance, somebody had murdered her husband and her children's father along with hundreds of millions of other innocent people, thirteen months ago – coolly greeting the newcomer.

The Angry Widow treated all Americans with the utmost suspicion. The only thing that was ever going to be 'special' for her in her future relations with representatives of the lost colonies was her innate mistrust of *everything* they said, did and had done in the days leading up to the October War. Which, assuming they all lived through the next few days and weeks might be a problem because Tom Harding-Grayson had a feeling that the Angry Widow, having arrived at the top table of Government at the tender age of only thirty-eight, was not leaving it any time soon.

Margaret Thatcher resumed her seat.

Around her the three men settled, each man aware that she was uncomfortable with the fact of this hastily arranged meeting, and had it not been for her chagrin at the way Airey Neave had cavalierly trampled all over Tom Harding-Grayson's domain would not have accepted his invitation to attend.

"Margaret," Tom Harding-Grayson said cautiously, "I have a confession to make." It was his turn to tread carefully. Notwithstanding they had recently gone through the Balmoral nightmare together and that in the aftermath of the initial attack his wife, Pat, and the Angry Widow had formed an unlikely friendship, he suspected this was flimsy ground upon which to presume on this particular lady's indulgence. "When Airey suggested to me that it was vitally important to attempt to keep channels of communication open, it was I who suggested it might be fruitful to approach Captain Brenckmann."

Margaret Thatcher let the subterfuge go unremarked. Instead she concentrated on the person of the unobtrusive, leanly made figure of the interloper in their midst. Captain Walter Brenckmann was of average height, his once dark hair heavily flecked with grey at the temples. She guessed he was in his mid-fifties, although it was hard to work out a person's age these days because so many people seemed prematurely aged. She was not convinced she had even heard Walter Brenckmann's name before that evening.

"I joined the Prime Minister after the War Cabinet earlier today," she

said coldly, “and he remarked that this was the second successive year that the death of Winston Churchill had gone uncelebrated and unremarked within the Party, and by his surviving circle of friends, admirers and family. The Prime Minister considers himself to have been Sir Winston’s friend, and to some extent, one of his protégés. Dear Winston was one of four living Prime Ministers, or former Prime Ministers of our country who disappeared in the holocaust of October last year.”

Walter Brenckmann returned her fierce gaze with the inscrutable dead pan face of a long serving litigator. There were no questions in his grey blue eyes, no censure, simply patience for he knew from experience that even the fiercest flame burned itself out, sooner or later.

“Harold MacMillan and the Earl of Avon, Anthony Eden, from my own Party *ceased to exist*, as did Mr Clement Atlee, who served as dear Winston’s deputy in the war against Hitler. Churchill, MacMillan, Eden and Atlee, murdered and for what, Captain Brenckmann?”

“I wish I knew, ma’am.”

Margaret Thatcher glared at him. The horrible silence settled around the four people in the cold, damp room tainted with the smoke from the feebly drawing chimney.

“I lost my youngest kid,” the American said when it seemed like the atmosphere was freezing close to absolute zero. “Her name was Tabatha May, she was eighteen years old. After we’d had our boys she was...an accident. Like any kid you don’t expect she was *everything* to us. My wife Joanne and me, we still think we’ll wake up one morning and it’ll all turn out to have been a bad dream. Not a minute of any day goes by that we don’t remember driving Tabatha up to Buffalo to start college.” His voice choked, only for a moment. “Do you mind if I ask who you lost, ma’am?”

Airey Neave, who knew Margaret Thatcher as well as anybody in Government House, and Tom Harding-Grayson, whose acquaintance with her was of a shorter but latterly somewhat intense character – literally under fire – both feared the Angry Widow would fly at the quiet American.

They were both astounded when, after sniffing back a sob she nodded and whispered: “My husband, Denis. He was my rock.” They were even more flabbergasted, and a little shocked, when she added: “And I very much fear that a remarkable man whom I met only recently has been sent abroad on perilously dangerous work from which, in the present circumstances, he

might well not return...”

“The last I heard,” Walter Brenckmann sympathised, “my oldest boy was on the USS Scorpion. For all I know, the Scorpion is riding herd on the Enterprise Battle Group as we speak.”

Tom Harding-Grayson coughed genteelly.

“In the hours before relations were severed with the United States, Captain Brenckmann visited my cottage where by chance Henry Tomlinson and I were drowning our sorrows. Henry and I came away from that meeting convinced that there was at least one man on Ambassador Westheimer’s staff who was as troubled by the turn of events as we were,” a quirk of arid humour, “and are.”

“Sir Henry is aware of *this* meeting?” Margaret Thatcher demanded, having hastily recovered her briefly mislaid composure.

“Not *officially*.”

If the Angry Widow recognised that the Foreign Secretary and her own closest advisor in Government – Airey Neave - had drawn her into a trap, she hid her vexation. Tom Harding-Grayson and Airey Neave knew that if they had her on their side then there was a prospect that the Prime Minister might listen to what they had to say, and more importantly, to what the former American Naval Attaché had to say. Margaret Thatcher had been with Edward Heath at Balmoral, and she had backed him – to the hilt – when he sacked most of the Cabinet and put the UKIEA on a war footing. All her political credit had been banked when the Premier needed it most, and therefore, it commanded a premium.

When neither of her colleagues made a move to kick off proceedings the Home Secretary took command.

“Tell me about yourself Captain Brenckmann?”

“I’m a small time Boston lawyer who volunteered for Officer Selection to the Navy Department back in forty to avoid being drafted into the infantry, ma’am.” The American waited to see how his opening gambit went down, adjusted the tone of his narrative and continued: “Joanne and me married in thirty-four the year I graduated law school at Yale. I was twenty-five; she was a few weeks short of her twenty-ninth birthday. She worked in a typing pool and waited tables to put me through law school. We met in a diner when I was a freshman. Our families were scandalised, mine no less than Joanne’s. Walter Junior was born a few days short of nine months after the

wedding; Daniel arrived fourteen months later, Sam thirteen months after that. Tabatha was an accident that happened on a seven day furlough in the spring of forty-three. The doctors had said Joanne should not have any more kids after Sam came along but, hey, what do doctors know?"

"Did you see much war service, Captain Brenckmann?"

"My fair share, ma'am. I'd hoped they would send a lawyer like me straight to the Judge Advocate's Department. Washington would not have been that far away from Joanne and the boys; instead I got assigned to a DDE, that's a destroyer escort. After Pearl Harbour I spent most of my time crossing and re-crossing the North Atlantic; convoy escort duty. By the time I got home in forty-six I was a Lieutenant-Commander in the USN Reserve. I got called back when the Korean War kicked off; they made my third half-ring into a full ring and gave me a Fletcher class fleet destroyer to drive. After that I went back to lawyering again. Joanne and me were thinking about selling up, moving down to the Florida Keys when I retired. Only somebody blew up the World first and I got put on a plane for England."

Margaret Thatcher absorbed the story.

"I qualified as a barrister before I entered Parliament," she informed the American. "My original training was as a chemist. I've always found the combination of a scientific and a legal training indispensable in the analysis and reconciliation of conflicting narratives."

"Being a successful litigator requires a forensic mind," the man agreed.

The woman did not reply immediately.

"It is our view," she determined, unhurriedly, "that the attack on Balmoral could not have been carried out without the active, or perhaps, tacit, acquiescence of diplomatic staff at *your* Embassy."

"I have no intelligence with which to confirm or counter that view, ma'am," the American responded. "I didn't come here to defend or to denigrate my former colleagues at the Embassy."

"Why did you agree to come here, Captain Brenckmann?"

"I came here because I don't want there to be another war."

Chapter 12

Sunday 8th December 1963

Palácio de São Bento, Lisbon, Portugal

Seventy-four year old António de Oliveira Salazar had been Prime Minister of Portugal for over thirty years. He had founded and led the Estado Novo – *New State* – Party which had ruled over his country since 1932. He was not an easy man to know; hardly surprising given that he and his Spanish contemporary, General Francisco ‘Franco’ Bahamonde, were the last of the pre-war dictators. Nevertheless, Sir Richard Templar, the British Ambassador had developed a somewhat grudging respect and admiration for the Portuguese leader in his seven months in Lisbon. Salazar lived modestly, forsaking the trappings of his office. He had not come to power through street-fighting, civil war, or by persecuting or demonizing minorities, or by gratuitously misrepresenting the historical narrative of his country. By and large – although his secret police had become ever more paranoid of late - his rule had been without the excesses of the other European dictators and even during the 1939-1945 war he had made it known that he detested Hitler and everything he stood for. As long ago as 1940 *Life* magazine had called him ‘the greatest Portuguese since Prince Henry the Navigator’. A quiet, modest academic whose manners remained professorial and sometimes overly introspective for a man in his position, Oxford University had once awarded him a Doctorate in Civil Law.

In the Second World War when Portugal had walked a fine line between the various combatants ever mindful of the priority of co-existing with a Spanish neighbour that might – at any time up until the end of 1943 – have flipped onto the Nazi side of the conflict with disastrous consequences for the Portuguese state. During Hitler’s war Lisbon had been the espionage capital of Western Europe, the playground of the British MI5, MI6 and Special Operations Executive, the German Abwehr and its SS analogue the Sicherheitsdienst, the Soviet NKVD, and the forerunner of the CIA, the American Office of Strategic Services. In the middle years of World War II Salazar had adroitly guided his small country along a perilous diplomatic

high wire; tolerating German U-boats and surface raiders sheltering and replenishing in his waters, turning a blind eye to Allied machinations on Portuguese territory, ignoring the Great Game being played out in the streets of his capital city by the intelligence communities of *all* the warring parties, knowing that only continuing Portuguese neutrality might preserve the nation.

Now António de Oliveira Salazar was walking the tight rope again with an intellectual finesse honed in his three decades in power. Not for him the suffocating apparatus of the Police State, nor great set piece public demonstrations. He was neither demigod nor rabble-rouser, more a chess player from the template of a former age. In a funny sort of way he would have been more at home, happier playing the game of imperial musical chairs with the movers and shakers of a Europe two World Wars removed from the apocalypse of the October War.

Sir Richard Templar had tried to explain the manner of man with whom he was dealing to his principals in Cheltenham; often he had wondered if they really understood that Salazar was, and had always been, a man with whom they could and should be doing business. The trouble was that Salazar's political creed, superficially at least, was as incompatible as it was distasteful to Sir Richard's masters in England even viewed in the radically altered perspectives of the new post-cataclysm era. The people back in England saw what they always saw; exactly what they wanted to see. Black was black and white was white, there were no shades in between but that was not the World in which António de Oliveira Salazar lived. Salazar's regime was vehemently anti-communist and anti-socialist, it loathed many of the freedom's most Englishmen had taken as their birthrights for innumerable generations, and viewed the liberal philosophies of most pre-war Western European governments with hostility and deeply-ingrained suspicion. However, there was a dichotomy at the heart of the Portuguese 'totalitarian' state that took the edge off its dedicated nationalist, controlling proclivities.

Salazar frequently spoke of a doctrine of *lusotropicalism*; the conviction that Portuguese imperialism was in some way uniquely 'better' than that of other European nations. The theory held that having been conquered and civilized by successive waves of invaders – Celts, Romans, Visigoths, the Moors and by various Christian peoples in more modern times, including the British – the Portuguese were somehow innately more humane, friendlier and

better qualified to rule benignly in its overseas colonies; the two largest of which were Angola and Mozambique, and among its smaller enclaves that of Macao in the Far East. This belief was supported by the fact that Portugal was the oldest of the European colonial powers; several of its territories having been continuously administered by Lisbon for over four hundred years. Notwithstanding that Sir Richard Templar thought that *lusotropicalism* and the *pluricontinentalism* it inevitably implied was largely pie in the sky wishful thinking, he retained a sneaking admiration for the way in which the Salazar regime had succeeded in using such ideas to expunge the guilt and the moral burden of Empire. For the Portuguese there was no such thing as 'the white man's burden' because overseas Portuguese territories were as much *Portuguese* as Portugal itself, and unlike the British, the Portuguese had never stopped believing that they had a civilising mission in the world.

António de Oliveira Salazar, the academic literally dragged from his professorial chair to save the nation from the travails which in the 1930s had torn next door Spain apart, was the rock upon which modern Portugal had been built. He was an intellectual who lived a blamelessly simple life spurning the privileges of his position. When, publicly, he was compelled to surround himself with the finery of Europe's oldest, albeit somewhat impoverished, Imperial polity he did so reluctantly for he hated the limelight and mistrusted the dangerous populism which had dragged half the world into the 1945 war.

The Prime Minister of Portugal rose stiffly to his feet to come around his desk to greet the British Ambassador as he was ushered into his grand but drab office. The first sections of the Palácio de São Bento – the Portuguese Parliament - had been built by the Benedictines in 1598. Over the centuries the building had grown and matured into a classical monument to the glory of the Portuguese Imperium. The current official home of the Portuguese Prime Minister was a nineteenth century mansion in the grounds of the Palácio de São Bento. Barring a short interregnum in the early 1950s Salazar had abjured from filling the essentially ceremonial role of the President of the Republic, in much the same way he had consistently abjured from collecting titles and spurious honours in the style of the other dictators of his era. He was too focused on the here and the now, the immediate and the long-term future of his people to trouble himself with baubles. All of this was reflected

in the strange, cluttered *ordinariness* of his office. Even after three decades as virtual dictator of Portugal, António de Oliveira Salazar remained at heart the professorial university academic he had been in a former life.

The Prime Minister waved his visitor to take a seat in one of the two dusty chairs in front of his desk.

“I asked you to come to the *Palácio de São Bento* so that I might personally assure you that Portugal will render all possible assistance to your stricken ships.” He spoke in the clipped, relaxed yet very precise Portuguese that the British Ambassador had, at first, found a little hard to decipher. Even now he had to listen very closely and worried that he might miss some vital nuance. However, this morning there were no subtle nuances to be detected for the dictator of Portugal was at great pains to make his meanings crystal clear. “Two Portuguese Naval vessels have been dispatched to assist your vessels and to ensure that there will be unambiguous communications with the port authorities in Oporto. I have appointed a junior minister, Hector Benes, to liaise directly with you and the municipality of Oporto on my behalf. He has full powers to do whatever needs to be done.”

Sir Richard Templar waited for the caveat, to discover what *quid pro quo* was to be demanded. Salazar was risking war with his neighbour, Spain; a war that Portugal could not fight alone or hope to survive, let alone win. Moreover, it was a war that in Templar’s humble opinion she did not *need* to risk, or ever *wanted* to fight in any conceivable circumstances.

“Thank you, sir,” the British Ambassador said, half rising to his feet and bowing his head.

António de Oliveira Salazar viewed his guest, his lined face and rheumy, wise eyes questing and betraying an underlying...anger.

“You are not alone, Sir Richard,” he said softly, “in having entertained scorpions in the nest. If the CIA,” he paused, disliking the imprecision of that catch all acronym, “if cadres *within* the American Central Intelligence Agency are willing to conspire with disaffected elements of *your* armed forces to attempt to assassinate Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and her family; who among us is safe?”

“Forgive me, sir. I have no specific intelligence regarding the involvement of outside agents in that dreadful business in Scotland.”

The Portuguese Prime Minister smiled sadly.

“Later today five members of the staff of the Embassy of the United

States of America will be expelled from my country for conducting activities incompatible with their diplomatic status, Sir Richard. Portugal is not in a position to send our trans-Atlantic friends such a powerful message as the United Kingdom, but we too, have a right to show our,” he hesitated, “*offence* to be treated thus by a country that claims to be a friend of Portugal.”

The British Ambassador realised that the interview was at an end.

He lingered.

“This will antagonise the Spanish, sir?”

The Prime Minister of Portugal spread his hands for a moment.

“I fear so,” he granted, “although I suspect that the bully *Francisco Franco Bahamonde* will cower in his bunker a while longer before he begins to worry about who is to blame for his latest folly. By then things will have resolved themselves. Either there will be new disasters, or the World might have begun to rediscover its senses.”

A dapper naval officer with dark, impatient eyes was awaiting Sir Richard Templar in the corridor when he left the Prime Minister’s office.

“I am Commander Hector de Oliveira Benes of the *Armada Portuguesa*, Ambassador.” He nodded his head respectfully. The naval officer’s English was pure Oxbridge, bell clear. “I also have the honour to serve as the Prime Minister’s personal *factor* in matters pertaining to Navy affairs. I am at your service, sir.”

Sir Richard Templar shook the younger man’s hand.

It was all the seasoned diplomat could do to not to laugh out a loud with relief. It might be too late to save the two crippled, storm-ravaged destroyers desperately trying to reach the sanctuary of Oporto but whatever happened next his country had just found – or rather, re-found - a new friend in the World. The support of former colonies half a world away was comforting, warming regardless of its immediate utility. To have a surviving, intact European nation make an unconditional gesture proclaiming itself an ally of the United Kingdom was pure manna from heaven. The uniform bleakness of the vista had lightened a little and every glimpse of hope was a thing to be embraced like a prodigal returning to the fold.

The diplomat took the bull by the horns.

“Are you authorised to communicate directly with your Royal Navy counterparts, Commander?” He asked casually as the two men fell into step.

“Yes, sir. The entire resources of the Portuguese armed forces stand

ready to assist in this operation.”

Chapter 13

Sunday 8th December 1963

Prime Minister's Private Office, Government Compound, Cheltenham

Margaret Thatcher's thoughts were preoccupied ordering her decidedly ambivalent impressions of the rather too secret meeting she had just left in the Foreign Secretary's office. She had been grateful that she had been able to leave that 'conference' early on the thoroughly authentic grounds that she had a prior engagement with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence, James Callaghan. She tried and failed to stifle a yawn as she bustled down the corridor in the direction of the Edward Heath's rooms. She had heard tall stories about Winston Churchill's war cabinet and the chaotic, impulsive way the great man had worked – and very nearly driven every single one of his friends and detractors alike quite literally, up the wall – in the darkest hours of the Second World War. She was only now realising how dissonant and exactly how disorientating the dreadful pressures of conflict and international crisis must have been, for every Government down the ages. Those pressures bounced off her but weariness was cumulative and she had not yet found a way to counteract its insidious, mind-slowng effects.

"I hope I'm not too late, Prime Minister," she apologised with a tired smile as she was ushered into Edward Heath's private drawing room. The room was as spartanly furnished as was practically every other room in the mansion, and no warmer. James Callaghan rose to his feet, nodding acknowledgment. The only other person in the room was Sir Henry Tomlinson, the Head of the Home Civil Service and Secretary to the Cabinet, with whom she exchanged a thoughtful look. The meeting in Tom Harding-Grayson's office with the former US Naval Attaché, Captain Walter Brenckmann, bore the fingerprints of a pincer-movement engineered by Henry Tomlinson and his oldest and firmest friend in the Civil Service, the new Foreign Secretary. "I allowed myself to be traduced into accepting a meeting with Tom Harding-Grayson at short notice and I fear it over ran somewhat. I do apologise."

The Prime Minister indicated for her to take a chair; his relaxed manner

was that of a man who believed himself among friends with whom he had no need to stand on ceremony.

“Presumably, Tom Harding-Grayson gave you the good news about the Portuguese?” He checked, perfunctorily.

“Yes, they’ve offered our damaged ships safe harbour,” the Angry Widow confirmed, purring with the same relief she had purred when the Foreign Secretary had shown her the telegram from the Embassy in Lisbon. “I’d expected demands for guarantees that we’d defend them against their neighbour?”

“Perhaps, Salazar isn’t the same kind of old fascist as Franco after all,” James Callaghan observed, lugubriously from the creaking depths of the arm chair into which he had gratefully re-arranged his large frame. A grey pall of approaching exhaustion lay across the three men and the woman in the room.

“I wanted to have *this* talk,” Edward Heath explained, seeking his words with infinite care, “because the process I initiated last week to confront the threats to the security of our Mediterranean protectorates and trade routes, and to respond to the provocations of our former American allies, cannot and should not deflect us from simultaneously addressing the other great issues facing us.”

“We could be a war with the USA in hours or days, Prime Minister,” James Callaghan observed. There was only the mildest taint of censure in the voice of the leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party. “As a Government, and as a people, we are stretched pretty thin at the moment.”

Edward Heath accepted this; electing to pose another question.

“Even in the middle of the Second World War Rab Butler was planning the reform of the post-war education system, and William Beveridge was preparing the blueprint for an economy in which full employment was a given and in which all our citizens would be able to rely on the safety net of the welfare state if through ill health or personal misfortune they fell on hard times.”

“True,” James Callaghan agreed. “But we’re in no position to contemplate either, Prime Minister.”

Margaret Thatcher had not known what the meeting was to discuss, simply that the Prime Minister wished to sound her out about ‘certain matters’. She opened her mouth to speak, but then shut it. She waved for the two men to carry on while she thought her thoughts.

“You are right, Jim,” Edward Heath conceded. “But that’s not the point, is it?”

The other man snorted mildly.

“Crisis or not I had the First Sea Lord bending my ear this afternoon about the ‘1964 Naval Construction Program’. He wants to re-commence *all* existing projects and to re-commission practically every ship in the Reserve Fleet. He even wants to recover and refit the hulks of two or three old cruisers that were on the 1962 Disposal List!”

Now Margaret Thatcher found her voice.

“Presumably, the Royal Air Force and the Army will have similar plans?”

“Oh, yes,” the Minister of Defence confirmed glumly.

“Can we afford such programs?”

“No,” Edward Heath interjected. “We are bankrupt as a nation.” He shrugged with a spasm of his broad shoulders. “But I don’t have to tell you that. Even if we had a functioning money economy, which we don’t, having had to operate on a command basis under virtual martial law for the last year would have destroyed it.”

They had been so busy just surviving; so busy keeping the worst ravages of starvation and disease at bay it was hardly surprising that virtually all the other responsibilities of a modern government had been shamefully neglected. Practical governance in the last year had been delivered by ten Regional Commissioners who reported to the Home Secretary. The Commissioners were mainly Army officers who managed local teams drawn from former County and District Councils; they were responsible for the distribution of resources – food and fuel – within their fiefdoms, for the provision of medical services and for the repair and maintenance of essential public utilities. In many areas of the country barter had replaced the cash economy. Nobody trusted paper money and as the majority of the things vital to sustain life and to stave off the worst miseries of everyday existence were provided free to all – if and when those staples were available – normal economic activity had been replaced with a Soviet-style command model. As an emergency exigency this system had, to a fashion, worked. People were getting fed just enough in enough areas of the country to stave off famine, the National Health Service was beginning to function again after its near total collapse in the aftermath of the October War, and transportation links,

electricity, gas and telephone links were being gradually restored up to the limits of habitation adjacent to the zones of destruction. In the spring a program of rebuilding and driving new roads through those zones was scheduled, mainly to reconnect communities up and down the East Coast and establish a route across the downs to the undamaged channel port of Dover. Greater London remained beyond the ambitions of such limited programs; there simply were not the means to tackle the wasteland of rubble. The priority had been to keep the Navy at sea, to preserve the much-reduced fighting power of the Army and the Royal Air Force, and to support as best as possible, the technical and industrial infrastructure required to guarantee the operability of the advanced electronic systems and weapons of the armed forces. The UKIEA had, in fact, been operating on a war economy footing ever since the October War and sooner or later, the country would reach breaking point. It was anyone's guess how much longer those who had survived 'could take it'.

Given what the country had been through it astonished the three men and the woman in the Prime Minister's Room that night that there had been no major insurrection. However, if they had been lucky thus far that was no guarantee that the road ahead would be anything other than extremely rocky. Bizarrely, the prospect of a stupid, futile, needless war with the United States of America was just one more insurmountable problem. Lately, they had all become used to confronting the impossible and somehow fighting through to live another day.

That the UKIEA had served its people so well was largely the work of its leader, Edward Heath; the Prime Minister had earned the right to muse out aloud the state of the World and the United Kingdom's future in it, even at such a time of dire crisis.

"We have very little idea of the true situation in the bombed areas of Central Europe," Edward Heath reminded his colleagues. "We have only the White House's damage assessment vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and its partners. Frankly, we are blind in the World beyond our Mediterranean bases. Goodness, we have found it practically impossible to talk to, let alone help or understand the plight of our putative French allies just across the Channel." The Premier's exasperation threatened to get the better of him, and sensing it, he hesitated. "We know that Italy survived the cataclysm more or less untouched and that before the US Sixth Fleet abandoned its base

at Naples it off-loaded a number of aircraft and other supporting military ‘assets’. In retrospect we might now reasonably suspect that those ‘assets’ were not insignificant and that they have been used to prop up the fascistic regimes that carved up Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica in the aftermath of the October War.”

James Callaghan objected, albeit gently.

“We suspected as much, Prime Minister,” he mollified. “However, we’ve hardly been in any position to do anything about any of that.”

“True.” Edward Heath was not deflected. “We know that Greece is in the hands of some kind of military junta; and we know that the Greeks and probably, the Turks, are stirring up trouble in Cyprus. We know that there have been clashes between Turkish naval forces and the Greeks in the Aegean. We know that sooner or later the Arabs will fall upon Israel like wolves upon the fold...”

“There is nothing we can do about that, Prime Minister,” the Minister of Defence said flatly. “Any of it.”

“I disagree,” the Angry Widow declared. “There is a great deal we can do about a great number of things, but,” she looked to each of the men in the room, “but only when we have ‘healed ourselves’ sufficiently. Sometimes, we worry too much about what we ‘cannot do’ and forget about the things we ‘can do’. For all we know the Americans might be planning to bomb us back to the Stone Age, as that self-important oaf Curtis LeMay proudly claims to have ‘bombed the Ruskies’ last year. Well, we shall see. Personally, I don’t think we have much control over that and our best defence, probably our only defence, is to show not one chink of moral weakness. Prime Minister,” she fixed Edward Heath with a steely blue-eyed stare that would have made a lesser man flinch, “I share one hundred percent your *vision* of a return to business as *normal*.” She sighed. “As soon as possible.”

The Prime Minister nodded ponderously.

“A few days ago I alienated much of my own Party, who now view me as a dictator of the ilk of Franco or Salazar,” he wryly reminded his newly appointed Home Secretary.

Margaret Thatcher frowned.

“Last week you placed the country on a *proper* war footing to deal with the provocations of the Americans, the fallout from the attack on Balmoral and the critical situation developing in the Mediterranean, Prime Minister,”

the Angry Widow rejoined, every cobweb of weariness blown asunder. “If we survive the next few days and weeks there will be ample time to make the case to the British people that you did the *right thing*. The only thing that the British people will never forgive us for doing is failing to stand up against former ‘friends’ who would see their children starve, and new enemies who would exploit our current, apparent weakness to destroy what remains of *our* power and influence in the World.”

“Nevertheless,” Edward Heath replied, “I believe that we must be *talking* about the future to our people *now*. It may be that there will never be a ‘right time’ to begin the national debate about reconstruction and *restitution*. It is our responsibility to ensure that the legacy we leave those who come after us is one of hope, not despair.”

Margaret Thatcher heard the fatalism underlying the Prime Minister’s statement of political faith; as if Ted Heath had already understood that he would never see the better times of which he so clearly dreamed. In that moment it was as if he knew another fate awaited him and he was resigned to it. His calm was the calm of a man who was at peace with himself and because of it, he was fearless in ways he could never have been at any time in his previous life. Before the October War she had regarded her present Party leader as a starchy, old-fashioned sort of man a little too hidebound by tradition and by a rigid sense of the right and wrong way of getting things done. He had seemed such a perfect pillar of the old hierarchy, utterly at home in the rather fuddy-duddy Conservative Party she had had to fight so hard to be accepted within, precisely because it was populated with men exactly like him. She had been wrong about Ted Heath; he was not a throwback to that halcyon, mythical English past for which most Conservative voters yearned, he was a man with a much deeper vision for his people. He might have been born for this moment in history. Perhaps, he sensed it and knew that like a moth drawn to the light his destiny was to emerge brilliantly from his chrysalis, open his wings and to fly towards his destiny in the certain knowledge that it would consume him in the blink of an eye. Whatever fate awaited him he was reconciled to it and uncomplaining because he knew his duty, and he would rather die than be seen to have failed to have done that duty.

She stared at Edward Heath. The last thirteen months had rushed by at a nightmare rush; every day she had learned a hundred new lessons, discovered

questions she had never asked in her old, suburban, insular political life. She had entered politics to change things, to get things done without ever really understanding either objective. It was as if her new life, her second life, had only begun on that dreadful morning after the last fireball had mushroomed over London. She had become a person she probably would not have recognised had she met her new self in the old World. Yes, she had retained many of her hard edges – that was a flaw she had constantly fought to rectify with little success – but she had mellowed in other ways, recognising the complexities of the real World in the same way she had come to grips with the intricacies of industrial chemistry and the convoluted majesty of the law. The grocer's daughter from Grantham in Lincolnshire would – had she noticed it at all – have scoffed at the poignancy of Edward Heath's quietly spoken statement of *faith* in a better future. However, that grocer's daughter had become the Angry Widow in the last year; and now she had accidentally glimpsed a vision to sustain her in the years to come.

The Prime Minister met her gaze briefly. She nodded, tight-lipped and they knew they understood each other perfectly in that moment even if in the future they might never again.

There was a knock at the door.

A youthful naval officer entered and handed the Prime Minister a folded note, before departing without uttering a word.

Edward Heath read for a moment.

“Portuguese warships and an ocean-going tug have rendezvoused with HMS Plymouth and HMS Talavera. The port authorities in Oporto have put all dockyard facilities at our disposal and have alerted every hospital in northern Portugal to be ready to receive casualties...”

The Prime Minister looked up.

“It seems that in the person of António de Oliveira Salazar,” he sighed, “the last of the old dictators, we have finally found a friend in Europe who is prepared to do more than talk about ‘friendship’.”

The crisis regimes in Scandinavia had mooted discussions about some kind of loose ‘mutual co-operation’ pact but this had come to nothing. The administrations running several of the Swiss cantons had radioed and sent emissaries across the dead zones of Germany offering ‘mutual defence pacts’ in exchange for food and weapons. All those *contacts* had hung in the air, and one by one, withered on the vine for want of succour. The UKIEA had

too many problems of its own to be distracted with *diplomacy*; in retrospect that had been a mistake, one of many mistakes.

“Salazar isn’t Franco,” Margaret Thatcher announced.

“Next best thing!” James Callaghan muttered.

Edward Heath looked up.

“Franco murders and imprisons his enemies; until recently António de Oliveira Salazar only ostracised and ridiculed them, much as we’ve been obliged to do, Jim.”

The leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party raised his hands, not in surrender, rather to signify he did not have the energy to debate the point further. A friend in need was a friend indeed, they would worry about their moral qualms another day.

Chapter 14

Monday 9th December 1963

The White House Situation Room, Washington DC

“The Brits have gun camera footage of the shooting down of all four 100th Bomb Group B-52s,” John McCone, the Director of the CIA reported tersely. Notwithstanding that each of the participants in the briefing had grabbed a few hours – albeit disturbed, restless – sleep the previous night, there was greyness in every man’s face that acknowledged the crisis was deepening with each passing minute. “They’ve also commenced a forensic examination of the crash site on Gozo. Thus far, they’ve recovered the bodies of four missing crew members from the sea. Third party agencies report that they have either six or seven or eight B-52 crew men in custody on Malta. They’ve also got their hands on three Italians who ejected during the raid.”

John Fitzgerald Kennedy drained his coffee mug. No sooner had he placed it on the table, leaving a dark ring on the top copy of the heap of glossy monochrome U2 surveillance pictures strewn across the table, than an aide stepped forward and refilled it. The thirty-fifth President of the United States of America asked himself why he felt so calm when clearly most of his closest associates were on the verge of shitting their pants...

“You said the Brits intercepted our spy plane?” He asked calmly, not betraying how stunned he was to learn that one of *his* Cabinet members had been dumb enough to risk *another* flash point provocation in the current climate of panic.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle ‘Bus’ Wheeler gave his colleagues in the room the opportunity to answer before reluctantly, assuming responsibility.

“An RAF unarmed high-altitude Canberra reconnaissance aircraft attempted to climb to within visual identification range of our U2 sortie over the Maltese Archipelago and subsequently tracked it back to the general vicinity of its base in northern Italy, Mr President. Over Genoa Regia Aeronautica interceptors attempted to engage the Canberra but it was flying

too high. Permission was sought to vector two F-104 Starfighters onto the bogey but the C-in-C US Forces in Italy ordered the ready fighters to land.” The General had brought copious notes, which he now referred to before, with a sigh, he continued. “The Hermes Battle Group CAP successfully engaged the second U2 sortie over elements of the British force blockading the Straits of Gibraltar. Two of Hermes’s Sea Vixens, climbing several thousand feet above their previously known service ceiling launched four air-to-air missiles – Sidewinders we must have supplied before the war - at our aircraft which we believe to have been operating at an altitude of between fifty-four and fifty-seven thousand feet, rather than the sixty thousand plus feet specified in the mission brief...”

“The British shot down one of our most technologically advanced spy planes because it wasn’t flying at the correct mission height?” The President asked coolly.

“One theory is that the aircraft might have been experiencing technical difficulties, sir. Normally, if this was the case the mission would have been aborted. However, it was believed that the British had expended the last of their Sidewinders in the previous day’s action against the Spanish Air Force, sir,” General Wheeler continued stiffly. “This was an assumption consistent with the Hermes Battle Group standing over a hundred miles out to sea...”

Jack Kennedy had seen enough the workings of the ‘military mind’ in the 1945 war in the Pacific, to know that the guiding principle in all military hierarchies was that practically every senior officer he had ever met had been promoted several ranks beyond his competence. General Curtis LeMay was a classic example; a brilliant, press on bomber commander with a drive for organisation who was an accident waiting to happen at any rank above full Colonel. Right now in the middle of the biggest international crisis since the October War ‘the General’ was presently conducting an unplanned tour of inspection of Strategic Air Command bases in the mid-west; and he was not taking calls!

Not even his Commander-in-Chief’s calls!

“I thought the Central Intelligence Agency owned the U2 fleet?” The President asked John McCone.

“Several aircraft are nominally on call for Department of Defence missions,” the wealthy Republican industrialist who had been brought in to curb the excesses of the CIA replied, his tone carefully neutral.

“How many?”

“Four. Three of which are usually at twenty-four hours or less, notice to operate. My office wasn’t notified that two of the aircraft had been transferred to northern Italy for operations in the European Theatre.”

The President did not believe – he did not want to believe – that the CIA had lost track of several of its most prized assets. He re-fixed his attention on the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee.

“So, what’s the story when the Brits hand over the gun camera movies to Pathe, RKO, NBC, ABC and the BBC, General?”

To his credit the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not flinch.

“I serve at the President’s pleasure, sir. After this meeting I will submit my resignation to you.”

Bobby Kennedy, sitting between an iron-faced Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, and an ashen, visibly shaken Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, fidgeted and eventually blurted: “Why hasn’t that maniac LeMay been arrested yet?”

Jack Kennedy looked to his younger brother. He sometimes envied Bobby his optimism; likewise, there were times he despaired of his lack of common sense. The only thing you never, ever did in the military was give an order you absolutely knew was not going to be obeyed.

The President flicked a glance at General Wheeler.

“You tell the Attorney General, *Mister* Chairman,” he invited. In later years many biographers would cite JFK’s calmness in that crucial moment as a classic example of ‘grace under pressure’.

Actually, his was the calm of a man who was without hope and who was patiently waiting for; either, something else to go wrong, or for something to ‘turn up’ and save him from the *fine mess* he was in. What others took as ‘grace under pressure’, was simply the outward emotional manifestation of a man who had discovered he was in a deep dark hole and had belatedly concluded that now would be as good a time as any to stop digging.

“My intelligence is that General Lemay is travelling with a large entourage,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained.

“So what?” Bobby Kennedy snapped irritably.

“General LeMay is ‘inspecting’ bases commanded by former subordinates and trusted associates, sir,” General Wheeler went on. “Since all the bases on his itinerary are SAC bases each has a substantial garrison

and up to a hundred nuclear warheads in its bomb dump.”

“Oh, shit...”

Jack Kennedy drank his coffee.

Was LeMay crazy enough to go for a full scale military coup? The problem was not so much mounting a coup as keeping the lid on the CIA malcontents and fifth columnists currently running amok in the Mediterranean, and of course, in the British Isles...

He stared at the big photograph directly in front of him on the table. Somebody had scrawled a white notation *Manoel Island FAB after action print 02/63/missionBZ2* across the bottom of the image. Thirty seconds after a three ton camera guided earthquake bomb had demolished the western side of the old fortifications, an experimental thermobaric fuel-air device had exploded on the left hand side of what looked like it might once have been a parade ground. Nobody above ground or inside HMS Phoenicia – the official Headquarters of the British Military Governor of the Maltese Archipelago – could possibly have survived that second bomb. It was murder pure and simple and the likely architect of this particular *crime against humanity* was presently conducting a victory tour around his Mid-Western fiefdoms.

“Okay,” the President said again, his voice developing a sudden cutting edge that snapped every eye up from the surface of the table to find his face. “Okay. At my request the Vice President is consulting Chief Justice Earl Warren with a view to granting him an unfettered hand to investigate the causes, the conduct and the aftermath of the October War. If he accepts this great national task he will have unrestricted access to all documents and will be able to subpoena under penalty of criminal law any member of this Administration or any other person he deems it necessary to interview. His report, whenever *he* deems it complete, will be released in full to the American people, and thus to the wider World.”

“Mr, President,” Dean Rusk blurted, his customary urbanity shredded, “is that...”

“Wise? No. But it is the right thing to do, Dean.”

Robert McNamara was scratching his chin.

“There will be serious national security ramifications, Mister President.”

“I don’t care.” He turned to his brother. “Bobby, tell the networks I will be making a State of the Union Address from the Oval Office at eight o’clock tonight.” He half-smiled. “This day.”

Silence.

“That’s less than eleven hours from now, Jack. There’s no way they can set things up that fast...”

“Tell them if they aren’t ready they’ll miss the scoop of the year and have to read all about it in the *Washington Times*.”

The Attorney General hesitated for one, two, three seconds. Then he was on his feet running for the door already shouting to his aides waiting in the corridor outside the Situation Room to follow him.

“Mr President,” Robert McNamara asked, blinking through the lenses of his steel-rimmed glasses with the air of a man who was vexed by the suspicion that that he might have just missed something important. “Have you thought this thing through? I found at Ford that it didn’t pay to be, well, impulsive, in moments of high tension...”

“Bob,” Jack Kennedy drawled, his anxiety draining from his body like water swirling down a storm drain after a sudden summer downpour, “I’ve been thinking about this ever since that night thirteen months ago. Maybe, the American people will skin us alive but at least we’ll have taken the first small step towards atoning for what we did.”

The Secretary of Defence was minded to pursue this unlikely thread of thought but he was interrupted by Dean Rusk, who had recovered a little of his poise now that he knew their fates were sealed.

“LeMay’s people will hear about this the moment Bobby puts through the first calls to the networks, Mister President,” the Secretary of State objected.

General Earle Wheeler had just picked up the handset of the ready phone that was never far from his elbow. He met his President’s eye unwaveringly.

“There will be soldiers guarding the perimeter of the White House within half-an-hour, sir,” he said grimly. From his tone what he meant to say was ‘there will be soldiers, tanks, field artillery and every fit man, or woman, from the Pentagon who can bear arms guarding the perimeter of the White House in a lot less than half-an-hour!’

The Head of the President’s Secret Service detachment had entered the Situation Room.

“I am advised that we have a *situation*, sir?”

Jack Kennedy chuckled.

He hoped he was wrong but it seemed to him that since Curtis Lemay

was – by his own design – dragging around the boondocks half a continent away, it was unlikely he was ready to move yet. Of course, if he was wrong then he would most likely be dead sooner rather than later. Oddly, he did not think for a minute that the man who had launched Armageddon actually planned to drive up Pennsylvania Avenue standing on the top of a tank. The man was not capable of thinking through the logic of his actions, any of them. No, he had engineered – cack-handedly, obviously with a collection of misfits and old buddies – a different kind of coup. He had set out to sow confusion, to create a second World crisis and was waiting to see how the chips fell confident that the American people would surely acclaim him their new Emperor. Douglas MacArthur had had a mind like LeMay's – explaining why the two men had detested each other so fiercely – and had it not been for Harry Truman's intervention MacArthur would, sooner or later, have started a nuclear war, too.

When Curtis Lemay heard about the unplanned State of the Union Address he would almost certainly think his plan was about to come to fruition.

He might even think he had already won.

Chapter 15

Monday 9th December 1963
Naval Dockyard, Senglea, Malta

Samuel Calleja blinked into the violent dazzle of the arc lights illuminating the wreckage in Dock No 1. He placed his hands on his hips, gagged on a yawn and shook his head. HMS Torquay lay on her side in the now drained dock. Pumping had only just started when the bomb, either a five hundred or a thousand-pounder had exploded between the wall and the frigate's starboard side next to her engine room spaces inflicting catastrophic structural damage. Detonating so close alongside the dock wall the destructive power of the bomb had been multiplied several times by exactly the same kind of hydro-dynamic compressive forces that Barnes Wallis had exploited to design a bomb to knock down the great dams of the Ruhr Valley in 1943. Except, in this instance, those effects had been at play not on several hundred thousand tons of solid brick and concrete but against the thin side plating of an unarmoured hull. The blast had blown in a twenty foot long section of hull from the level of the main deck to the vessel's keel and probably broken HMS Torquay's back. The ship had capsized within seconds and over fifty men – some thirty naval personnel and over twenty mostly native Maltese dockyard workers had been trapped in the wreck. Thus far only eleven bodies had been cut out of the hulk although now that the dock had been belatedly drained – a second bomb which had exploded in French Creek had killed two men in the pump house and severed most of the power cables to the electric motors working the pumps – they had been able to start a compartment by compartment search. Realistically, it was a search for more bodies; over forty-eight hours after the disaster there was no realistic hope of finding anybody else alive.

"I thought I'd find you here, son," said the familiar voice as a hand patted his back.

Sam Calleja half-turned and gave his father a wintery smile.

"This would never have happened if the British had left us in peace after the war," he said sourly.

“Which war?” The older man inquired wryly. There was no member of his family who had been more vociferously pro-British before the October War than Sam. He attributed the remark to tiredness. “The Crimean War, the Great War...”

His eldest son shook his head as his lips became a thin white line across his grime-smeared face.

“Joe and your sister have gone back to Mdina now,” his father told him. “The British have asked Dottoressa Seiffert to set up an emergency hospital at Fort Pembroke, so Marija went back to Mdina to collect a few things.”

The nightmare of the attack was slowly fading now.

The bombs had exploded in and around HMS Agincourt moored in Sliema Creek less than three hundred yards away from where Peter Calleja, his wife and daughter had been drinking coffee and enjoying the mild dusk. Dozens of people had been walking on the sea front. He had heard the approaching scream of jet engines, seen the flash of the first detonation and bundled his wife and daughter to the ground, desperately attempted to shelter them from the bullet and shrapnel-filled air. He had been the most surprised and the most relieved man on Earth when afterwards he had realised that none of them had received so much as a scratch. Nearby, men and women, and a child, a girl of perhaps four or five, lay or sat on the pavement, bleeding, too shocked or too badly injured to move. Marija had been a revelation. She had gone first to the girl child, established she was splashed with blood and traumatised but otherwise unharmed. Peter’s wife had comforted the child while her daughter went among the dead and the wounded, calling for help, directing dazed passersby to staunch wounds and to help her to move casualties under cover. And then the big bombs had landed within the ancient ramparts of Fort Manoel with ear-splitting concussions and smoke, dust and the screams of the dead and the dying had seemed to drift across the oil-fouled waters of Sliema Creek like a malignant miasma. It had been nearly two hours before an Army doctor with a small team of orderlies arrived on the waterfront. Peter Calleja had no idea how many lives his daughter had saved by then. Yesterday morning his wife had burned Marija’s blood-stained dress; partly because the garment was ruined forever, but mostly to try and expunge the horrible memories of the sights and sounds they had witnessed the previous evening.

Peter Calleja had good reason to be proud of his children. He was a

lucky man and every morning he reminded himself of the fact. He remembered the day Samuel; his first born had followed him into the dockyards as if it was yesterday. Until Friday evening when Marija had woven her magical spell and created a pool of order out of a scene of utter chaos and stupefying suffering he had honestly believed nothing could, or would equal his pride of that day. Now Sam was a foreman under-manager; in ten years he would be doing his job as an Assistant Dockyard Supervisor. Like father like son, the one following the other into the family business.

Not that the old Naval Dockyards straggling around the creeks of the Grand Harbour were anybody's 'family business' these days. In 1959 the Royal Navy had leased them to a firm registered in Monmouthshire, South Wales called Bailey (Malta) Limited, which in the period leading up the October War had managed the docks like feudal absentee landlords. In those days the British had been stepping aside, gently winding down towards granting Malta independence and the Royal Navy had seemed happy to allow the old Admiralty yards to slowly descend into a kind of benevolent anarchy ahead of Maltese independence, tentatively scheduled for sometime in mid-to late 1964. Everything had changed in the last year and the docks had been re-nationalised under direct Admiralty control. There had been talk of prosecuting several of the former directors of Bailey (Malta) Limited for financial irregularities discovered by Royal Navy auditors but nothing had, as yet, come of those rumours.

Peter Calleja had had very mixed feelings about little Malta trying to go it alone in the World; the chaos in the dockyards had seemed to him like an ill portent of what was likely to follow in the first years of independence and he had not looked forward to the prospect. He yawned, ran a hand through his thinning dark hair.

Peter Calleja looked at his thirty-one year old son, barely able to contain his paternal pride. Sam had been a troubled, solitary child with nightmares about the 1945 war but he had grown into a fine man. Sam was the spitting image of him when he was the same age, sparsely built and tall, dedicated to his career and his family although his mother would only be happy when Sam and his wife, Rosa, a beautiful girl from an old Maltese family a year or so younger than Marija, finally produced their first child.

Peter and his wife were beginning to despair of ever holding their first grandchild in their arms. Especially, since Joe did not seem to be the

marrying kind, or at least if he was he was not in any hurry, and Marija, well, Marija might never bear a child...

That thought deeply pained her parents; although not a day passed when they did not thank merciful God for the miracle of her life. They had so nearly lost her all those years ago and later having to watch her imprisoned in a hospital cot, unable to walk had been the cruellest of tortures. To see Marija now, so young and beautiful, so full of vitality and living her life to the full was answer enough for their years of prayer.

To witness Sam becoming a man to be reckoned with in the dockyards, well respected, made the trials of recent times bearable. He just wished Sam and Marija had not fallen out. What did it matter if Sam's new wife had airs and graces? Why did Marija have to flaunt her *political* activities in front of her brother when she knew, full well, that Sam had never shown the remotest interest in any of that stuff?

"Is it true?" The younger man asked.

"About Marija meeting the new Admiral?"

"Yes," there was a strange hoarseness in Sam Calleja's throat which his father put down to the smoke and dust which still hung around the docks two days after the attack.

"You know that the new Admiral is the father of Peter Christopher, Marija's..."

"Her *pen friend*, yes."

Peter Calleja gave his son a sharp look, stung by the bitterness of his retort.

"What's got into you tonight, Sam?"

The younger man waved at the wreck of the frigate in the dry dock.

"I lost a lot of good men in *that*," he ground out between virtually clenched teeth. "And for what?"

Peter Calleja did not know the answer to that so he said nothing for about a minute as the two men eyed the scene. There were surveyors climbing about, sometimes disappearing under the ship where she rested on grounding blocks, many of which had penetrated or warped her plates when she rolled over. A hundred feet away HMS Torquay's lattice foremast lay across the quay, broken, bent. It was a surreal sight.

"The last time I saw something like this was back in the forty-five war," the father said, eventually, to his son. "HMS Kingston was in dock. She had

got too close to a couple of fifteen inch shells from an Italian battleship. Anyway, there was a big raid and when we came up out of the shelters, there she was, lying on her side, just like this. She was a constructive total loss in the end although there was a lot of pressure to patch her up. Afterwards we stripped her down to a bare hull, plugged her holes and moored her out of the way while we got on with the war. Later she was towed north and scuttled in St Paul's Bay."

"I thought Joe was supposed to be under some kind of curfew?" Samuel queried, ignoring what he had just heard.

"Er, yes and no. I only know what your mother told me after she spoke to Dr Seiffert. You know how your mother tends to gabble when she talks about the La Dottoressa Seiffert but from what I can gather, Dr Seiffert 'squared things away' with Admiral Christopher."

Sam Calleja grunted.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, "I'm tired." He nodded at the frigate lying wrecked on its side in the dry dock. "A couple of the guys who are still missing joined the yard when I did."

His father planted a hand on his arm.

Peter Calleja was of the 'war generation' who had gone through the bombing and the siege of 1940 to 1943. He had seen his idyllic island home scarred with rubble, stood and wept by more gravesides than he cared to recollect and humbly watched the sinking, wallowing remnants of the life-giving convoys struggling into the Grand Harbour. With every new convoy more of the destroyers and cruisers the Senglea Yards had patched up would be missing. The horror of fighting monthly battles just to keep the people of Malta from starving was written in the faces of the men of the warships who fought the convoys through. His son had been only eight when the Italians, and soon afterwards, the Germans began to bomb Malta. There had been no hunger in the beginning, that only came later when convoy after convoy of vital supplies; food, fuel and ammunition, was decimated by dive bombers, U-boats, torpedo boats and mines lying in wait in the narrows between Sicily and Tunisia. There was nowhere for the convoys to hide on the wine-dark Mediterranean seas and the waters around the Maltese Archipelago had become a graveyard for the Royal Navy. His son had grown into adolescence knowing fear and hunger; their family home in Birgu – Vittoriosa to the English – had been destroyed, Marija nearly killed, crippled. Those were the

worst of times. They said Malta had been the most heavily bombed place on Earth in 1941 and 1942. Every day he had awakened wondering if this would be the day of the invasion, the day when German parachutists fell from the sky like a dark, malevolent swarm of vultures, and Italian soldiers poured out of ships onto the quays of the Grand Harbour. It had been bad for the adults; for the children those must have been years of unimaginable terror. He had always understood – better somehow than his dear wife seemed capable – how hard that time had been for his eldest son. If his son had been a little older, or a little younger, perhaps he would have shrugged off the memories of the things he seen, heard, and lived. But the war had caught Samuel at that cruel cusp between true childhood and the possibility of manhood; at that moment when his mind was at its most vulnerable and his personality – the man that he might become – was emerging from the innocence of his youth. Other boys of a less sensitive disposition, who were more confident in their own physicality, or just that little bit farther down the road to growing up had shrugged off the horrors of the siege; but Samuel had been the prisoner of those days ever since and probably always would be. Peter understood this as only a loving father could understand it; the tragedy was that Sam's siblings never would. Such was one of the true evils of war.

"I'm going to put my head down for a couple of hours in my office," he told his son. "There's no point trying to get home at this time of night."

"No," the younger man agreed, grimacing. Even if the buses ran at this time of day – which they had not for several months due to fuel shortages – a lot of the roads were still blocked. Besides, he did not want to have to answer his wife's questions. Whatever hour of the day or night he got home to their company house in Kalkara, Rosa would bombard him with demands to know everything about the nightmare of the last few days. At first he had found her attentiveness, and the melodic soprano of her voice comforting, reassuring but lately she got on his nerves and it was hard to conceal his true feelings. He had needed a 'good marriage' and Rosa, the daughter of an old and respected Maltese family embedded in the fabric of the island and its nationalist politics, had seemed too good to be true. In other circumstances they might easily have been happy. He felt a little guilty denying Rosa the bambinos she so longed to bear him; otherwise, he was beyond regret. "Maybe I'll try to have a nap in my office later. There's too much to do here."

Peter Calleja, thinking he saw a suggestion of wry amusement in his son's hooded gaze felt a renewed paternal connection. Ever since the October War he had been aware of a distance between him and Sam, as if his son had retreated into his shell, shut out the world. Like fathers everywhere and in all times, he seized on any small sign that the Samuel he loved and for whose existence he had always thanked merciful God, still lived behind the mask of worry and exhaustion that sometimes afflicted all men.

"You do that. If I learned anything in the bad old days it is that a man must get his sleep because..."

His son grinned involuntarily.

"Because something worse is always likely to happen tomorrow," he said grimly, repeating his father's familiar mantra.

"You can rely on it!" Peter Calleja chuckled.

Shortly afterwards father and son parted; Sam Calleja to clamber down into the dock to check the progress of the surveyors, Peter Calleja to his office where he planned to spread a blanket on the floor and to rest his aching head. Tomorrow was a new day and unlike his son, at his age he needed several hours sleep a night if he was to be able to function again in the morning.

The younger man walked into the shadows beneath the bow of HMS Torquay. Down in the dock it was as if the whole World was upside down, inverted, topsy turvy like something out of a darkling fairy tale.

Sam Calleja paused in the blackness, reached up and ran his hand along the clammy cold steel of the broken frigate's plates, remembering the dead still trapped in the ship's hull. The pain of dislocation, of not belonging, of forever feeling alien stabbed his soul anew. His father knew nothing; he lived his life like a sleepwalker. Things might have been different but then the war had come that October night when the Yanks and their British lackeys had set fire to half the World and after that, hope and reason had died. In this brave new poisoned World the very act of procreation had become a lottery, Russian roulette; the very air he breathed was blighted yet people like his sainted sister, the *Heroine of Birgu*, carried on as if everything was normal. The last time he and Marija had spoken they had quarrelled, she had told him that 'people are still people', and that 'we must do what we can', and ludicrously, abjured him that 'to believe in a loving God is to believe in a future in which hope will surely be rewarded'. Of course, he had

provoked her into all that nonsense. He and Marija were chalk and cheese; they had always fought like alley cats...

The wreck looming over his head creaked ominously and something fell noisily onto a steel bulkhead deep in the hulk. Sam Calleja wondered idly if the ship was about to break in two and if the bow would fall on him. He made no attempt to run, he simply waited.

If he died tonight it did not really matter.

Nothing really mattered any more.

Chapter 16

Monday 9th December 1963

HMS Hermes, 107 miles WNW of Cape Trafalgar, North Atlantic

The sky was just beginning to lighten, not yet quite dawn as the small party gathered to wait in the cold, clammy compartment at the base of the carrier's island bridge superstructure looking through the open hatch onto the grey, pitching deck.

"It seems the Portuguese are our new best friends," the young Fleet Air Arm lieutenant explained cheerfully as the delay lengthened. "As I understand it the Captain was asked to get you two to England as soon as possible and what with the Portuguese suddenly opening their air space to us," he shrugged, "it gives us the opportunity to send you to Lisbon – along with dispatches and several of the other wounded – in a Wessex."

Clara Pullman gazed at the angry white-horses chasing from the crests of the huge waves the carrier was smashing into every few seconds.

"We'll bring the stretcher cases up on the centreline lift," the youngster went on. "Cart the poor fellows straight onto the aircraft then we'll wheel you two out into the rain and you'll be on your way."

"Lieutenant," Arkady Pavlovich Rykov asked, "what happened last night?"

"Oh, you mean all the high speed turns and the whizz bangs?"

"Yes," the former KGB Colonel confirmed patiently. He was swathed in several layers of clothing against the cold and the wet and a crewman was strapping an inflatable lifejacket bib around his brutally beaten torso. His head was bare and the bruising on his face was subsiding a little. Now that the swelling was reduced his features looked less lopsided and his swollen lips no longer slurred his words.

"We intercepted a couple of merchantmen; a big tanker with a refrigerator ship in company. They were bound for Genoa so we impounded them. Or rather, we tried to impound them. The refrigerator ship was torpedoed."

"Torpedoed!" Clara exclaimed.

“We think Hermes was the target but the SS Sevonía got in the way. The submarine must have fired a spread of five or six torpedoes, most likely at extreme range and it was just unlucky the Sevonía happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Obviously, as soon as the ball went up the Hermes got her skates on and the escorts got stuck into her would be assailant!”

“So the groups of three explosions we heard later were depth charges?” The Russian checked, nodding.

“Yes, anti-submarine mortars. Limbos,” the younger man confirmed enthusiastically. “HMS Duncan thinks she got the blighter with the first salvo but the Venerable followed up afterwards, just to be sure. There was a fairly big oil slick so we’re pretty confident the sub was a Spanish diesel-electric boat.”

“What happened to the SS Sevonía?” Clara inquired. Out on the wet, windswept flight deck she saw two stretchers being carried towards the big helicopter which had moved into the periphery of her vision.

“You’d have thought she would have gone down like a stone, wouldn’t you?” The younger man replied his expression perplexed. “Great big hole in her side like that! The torpedo hit her plumb on the waterline, she must have been digging her stem into a big swell I suppose for it to have clocked her that high. So, there’s a great big hole in her side but not a huge amount of underwater damage. The Rhyl is escorting her to Lisbon. You’ll fly over the two ships in a few minutes; they can’t have gone far yet.”

Clara heard the matter of fact, whatever will be will be fatalism in the young man’s voice. She guessed he was in his early twenties and already a veteran of this callous new age.

“What about the other merchant ship?” She asked.

“The tanker? We put a prize crew onboard and sent her to England.”

“Oh.”

“Right! If you’d come with me please!” The youthful lieutenant took Clara’s arm and led her out into the wind and the spray while two burly ratings half-carried her companion to the waiting Westland Wessex. The helicopter rocked and swayed as the passengers were hurriedly arranged in the cargo cabin. There were four stretcher cases and a sickbay attendant, with Clara and Rykov planted in the only free corner.

The big doors clanged shut and the machine seemed like it was about to

shake itself to pieces as it clawed into the air; wobbling, fish-tailing it dragged itself away from the carrier. The rain beat angrily at the sweaty aluminium skin of the Wessex.

Clara was glad of the arm Arkady Rykov cautiously extended about her shoulders and she carefully, mindful at all times of his injuries, melded against him. The last few days had become a blur of fear, relief, horror and incomprehension. The past year had been exciting, exhilarating and well, terrifying but she had probably never been so *alive* and now, she was a little afraid that was all over. Assuming the helicopter they were riding in did not crash into the sea in the storm; what awaited her and Arkady back in England? *They* had half-beaten him to death in Gibraltar; were *they* going to finish the job as soon as *they* got home? And what was it really like in England? One heard so many awful things. She could not begin to picture London where she had lived for many years in ruins. They said there had been famine, plagues last winter and that many of the old and the very young had not lived through the snow and ice of that ‘nuclear’ season...

“Ma’am?” The Wessex’s load master was crouching beside her. “They said you are a nurse?”

Clara did not try to explain that she had not been a nurse for years; in the circumstances one did not split hairs.

“Yes,” she yelled above the roar of the rotors and the thunder of the rain-heavy slip stream.

“One of the stretcher cases is in a bad way, can you help?”

Clara was already getting up before she nodded, brusquely.

“Yes, of course.”

The flight was much longer than she had expected. It seemed to go on, and on, and on, the buffeting and the shaking, and the racket of the engine over their heads was deafening. She could not imagine how nightmarish it must have been for the four badly injured, sedated men on the stretchers. She stroked the face of the badly burned boy, waiting as long as possible before injecting another ampoule of morphine into the kid. He was a little more peaceful after that and his breathing, and pulse, which she checked from minute to minute steadier.

The Wessex outran the leading edge of the storm front as it crossed the coast; and watery grey sunshine filtered, now and then, into the cargo bay as the helicopter banked and turned, searching for the nominated landing

ground.

There were stretcher bearers waiting as the Wessex bumped down, rolled a few feet and halted, rattling loudly. The load master flung open the door and blustery, drizzle-laden air refreshed the oily, humid cabin. Clara jumped onto solid ground, swayed for a moment before she regained her balance and started to supervise the unloading of the four badly injured seamen.

Arkady Pavlovich Rykov, demonstrating stoic Russian phlegm attempted to disembark unaided.

The reception committee – a mixture of uniformed men and white-coated doctors and nurses under the concerned ‘command’ of a diffident middle-aged Air Force officer, pounced on their patient and in a moment, he was laid on a stretcher.

“This man is Colonel Rykov?” The officer inquired solicitously as he and Clara fell into step beside the former KGB man’s litter.

“Yes,” the woman confirmed.

”I have arranged for you both to be transported directly to the British Embassy.” The Portuguese officer raised a hand forestalling the expected protest. “I am to assure you that your, er, friend, will be attended by the Ambassador’s personal physician.”

A tall, distinguished, still handsome man with thinning fair hair stood by the Bentley parked at the edge of the runway that the Wessex had touched down on. Behind the small stretcher party, the helicopter taxied in a whirling of rotors and spray the short distance to where a small fuel bowser awaited its arrival.

Clara had not seen the tall man or the Bentley until the Wessex had moved out of her line of sight. Other than a second man wearing a Homburg sitting behind the wheel of the black car, which had a small diplomatic plate on its rear bumper, there seemed to be no welcoming committee.

When Rykov’s litter was placed on the ground a few yards from the Bentley the tall man approached, smiled pleasantly but wordlessly at Clara, and crouched down beside the injured man.

“Well, well, well,” he said in a voice that was pure Oxbridge and not in any way unfriendly or threatening. “The chaps on the Rock gave you a bit of a hard time, I hear. Dreadfully sorry about that; you know how I hate violence.” He extended his hand, gripped the Russian’s left hand and slowly, patiently helped the invalid to his feet while Clara rushed to support him.

Painfully, Rykov straightened and to Clara's astonishment formed a crooked grin on his battered countenance.

"Presumably," he said, stifling a groan, "your boys back in Gibraltar will have spread the word that they kicked me until they wore out their boots and then they threw me off the highest point of the Rock?"

The tall man - the Russian's head only came up to his chin - smiled a glacial smile.

"My Head of Station on the Rock, Denzil Williams, was incandescent when I told him he *couldn't* toss you off the Rock."

"He and I have *history*," conceded the shorter man philosophically.

"Yes, quite." The tall man, dressed in the sort of expensive suit that one could no longer buy from a real Savile Row tailor, looked to Clara, raising an eyebrow. "Arkady Pavlovich, perhaps it is time you introduced me to your charming companion?"

Drops of lumpy cold rain were falling as the Atlantic storm front they had outrun thirty minutes before in the Wessex roared onshore. The wind plucked at their coats tails, sent the woman's hair flying in streamers.

"I have the honour to present Ms Clara Pullman," the former Soviet KGB Colonel announced. "She has rendered invaluable and selfless service to her country. Without her by my side I could have achieved *nothing*."

Clara lowered her eyes in embarrassment while she made every appearance of trying to sort out what seemed to be so *wrong* about this meeting – or rather, for Arkady Rykov and the tall man, what was obviously a *reunion* – on a windswept airstrip in Portugal. The atmosphere was *wrong*, so *wrong* it was unreal. Her face suddenly reflected her surprise about the respect and solicitude with which she and Arkady had been received, and subsequently treated on HMS Hermes. She had thought there must have been a breakdown of communications and the Royal Navy, as it was with all its guests, was simply being politely hospitable. But in hindsight, it had been more than that. They had been welcomed on board like minor homecoming heroes, VIPs, prodigals returned. And now there was this odd reception, in the one place in Portugal that nobody could possibly overhear what they were saying to each other.

The tall man held out his hand to shake Clara's.

He held her hand a moment longer than necessary, waiting for her to look him in the eye.

“Forgive Arkady’s coyness,” he apologised, the laughter lines around his clear grey eyes quirking. “That’s a Russian trait he’s never quite conquered. In case you were wondering, Arkady and I are old acquaintances.”

Clara recovered her hand and tried to retain her equilibrium as she looked askance at the former KGB man who had been her lover these last few months.

“Clara,” Arkady Pavlovich Rykov declared, “this is the man who has been my *controller* since I first made contact with British Intelligence in 1956. Let me introduce you to Sir Richard White, the Head of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service.”

Clara stared dumbfounded at the Head of MI6.

“Dick,” the tall man said. “Everybody calls me ‘Dick White’.”

Chapter 17

Monday 9th December 1963

HMS Dreadnought, 74 miles WNW of Lisbon, Portugal

“Down one-hundred,” Commander Simon Collingwood said in a completely normal voice which sounded deafening in the ultra quiet control room of the Royal Navy’s first, and for the foreseeable future, only nuclear powered hunter-killer attack submarine. “On the planes only, if you please.”

“Down bubble,” a voice confirmed.

“Belay trimming fore and aft,” Simon Collingwood added, probably unnecessarily but then when you were Captain of one’s nation’s single most valuable military asset, one was expected to drive it with both care and no little unction. “Sound room. Report please.”

“No new contact, sir.”

Collingwood threw a glance in the direction of his bearded, poker-faced Executive Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Max Forton. The younger man shrugged at him as they both ‘worked’ the problem. The ghost contact – sometimes near, sometimes far, sometimes not there at all - might have been a whale; and if they had not been playing cat and mouse with two United States Navy attack boats for most of the last forty-eight hours they would have ignored it. But...

“Water temperature?” Collingwood asked softly.

“Possible inconsistent gradient...”

Perhaps, either Dreadnought or the other boat had crossed through an overly saline cross-section of the water column? Or found a minutely warmer or colder deep ocean current to hide above or beneath?

The Diving Officer was softly calling out the depths.

“Three-three-five feet...”

“Three five-oh feet...”

Again, Captain and Executive Officer exchanged thoughtful looks.

“Level the boat at three-seven-five feet please.”

Forty-eight hours ago, Collingwood had deliberately advertised HMS Dreadnought’s presence by running fast and deep ahead of the US boats;

initially, this had succeeded in driving them some thirty miles north-west and away from the northernmost elements of the Hermes Battle Group. For nearly twelve hours he had hoped they had gone looking for easier prey, ideally to play games with the Ark Royal's anti-submarine screen. However, when they had reappeared they had clearly been acting as a team, executing a series of horribly professional and methodical sweeps, driving Dreadnought ever farther south until now she was patrolling only twenty miles north of the eighty by thirty mile rectangle of ocean in which the Hermes Battle Group was currently operating.

Simon Collingwood's orders were explicit.

...You will avoid contact with surface units of the Enterprise Battle Group but will operate in such a way as to block submarine elements of that force, and if possible other potentially hostile units from approaching the northern flank of the Hermes BG. ROE Protocol 1.2 is in effect...

Under her current 'rules of engagement' Dreadnought was *not* authorised to initiate hostile action against elements of the Enterprise Battle Group but she was permitted to defend herself if threatened or attacked.

"Contact bearing two-six-two."

Then: "Down Doppler."

Dreadnought was levelling out.

"Range to contact four thousand yards..."

Simon Collingwood stopped himself whistling with surprise.

Two nautical miles. That was too close. Worse, this was not the contact they had had before; that had been more distant, very slowly moving north to south east.

"Your opinion please, Number One?" The Captain of HMS Dreadnought inquired nonchalantly of his Executive Officer.

Max Forton's face creased in intense thought.

"I think they're pissing in the wind, sir."

Simon Collingwood chuckled lowly. He was a lean, clean-shaven man of only just average height with dark hair that had been receding for some years. He had been designated as one of three candidates to be Dreadnought's first Executive Officer before the October War had changed everything. It had fallen to him to commission the boat, to build a new crew and take Dreadnought, probably, to war. The US Navy had a score of boats like, and in many cases, more advanced and capable than his command; no

matter, one could only confront what was before one.

“How are we trimmed, Number One?” He asked, considering his next move and the half-a-dozen after it. Underwater hide and seek was like three dimensional chess.

“If we lose steerage way we’ll start rising by the bow, sir.”

“How badly?”

“We’ll hold level for maybe three or four minutes...”

Thereafter entropy would do the rest.

“Zero revs!” Simon Collingwood ordered. “Silence in the boat, if you please.” This latter was a redundant order; Dreadnought had been closed up running silent, mostly running deep for ten hours without a break. A lot of men would not have slept for twenty-four hours. This was not the time to get careless.

Lieutenant-Commander Max Forton tip-toed around the plot and joined his Captain, leaning on the back of his high chair.

“Those jokers aren’t taking this anywhere near as seriously as we are,” he whispered.

“How would they play it if this was for real?”

The younger man by a handful of years scratched his rust-coloured beard.

“I’d go active,” he decided.

“So would I if I was them. But only if I was absolutely certain I’d got a bead on us. They know we’re here. I don’t think they’ve got us on their plots though. So, if I was them I’d be treating it like a peacetime exercise, making sure my log looks good when my Flag Officer crawls all over it in a month’s time.” This sounded reasonable as far as it went; but nothing stopped the hairs on the back of Simon Collingwood’s neck rising as a cold, cold hand clutched for his heart. “Surface contacts?”

“Negative, sir.”

“What is it, sir?” Max Forton asked, frowning.

Simon Collingwood sighed.

Game over!

“Some you win, some you lose, Number One.” He hesitated another moment. “Trim the boat, if you please. Make our revs five-zero. Five degrees left rudder, turn onto three-three-zero degrees. Stand down silent running.”

The crisp orders were repeated and acknowledgements flew around the

control room.

Simon Collingwood waited phlegmatically for the anticipated report.

“Contact astern!” Reported the sound room about a minute later.

“How close is he?” The Captain of HMS Dreadnought asked, already knowing the answer.

“Almost on top of us, sir. Less than five hundred yards.”

“Send by active ping the following: WELL PLAYED SIR STOP PLEASE KEEP SAFE DISTANCE MESSAGE ENDS.

Simon Collingwood cleared his throat.

He looked around the control room.

“Gentlemen, we must not let that happen again. I suspect the ghost contacts we allowed to distract us were sonar buoys dropped by the Enterprise’s aircraft. Subsequently, one of the boats out there made himself visible so that we believed we had a handle on both hostiles while the other one worked around behind us. When we analyse the plot we shall find that the rate of drift of the sonar buoy contacts approximately correlates to known tidal, current and drift records relative to our movements which we *ought* to have factored into the plot. No matter how tired we are we must focus, gentlemen. Our foe,” he could not bring himself to say ‘our enemy’, “has learned from the run around we gave him a week or so ago. We must learn from today’s *exercise*. That is all, resume normal watch keeping stations.”

“Chummy hasn’t replied to our message, sir,” Max Forton remarked.

“No, he won’t.” *Not even when he’s stopped rolling around on his control room deck splitting his sides with mirth.* “The nature of the game has changed, Number One. I shall be in my cabin.”

Once in the claustrophobic solitude of his cabin Simon Collingwood shut the hatch at his back. The Captain’s Cabin on HMS Dreadnought was small and pokey but by far the most luxurious berth on the boat.

The two American submarines would cling onto Dreadnought’s skirts like grim death; if war came his command would already been locked in their sights. He understood the game; they understood the game. It was not personal. It was just the way it was. The second part of his short message had communicated that he understood, as they must as brother submariners that death could come with horrible swiftness in their profession. If they had to do their duty, so be it. In the meantime it was his job to wriggle free of the trap they had sprung with such aplomb. He would take himself to task for

putting his hand in the meat grinder another time; assuming they all lived to tell the tale.

Never forget it is just three dimensional chess.

Always look one move farther ahead than the other fellow...

Simon Collingwood had built his naval career as a technician, one of the new breed of 'experts'. He had been posted to the Dreadnought project primarily to oversee the last year of her construction, the commissioning of her propulsion and electronic systems, and to 'manage' the start up of her nuclear reactor. In the normal run of things, afterwards, he would have stood down as the boat's Executive officer and probably been assigned to a similar role in the construction of Britain's second nuclear submarine, HMS Valiant, which was presently a partially formed steel skeleton near to where Dreadnought had been fitting out on the night of the October War. He had dreamed of commanding one of the new nuclear boats; secretly suspected that this was no more than an idle pipedream. Yes, he had passed the 'Perisher Test', the gruelling course that all would be submarine captains in the Royal Navy had to pass; but he had had no illusions that he was a man born to command one of the Navy's most complicated and inherently dangerous vessels. His progression in the Service had been gradual, and other than in his chosen specialism - electrical and mechanical engineering - he had never stood out from the crowd, and even now he could think of a dozen men better qualified and better temperamentally fitted to command HMS Dreadnought. He was in command of Dreadnought because he was the best technician available to trial and document the raft of new technologies crammed into her pressure hull; he was the Royal Navy's nuclear boat test pilot. That he had had the opportunity to 'test fly' his command in conditions so close to real combat that it made no difference that no torpedoes had yet been launched in anger, was a mere, random quirk of fate. Dreadnought had been exercising in the Western Approaches and the Enterprise Battle Group had steamed over the horizon right into the path of the first Operation Manna convoy. Suddenly machinery trials, sonar calibration exercises and war games with Channel Fleet frigates had become damned nearly the real thing.

The irony of the situation was not lost on the commander of HMS Dreadnought. While he was stalking the most powerful battle group on the seven seas the real hot shots of the Royal Navy's submarine club had been ashore at Plymouth until the last few days. The *real* hot shots were the men

commanding the new Oberon and Porpoise class advanced conventional diesel-electric boats of the 1st Submarine Squadron at Devonport; who had thus far kept well away from the USN's nuclear hunter killers; if war came the less the Americans knew about the modern, ultra-quiet, nimble new boats and their formidable capabilities the better.

In the meantime Commander Simon Collingwood – the Royal Navy's 'reactor starter' - was the one who had found the prize at the bottom of the apple barrel. Albeit that he got to play this game of undersea hide and seek in a submarine that was, in comparison with the O and P class non-nuclear boats, catastrophically *noisy*.

Escaping Dreadnought's two equally *loud* US Navy jailors was going to be problematic; but knowing as much was no excuse for not getting his finger out, pulling himself together and getting his act together!

He checked his watch: he had been brooding some fifteen minutes.

It was high time he got back to work.

Chapter 18

Monday 9th December 1963
Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana

Well over half the B-52s despatched on strike missions on the night of 27th-28th October 1962 had been lost. The 100th Bomb Group had been formed out of the remnants of units decimated during the October War. Reforming the 'Bloody 100th' had been the suggestion of one of General Curtis LeMay's long-time staffers, and in the febrile, jittery aftermath of the war he had seen morale boosting possibilities in the idea. Like any idea to which Curtis LeMay took a shine he had driven it forward with the zeal of an angry bull in a china shop.

Normally based at Arnold Air Force Base at Tullahoma, Tennessee, the seventeen operational B-52s of the 2nd and 3rd Bomb Wings of the 100th Bomb Group had been operating out of Barksdale on a routine two-week training rotation. The Chief of Staff of the US Air Force did not like *his* front line Strategic Air Command crews getting either too set in their ways, or too comfortable in their home bases. Complacency was the greatest enemy and the hardest to combat in peace time.

With the Soviet threat if not eliminated, then eradicated for a generation and no significant extant hostile strategic military threat to the North American continent, Curtis LeMay had been unable to prevent the President and his Congressional lap dogs clawing back a massive so called 'peace dividend' equivalent to over forty percent of the 1961-62 *real* dollar spend on defence. Half of the Navy had gone straight into mothballs, the regular Army had been reduced to a skeleton of less than two hundred thousand men, and the front line war-fighting order of battle of *his* Air Force had been reduced by war losses and Capitol Hill gerrymandering to less than a third of its pre-war roster. He had been forced to scrap or mothball the entire B-47 component of SAC, and to pare down the B-52 force to only 188 aircraft organised between five under strength Bomb Groups. Half of all US Air Force Bases in North America had been decommissioned in the last five months. The idiots in Washington did not have any inkling how much

trouble they were storing up for themselves by prematurely retiring and discarding so many good and true, patriotic Americans. But that was a problem for the future and presently, the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force had a very big, and very immediate problem of his own that neither he, nor anybody else had seen coming and worse, neither he nor anybody else knew what to do about.

Somebody in the Air Force Department in Washington had raised and routed a request for B-52 strikes on Malta and Gibraltar, and *somebody* at the Pentagon had green-lighted the operations order.

Whoever it had been; it *had not been* fifty-seven year old Ohio-born General Curtis Emerson LeMay, Chief of Staff since 1961 of the United States Air Force. Which was a problem because the hardcopy teleprinter operations order running to some forty-seven pages bore the imprimatur of his *personal authentication code*!

“What the fuck is going on here!” He growled at the base commander, whom LeMay had known since the bad old days in Europe. Major-General Phineas ‘Slim’ Babcock had also been with him in India, China and the Pacific, and for most of the last ten years he had been his go to ‘operations guy’ whenever a SAC Air Wing failed to measure up to his exacting standards. LeMay had never seen his old friend so ashen-faced, or so mortified; while Babcock, who had seen the Chief of Staff blow his top too often to be easily impressed, had *never* seen him this coldly angry and this *shaken*. “Where’d this shit come from, Slim?”

Babcock stared at the sheaf of papers the other man was brandishing.

The base commander who owed the handle ‘Slim’ to his long ago West Point days when he had been a ferociously bear-like linebacker. He had been a big man in his youth and over the years he had beefed up more than somewhat so that nowadays his huge frame was threatening to visibly sag beneath the accumulated layers of flesh and muscle.

“Jeez,” he protested. “Don’t you think I didn’t think it was screwiest thing I’d ever seen in my life? I was straight on the horn to the Air Force Department. They said this thing came from the top; the Commander-in-Chief wanted it done and anybody who didn’t like it could resign the Service. Then I talked to your new guy Seedorf...”

“Who the fuck is Seedorf?” General Curtis LeMay exploded, threatening to come across the desk to physically assault Babcock.

“Larry Seedorf. Colonel Larry Seedorf, the guy you brought onto the staff to re-draft the war plans...”

“I don’t know any goddam Colonel Seedorf!” Curtis LeMay did not think his old buddy was lying to him. Why would he? Jesus H. Christ! He and Slim had flown B-24s to Regensburg and most of the worst places on Earth a man could take a heavy bomber in 1943. Slim Babcock would put his hand in the fire if his President asked him. Shit, JFK would not have needed to ask him twice, either! “How many times have you talked to this Seedorf character?”

“Er, twice, sir. Once to confirm the rotation schedule when the two Bomb Group wings were rotated out to Arnold AFB a week ahead of program to test 100th Bomb Group’s readiness to relocate at short notice...”

Curtis LeMay slumped back into his chair.

The orders altering the rotation schedule had not come across his desk *either*.

Or if they had he sure as Hell had not authorised it.

The truly frightening thing about this situation was he had no idea how many people would have had to have been involved in *this* to make it work. Other than that the number would have had to have run into scores; dozens just at the Air Force Department and at the Pentagon, for sure. Granted, some of those involved would have gone along with it rather than make waves, but others had to have known it was a crock of shit. They would have had to be persuaded to sit on their hands; or – as bizarre as it seemed - been genuinely convinced that it was suddenly the policy of the United States Government to mount sneak attacks on its oldest surviving allies. *Jesus, every way he looked at it this thing it just got worse...* A small core of conspirators – traitors – must have spent months planning...

Even then, how the fuck had they got away with it?

Curtis LeMay badly needed to kick something or better, drop a bomb on somebody. The trouble was that neither of those things was going to do any good.

FUBAR!

Fucked Up Beyond All Repair!

Sometimes things were so screwed up it did not do any good shouting; and punching out somebody’s lights did not help either. Neither did starting the witch hunt early. There would be plenty of time for the mother and father

of all witch hunts later.

“What went wrong in the Malta raid?” He asked suddenly, his tone gruffly sour but utterly without bluster.

“We don’t know. The Brits had fighters at altitude when our boys came onto the target. Beyond that, we’ve no idea what happened, sir.”

Curtis LeMay forced himself to take a very deep breath.

Every which way this gets worse!

He had been wading through ever deeper shit ever since he had arrived at Barksdale four hours ago. They would be blaming *him* in DC by now. *Assuming they had not already sent out the lynch mob!*

“Why didn’t the 3rd Bomb Wing press home the attack on Gibraltar?”

“The operations protocol was to abort the mission if the Spanish had failed to suppress the Brits’ carrier based air within a hundred mile radius of the designated IP for the bomb run...”

“Where was the initial point?”

“That would have been at thirty-eight thousand feet five miles north of the centre of Cadiz, sir.”

“Fuck!” The Chief of Staff of the Air Force spat. “My people in DC say the Brits have gun camera footage of their fighters chewing up our birds over Malta! With fucking thirty-millimetre cannons! Our birds!”

“Yes, sir.”

“You better have this place locked down so hard anybody trying to take a leak on the perimeter fence gets his dick shot off or I’ll want to know why, Slim!”

Barksdale AFB had in fact been locked down ever since the first B-52 took off three days ago.

“How’d our birds refuel in flight, Slim?”

“According to the operations order,” Babcock belatedly realised that asking his old friend to read every word of every sheaf of paper he had just liberally distributed on the desk probably was not a good idea. “There were two KC-135s out of Anchorage on the way out; and two pre-positioned KC-135s out of Aviano AFB in Italy on the way back. The mission parameters assumed airspace over Austria, Czechoslovakia and West Germany was *safe...*”

“Safe?” Curtis LeMay glared.

That was when there was a staccato knock at the door.

When this was ignored the banging became almost frantic.

“What?” The Chief of Staff of the Air Force bellowed like an enraged Bison with a Lacota warrior’s arrow sticking in his rump.

Lieutenant-Colonel Harvey Goldsmith, Curtis LeMay’s Communications Officer, stumbled into the room. He was a little dishevelled and he was breathless.

“General Wheeler ordered me to inform you,” the newcomer gasped, “that unless you take,” another gasp, “his call in the next five minutes he will order your arrest for...”

“Aw, shit!” Curtis LeMay groaned. “I don’t believe this!” He got up, shaking his head like a heavyweight picking himself off the canvas wondering where the haymaking left hook had just come from. “Calm down, son,” he said wearily to his Communications Officer. “*Bus* Wheeler ain’t going to do no such thing. Not unless he was suddenly born yesterday and take it from me, that ain’t the case.”

It was several minutes before the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force arrived in the underground Command and Control Centre of Barksdale Air Force Base and raised the violent red scrambler handset to his head.

“If you’ve tracked me down to Louisiana just to tell me that we’ve got a problem, *Bus*,” he drawled laconically, “you ain’t telling me anything I don’t already know.”

General Earle ‘*Bus*’ Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee of the Armed Forces of the United States of America had, it seemed, been biting off and spitting out pieces of his Bakelite phone in Washington.

The public image of Curtis LeMay was of a fearless, fire-eating, cigar-smoking, red-necked martinet who was always the first man over the top, laughing in the face of the enemy. But *Old Iron Pants* LeMay, the man who had been *Bombs Away* LeMay as the commander of one of the first B-24 Groups in England in 1942, *the Demon* to anybody who got on his wrong side, or the *Big Cigar* to his airmen; was not just that man. Curtis LeMay had advanced from a lowly First Lieutenant in 1940 to a Major-General in 1945 commanding the great B-29 fleets that had ravaged the ancient cities of Japan in the last months of World War II. In 1948 he had commanded the United States Air Force in Europe during the Berlin Airlift. Until 1961 he had been the commander of Strategic Air Command for a decade, the primary architect

of the force that had won the October War in hours.

During the Second World War his current political Chief, Robert McNamara, had been a relatively junior officer assigned to the Office of Statistical Control serving in India, China and the Marianas, coincidentally following Curtis LeMay from one command to the next, applying statistical analytical techniques to the operations of the *Big Cigar*'s bombers. LeMay and McNamara were antipathetic characters who had never really seen eye to eye; and not surprisingly the drastic cut backs in the Air Force budget had promoted a widening rift between the two men. When LeMay had found out that McNamara had described him as '*extraordinarily belligerent, many thought brutal*' he had ignored the subsequent caveat, offered freely and generously by the Secretary of Defence that '*he [LeMay] was the finest combat commander of any service I came across in the war*'. In many ways McNamara hugely respected LeMay, not least for his inclination to lead from the front. Curtis LeMay was after all, the man who led the B-24 component of the 1943 bloodbath attack on Schweinfurt and Regensburg. The problem lay in LeMay's opinion, frequently stated - both verbally and in writing - that he believed a pre-emptive nuclear war was in some sense winnable. After the events of the night of 27th-28th October 1962 the two men could never trust each other again.

So when Curtis LeMay waited for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to compose his thoughts, he was asking himself if the repercussions over who exactly was responsible for the almost total FUBAR – as in *fucked up beyond all repair* – completely unfunny comedy of tragic errors they had overseen that night thirteen months ago was finally about to consume the *Big Cigar*.

"The President," Bus Wheeler said slowly, precisely, "is to make an unscheduled State of the Union Address tonight," he forced it out with the ill-grace of a man pulling out his own teeth with a pair of rusty pliers, "in which he will announce that Chief Justice Earl Warren will lead 'a Commission' into *the causes, conduct and the aftermath* of last year's war."

Curtis LeMay digested the news unhurriedly, saying nothing.

"He's also going to come clean about the B-52s the Brits shot down over Malta, Curtis."

That was not so good.

"When does that get to be a good idea, Bus?" The Chief of Staff of the

United States Air Force objected. “I didn’t order that. Neither did any of my people. Yeah, sure the mission orders and protocols have got my signature and command codes on them but that’s just standard operating procedure. It’s like blaming George Washington for embezzlement just because his face on a greenback!”

There was a hissing silence on the line.

“*They* think you’re behind that thing that happened in Scotland with the Queen of England, or whatever. That,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was close to hyperventilating in disbelief: “and that USAF personnel in Spain and Italy have been yanking chains, giving Franco and those shitheads in Italy the heads up that we – the United States of America – will back them up if they challenge the Brits.”

“You’re shitting me, Bus!”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, it’s what *they* actually believe in the White House.”

“I’m out here trying to get a handle on this thing with the 100th Bomb Group...”

“Where have you been the last few days, Curtis?”

The Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force was momentarily struck dumb by the tersely delivered interrogative. He had spent most of the last fortnight racing cars in the desert. He had always been a car nut; lately racing fast cars was pretty much the only thing that took his mind off the madness of the World and the knowledge that even here, in America, a sizable proportion of the population regarded him not as a national saviour but as a monster, a mass murderer in the same league as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin. A fortnight ago the World had been mostly peaceful, albeit broken; there had been no serious threats on the horizon so he had gone on leave, driven a lot of old cars, and raced a few very fast new ones around a couple of recently abandoned air bases with his friends...

People used to tell Curtis LeMay that he never knew when to give in; that he never knew when he was beaten. People were wrong about that, too; just like they were wrong about so much else to do with *Old Iron Pants*.

The big decisions were the simplest decisions.

Okay, I haven’t been sacked or arrested yet. While I’m still Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force I plan to carry on doing my duty. My loyal, patriotic duty consistent with the oath I took when I joined the Army Air

Corps Reserve in Ohio in 1929. A lot of people don't seem to be taking their oaths of allegiance very seriously lately. I always have and I always will!

His tone was suddenly cool, businesslike.

"I'll leave some of my people here to interview the base operations staff. I'll be back in DC as soon as possible bringing the documents I've already impounded. Somebody ought to talk to the Head of the Secret Service and that bastard Hoover. Some of our guys – maybe a lot of our guys - have gone bad on us, Bus."

"Yeah," the other man acknowledged hoarsely. "It sure looks that way."

Chapter 19

Monday 9th December 1963

Main State Building, Department of State, Washington DC

Robert Francis ‘Bobby’ Kennedy’s anxieties had not been assuaged by Dean Rusk’s unexpected - and for Rusk, a mild mannered man, untypical - agitated summons to the State Department at thirty minutes notice. Everything was spiralling out of control and he desperately wanted to slow the clock, come up for air, and try to get a handle on what seemed like another ungodly rush towards catastrophe. His brother might have found and demonstrated a strange, semi-cathartic calmness that morning but very little of it had rubbed off on the other members of his Cabinet, most of whom thought – those who were not saying it out aloud – that Jack was exhibiting the first signs of madness.

“Well?” The Attorney General of the United States of America asked, walking unannounced into Dean Rusk’s office.

The Secretary of State was staring out of the windows across a grey, tired, misty vista to Theodore Roosevelt Island in the middle of the Potomac River, his hands clasped behind his back. For a moment he seemed not to have heard the younger man. Then he sighed and without moving, his gaze still lost in the dreary mid-distance said: “Every time somebody comes through that door I expect it to be somebody who has come to arrest me.”

“That’s never going to happen, Dean,” the President’s brother retorted impatiently.

The older man half-turned, flicked a look at his watch.

“Five minutes,” he muttered, before explaining that “the British Foreign Office asked for a secure telephone line to be established between Cheltenham and the State Department. The British Ambassador is talking to us via the Swedes at the moment. The call should come through some time in the next five minutes.”

Bobby Kennedy scowled.

“If the Brits want to talk to us they can pick up Jack’s phone any time they want.”

“They think we’ve started bombing them, Bobby,” the Secretary of State reminded the younger man. “What could Premier Heath possibly say to the President that might not make the situation even worse?”

Bobby Kennedy had not thought about that.

“Okay, so why talk to State?”

Dean Rusk obviously did not think he ought to have to be drawing a diagram for the man who had been the President’s most ‘special’ of special personal advisors for several years.

“You ever meet Walter Brenckmann?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“He was our Naval Attaché in England.”

“If you say so, Dean...”

“He submitted a report telling State and the Navy Department that the Brits were one provocation away from declaring war on us.” Dean Rusk dragged away from the window and went to his desk, waving his visitor to take a seat in one of the three chairs next to it. “Did you know that oaf Westheimer was wining and dining the same people in England who have persistently blocked Premier Heath’s attempts to re-organise and rationalise what remains of the United Kingdom’s industrial and economic base on an emergency, command model. The same faction that attempted to veto Operation Manna on the grounds that the United Kingdom would be indebted and beholden for all time to the Commonwealth countries who made it possible?”

“LBJ recommended Westheimer?” Bobby Kennedy reminded Dean Rusk, as if this made the problem go away.

“The Vice President recommended Westheimer for public consumption only; he made it perfectly plain that he was not going to lose any sleep over it if we nominated somebody better qualified.”

Finding an Ambassador to the Court of Balmoral had been a thorny issue after the October War. One likely candidate, the anglophile former Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, Garfield Sumner had been killed in a car wreck. Several other strong contenders had withdrawn. In the end Loudon Baines Westheimer II had been the last candidate standing, taking up his appointment in early March.

Bobby Kennedy slumped into his chair.

“So what? This guy Brenckmann is some kind of Jeremiad

whistleblower telling us what we already know?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him yet.”

One of the two black handsets on Dean Rusk’s desk rang jarringly.

He picked up the receiver.

“Rusk speaking.” He waited, pointed for his visitor to pick up the other telephone.

“Good morning, Mister Secretary,” said the man at the other end of the crackling analogue line, his words spanning the swooping peaks and troughs of amplification. “This is Walter Brenckmann. Captain, United States Navy Reserve. I was sent to England as CINCLANT Liaison to the British Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy Channel Fleet. More recently, I was promoted to my present rank and posted to the Embassy in Cheltenham as Naval Attaché. Shortly before I was declared persona non grata by the British Authorities I resigned my commission and my post and communicated my profound concerns about the state of Anglo-American relations to *your* Department.”

“You are speaking to Dean Rusk, Secretary of State. With me in the room is the Attorney General. What is the purpose of this call, Captain Brenckmann?”

The line hissed and exploded with distant bursts of static.

“Are you still there Captain Brenckmann?”

“Yes, sir.” The man in England was not in a hurry. “May I ask you a question, sir? And the Attorney General?”

“Go ahead.” Dean Rusk shrugged at Bobby Kennedy.

“Is it the policy of the State Department to intercept, delay and mislay communications from diplomatic staff in England?”

“Don’t be impertinent, Brenckmann!”

“Are you in receipt of *any* of the reports I copied to both the Navy Department and to your own Department since my appointment as Naval Attaché to the United States Embassy at Cheltenham?”

“Are you some kind of lawyer, Captain?” Bobby Kennedy inquired testily.

“Yes, sir. I only put on a uniform when the people running my country deem it appropriate to participate in foreign wars and adventures.” The voice of the Navy Captain was evenly modulated, clipped and indifferent to the elevated status of his two interlocutors. “Mister Rusk,” he went on with an

almost schoolmasterly inflexion, “respectfully, after what the administration of which you are a prominent member has put us all through in the last year, neither you, or any of your fellows in Government has the right to accuse *me* of impertinence, sir.”

The Secretary of State took a deep breath.

“Forgive my intemperance, Captain. These are troubled times.”

“Yes, they are, sir. I repeat my earlier question; are you personally in receipt of *any* of the reports I sent you in the last month?”

“I wouldn’t necessarily be on the circulation list for reports from a Naval Attaché, Captain Brenckmann...”

“*Those* reports were of a nature where the recipient lower down the food chain would automatically pass them to his or her boss, and so on until they reached the desk of at least an Assistant Secretary of State, sir. I suggest you urgently look into who has been sitting on, or variously misdirecting or diverting diplomatic traffic between the Cheltenham Embassy and your Department. The first thing I heard when I began meeting my British counterparts, and later when I joined the Embassy Staff within the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration compound at Cheltenham, was that communication with the State and Navy Departments seemed to be unduly ‘spotty’, and that important cables often ‘got lost’. Moreover, I was surprised to discover that there seemed to be no meaningful contacts between the British intelligence agencies and the CIA. Granted, at my pay grade I don’t see the ‘big picture’ as well as you gentlemen in DC, but frankly, sirs,” Walter Brenckmann concluded, quietly scathing, “the whole situation stank to me. If our great country had had a professional diplomat in post as Ambassador rather than a disinterested political place man, somebody in Washington might have noticed before now that we had a problem in England.”

The President’s brother leaned forward, his face creased with undirected anger.

“This is Bobby Kennedy, *Captain* Brenckmann,” he declared, realising how hostile he sounded only after the event. “What are you alleging; that somebody is intercepting diplomatic mail?”

“I’m not alleging anything, *Mister* Attorney General. I’m simply telling you what it looks like from over here. In any event, if communications are being subverted then we’re not talking about a ‘somebody’, we’re talking

about a multi-level conspiracy by several people possibly in senior positions in several departments in Washington and elsewhere.”

The President’s younger brother allowed himself several seconds to process this information and to glimpse the implications.

“You think somebody wants another war, don’t you?” He said, thinking out a loud. “Is that what you are saying, Captain Brenckmann?”

“No,” the other man said patiently, irritated by the Attorney General’s lack of intellectual rigor. While ‘somebody’ might want to start another war, that was a leap in the dark. What seemed more ‘likely’ was that ‘somebody’ was trying to sour relations between the two World military powers who had survived the October War. Perhaps, ‘somebody’ hoped for another war but if they were successful then that would be an *effect*, rather than a direct *cause* and it was the ‘cause’ that was the thing *everybody* needed to focus upon if they were going to unravel the conundrum. “I honestly don’t know what’s going on. However, I do think that somebody ought to try to find out before it is too late.”

But it was already too late.

Bobby Kennedy had just had an apotheosis; suddenly it was possible that everything that had happened in the last thirteen months was not really *his*, Jack’s, or anybody in the Administration’s *fault*. *There might have been a conspiracy*. Camelot had been undermined and betrayed by dark forces from outside. Now that he thought about it, it seemed so blindingly obvious he could not believe he had not worked it out before. A crushing weight had lifted off his conscience; it was as if he had confessed his adultery to his priest and he had been granted unconditional absolution...

Chapter 20

Monday 9th December 1963
Pembroke Barracks, Malta

Captain Nathan Zabriski was still dressed in his flying suit. A nasty-looking gash over his right eye – which was mottled blue, swollen and almost shut - had been sutured, and his right arm was in a sling. When Vice Admiral Sir Julian Wemyss Christopher, Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations strode into the room the young United States Air Force navigator staggered hurtfully to his feet, removed his damaged arm from the sling and attempted to form what turned out to be a surprisingly crisp salute.

Julian Christopher returned the salute.

“Sit down, Captain,” the older man directed irritably.

The young American remained on his feet, swaying, struggling to stand to attention.

“Zabriski, Captain Nathan Tobias, service number...”

“Oh, for goodness sake!” Julian Christopher snapped irascibly. “Sit down before you fall down!” There were about a dozen chairs in the guard house mess room of Pembroke Fort, where he had determined that the American *prisoners of war* would be ‘quarantined’. Technically, there was no requirement in international law requiring him to treat the eight American and three Italian airmen as POWs. Nobody had declared war on anybody; if he had wanted to he could have had them lined up against a wall and shot as common criminals.

Now he was alone in the room with one of the men who had wreaked such dreadful havoc and killed and maimed so many innocent people three days ago.

“Do you know who I am?” He asked tersely.

The young American was aching to jump to his feet and salute again.

“Admiral Christopher, sir!”

“Good.” The older man nodded, tried to ignore the tendrils of exhaustion which twisted in his mind and choked his thoughts. “Good. When this is all

over,” he went on, “I want you to remember that despite the fact that you and your comrades are *personally* responsible for the deaths – confirmed so far - of at least six hundred and seventeen members of the British Armed Forces, and the cold blooded *murder* of at least three hundred and seventy-eight civilians,” he looked the boy in the eye, “that you and your comrades were at all times treated decently by your *British* captors.” He breathed a shuddering sigh. “In the absence of a declaration of war between our two countries you are, strictly speaking, a war criminal liable to the contingencies of summary justice. However, by *my order* you and your partners in crime will continue to be accorded all rights mandated by the Geneva and other conventions recognised by the United Kingdom in time of war until such time as you are repatriated.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You are the senior prisoner.” Julian Christopher, by far the taller man, radiated barely suppressed molten-hot anger. “Have you and your people received medical treatment for your injuries?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Have you been fed and watered?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Have you been mistreated by British or Commonwealth military personnel or by Maltese civilians?”

“No, sir!”

Julian Christopher rose stiffly to his feet and stalked out of the room without saying another word or looking back. He had spoken of the bald figures for the dead thus far. As many as three hundred souls, mostly British service personnel were still missing in the ruins of Fort St Angelo, Fort St Elmo, HMS Phoenicia and the command bunkers penetrated or collapsed by the big bombs dropped by the B-52s. Over fifteen hundred people had been seriously injured, countless others completely traumatised. There had been no warning, no chance to take cover. One minute there had been peace, the next minute the bombs were falling.

The walking wounded in their hundreds, uncounted, were trying to go about their daily business. Makeshift dressing stations, field hospitals and surgical operating units had been established to take the pressure off the main hospitals. One such had been set up at the Pembroke Barracks with the assistance of Dr Margo Seiffert and her small army of remarkable *auxiliary*

nurses. Julian Christopher had been astonished to learn – from Lieutenant Alan Hannay, the font of all knowledge – that all the blue-uniformed nurses had been trained by *Dottoressa Seiffert* at St Catherine’s Hospital for Women in Mdina. The hospital had become Margo’s life’s work in the years since he had last known her; and the recruitment and training of young women rejected by the ‘official’ medical fraternity of the Archipelago, like Marija Calleja, her personal crusade. That Margo could magic virtually out of thin air a cadre of twenty professional nurses to run an emergency hospital at, literally, three hours notice very nearly defied belief.

It was dusk by the time Julian Christopher, leaving his staff to snatch a meal in the Officers Mess went in search of the woman who had eventually rebuffed his advances – but only after wrapping him around her little finger - when he had last been on Malta. Alan Hannay, his flag lieutenant, tirelessly dogged his every step like a bloodhound that was pathologically incapable of not stalking his quarry.

“They say we’ll be hearing you on the radio tonight?” Margo Seiffert queried, looking up from the cluttered table that had become her entire office at the Pembroke Barracks in the last twelve hours.

“I’m afraid so. Look,” he hesitated, then he lunged on, “this is very irregular but would you do me a huge personal favour, Margo?”

The woman ran her hands through her straw grey hair, stifled a yawn.

“That depends what it is,” she countered mischievously.

“A couple of the airmen we’re holding in the fort are a little knocked about. I’m sure my chaps have done what they can for them but, I’d be happier if you took the, general welfare of the, er, POWs, under your wing.”

If the slim, sinewy former US Navy Surgeon Commander guessed her old friend’s concerns were of a more political than overtly humanitarian nature, she did not betray it on her tanned, lined face.

“If I was you I’d have had ‘the POWs’ shot by now, Julian,” she declared forthrightly. “In fact I’d have had them shot by now if it was up to me!”

“Well,” the man frowned. “It isn’t,” he shrugged, “and we’re not going to do that. No matter how I or anybody else on Malta feels about it, it is my job to see to it that the POWs are treated humanely. And that’s that.”

The woman pursed her lips in apology.

“Sorry. Of course I’ll ‘look after’ them.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

They had usually ended up at cross purposes when they had been trying to have an affair all those years ago; not a lot had changed since. As if they both realised as much at the same time they smiled, and shook their heads at their own foolishness.

“We’re getting too old for this, Julian,” Margo Seiffert observed.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I heard on the grapevine that you and Reginald Stephens were ‘a couple’ for many years.”

Surgeon Captain Reginald Stephens was everything that Julian Christopher had not been in those years after the war. He remembered Stephens as a red-cheeked, rotund man with large ears and laugh that threatened to crack window glass. The man had dedicated the last decade of his career – and it turned out, his life – to the development of military and civilian medical services on the Maltese Archipelago. Marija Calleja and countless other of his patients owed the lives that they had been able to live to Reginald Stephens. After the 1945 war Julian Christopher had set his sights on the top of his profession; Reginald Stephens had devoted himself to the service of his fellow men. All things considered; it seemed that Margo had passed him over in favour of the better man.

“We were very happy together,” she said simply. Instantly, she changed the subject. “Is there news about Peter’s ship?”

Julian Christopher shook his head.

“Have you mentioned anything to Marija?” The man asked.

“Yes. Everything you’ve told me.” Seeing that her former suitor did not approve Margo Seiffert prickled with angst. “Lying to people you care about isn’t ‘helping them’, Julian. She didn’t deserve to find out about Peter’s ship from a stranger. Marija’s had a lot of bad things happen to her in her life; she keeps busy.”

Julian Christopher flashed an angry glare at the woman.

“Admiral, we need to be moving on,” Lieutenant Alan Hannay apologised.

In the car rattling and jolting along the potholed roads between the coast and Mosta, where the Signals Corps had positioned a powerful transmitter, Julian Christopher seized a few moments for private reflection. He could have requisitioned Radio Malta’s surviving broadcast facility on Gozo but that would have cut against the grain of practically everything he was planning to do on the Archipelago; and besides, unexpectedly relieved of all

censorship thirty-six hours ago Radio Malta was already threatening to become 'a voice' of and for the people that had been, by and large, unheard by his predecessor's regime. The last thing he wanted to do was silence that voice again, even if it was only for a few minutes.

I have to get some sleep tonight.

Although he had known that in accepting the command of the Mediterranean Theatre he was accepting a poisoned chalice; nobody had anticipated the chaos of the last seventy-two hours. Thus far he had issued three General Orders: *one, the Hermes Battle Group was to block the Straits of Gibraltar to all shipping and support the besieged garrison of the Rock; two, all land forces in the theatre of operations would stand firm and hold the ground currently under British sovereign control; and three, all Royal Navy ships and submarines on general patrol duties or not specifically tasked to reinforce the Hermes Battle Group were to return to Malta to refuel and replenish, pending further deployment.*

Since arriving on Malta he had received a series of communications from England; sufficient to inform him that all available naval and air war-fighting 'assets' were being brought to readiness and pre-positioned ahead of possible hostilities. If war came it was likely that the Hermes and Ark Royal Battle Groups would operate together in the Western Approaches. In that event the UKIEA would explicitly and in the most categorical and unambiguous terms warn the Spanish that further aggressive actions against Gibraltar would literally 'bring down the fires of Hades' upon them. He had lived through some grim times during Hitler's war; he was starting to ask himself if this was not much, much worse.

It was dark when Julian Christopher followed Alan Hannay up the steps into the ramshackle hall where the Signal Corps technicians had set up a makeshift studio. In a few days the broadcasting facilities in Valletta would be fully restored, until then this was the best alternative. Outside, Royal Marine Commandos manned roadblocks and stood at every door. After Friday evening's raid practically everybody had expected civil disorder, perhaps, new terrorist outrages. Against expectations the population had united in the ongoing rescue and recovery operation. There had been no repeat of the shootings and bombings which followed so closely on the heels of the October War. If anything, there was a renewed sense of everybody 'being in it together' again; as if the surprise attack and its dreadful toll of

death, pain and destruction had rekindled something of the spirit of the siege years of the Second World War.

“My name is Julian Christopher,” the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations said clearly, confidently into the single big microphone. He had been advised to speak from about ten inches away and asked, very politely, not to move backwards and forwards as he spoke. The Signals Corps technicians had visibly relaxed when he had greeted their entreaties with a broad smile and thanked them for their ‘excellent advice’ which ‘I intend to heed’.

“Three nights ago the peace of these islands was shattered by a cowardly and unprovoked attack that has left over a thousand British and Maltese dead and missing, and over one thousand five hundred people seriously injured. You will have heard many stories and a great deal of uninformed gossip about the events of last Friday night. I would like to put the record straight.”

Julian Christopher spoke in a clear, unfaltering voice without notes for nearly twenty minutes. His enunciation was patient, speaking to an underlying outrage that the majority of his audience would almost certainly share and empathise with regardless of their political leanings.

First he described the peaceful scene on the Gzira - Sliema waterfront, the night shift at the Senglea docks swarming all over HMS Torquay as she was positioned, exactly above the grounding blocks hidden beneath her hull in the dark water of Number One dock; and the roar of the motors gearing up to start pumping. There were families enjoying a stroll along the Msida sea wall opposite Manoel Island, the officers at Fort Phoenicia were filing into the Mess for dinner; and out in Marsamxett Harbour the old cruiser HMS Sheffield was manoeuvring alongside the oiling jetty. In Sliema Creek a lone destroyer, HMS Agincourt rocked gently at her moorings, her guns trained fore and aft, her GWS 21 Sea Cat quadruple missile launcher locked down beneath a tarpaulin and with half her crew out on the town on a typical Friday evening run ashore...

The first wave of marauders had approached at over four hundred miles an hour hugging the tops of the waves, soaring high over the rocky coast and falling like plummeting hawks upon the unsuspecting ships moored in the harbours and creeks. There had been no warning, the archipelago’s air defence radar system had been unable to distinguish friend from foe because of the ongoing RAF and Fleet Air Arm ‘war game’ which had been in full

swing by then. No air raid sirens had wailed like banshees across the Archipelago. A bomb had wrecked HMS Agincourt's bow and started a fire that would have ignited her forward magazine had her crew not let her sink where she lay in Sliema Creek. A bomb had sliced through the armour of HMS Sheffield's aft triple six-inch turret and exploded against the breech of one of the big guns. Another bomb had landed in the water some distance away and 'skipped' across the surface to detonate against the lightly armoured trunk of her forward port twin four-inch secondary armament mount. Another bomb had exploded in the water directly alongside her bridge, smashing a ten feet wide rent in her side beneath her armour belt. It was a miracle the old cruiser had been eventually towed into shallow water. Across the other side of Valletta, HMS Torquay had been defenceless as she lay in Number One dock. Perhaps, four or five bombs fell around her, mostly in French Creek before the fateful impact of the bomb in the dock opened her side like a great tin can opener and she had capsized within seconds. In attacking the warships bombs fell with apparent randomness into closely packed streets, tearing trails of ruin through whole districts. Three bombs killed scores of people on the Strand in Gzira and Sliema. More civilians, including many workers at the main hospital on the Archipelago died when a string of small bombs bracketed houses along Msida Creek. A bus at the roundabout at the end of Pieta Creek had received a direct hit.

The aircraft in the first wave of the attack were piloted by Italians and wore the livery of the reincarnated Regia Aeronautica, the air force of the new Fascist Republic of Italy and Sicily. All the aircraft in this attack were of American manufacture but, so far as could be ascertained from the testimony of the three captured Italian airmen, they were flown by native Italian pilots.

Had it not been for the 'valiant endeavours of the Royal Air Force and the Fleet Air Arm,' the first wave would undoubtedly have caused even greater damage and occasioned significantly greater loss of life.

However, while the Regia Aeronautica Skyhawks were being hunted by Royal Navy Sea Vixens and Scimitars big bombs suddenly started to fall from seven miles high in the darkening Mediterranean skies.

The second – high-level – attack had commenced some three minutes after the attack by the low-level first wave had turned into a dog-fighting melee that rapidly spread across the skies of the whole Maltese Archipelago.

At the conclusion of this low-level battle five of the attackers and one of the Fleet Air Arm fighters had been shot down.

“The pilot of the Scimitar that was lost survived with only minor injuries,” Julian Christopher told his audience with grim satisfaction.

As the last of the surviving Regia Aeronautica A-4 Skyhawks fled into the darkening north-eastern skies a rain of M118 general purpose – classified by the United States Air Force as ‘demolition’ munitions – arrowed down with unerring precision on Royal Navy and Army headquarters, and major public buildings and bomb shelters used by the civilian authorities across Valletta, Birgu, Kalkara, Senglea, Cospicua and Floriana from the bomb bays of the four Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses of the 2nd Bomb Wing of the 100th Bomb Group of the United States Air Force. These bombers were subsequently engaged by RAF Hawker Hunter fighters between six and seven miles high above the Maltese Archipelago.

HMS Phoenicia, the Headquarters of the British Military Administration was struck by several large ‘demolition’ munitions and at least one very large ‘fuel-air’ device which exploded in the middle of the old fort with the force of a small nuclear detonation.

“I can confirm that my good friend Vice Admiral Hugh Staveley-Pope was among the dead on Manoel Island; had the Manoel Island detention camp still been in operation the death toll on the island would have been many times higher.”

Even as he spoke RAF and Fleet Air Arm technicians were splicing together gun camera footage from the ‘air actions over Malta’; and within days this footage would be shown in local cinemas.

Eventually, Julian Christopher concluded the litany of death and destruction.

“I personally, have lost many good friends in this atrocity. In the cities and villages of the Maltese Archipelago everybody will know somebody; a father, a mother, a brother or a sister, a son or daughter, a friend, or a colleague at work, or somebody one was at school with many years ago, who has been taken from us in this terrible, cowardly assault on the very soul of these precious islands.”

The hairs on the nape of Lieutenant Alan Hannay’s neck were standing on end by this juncture. There was a cold, deadly intent in *his* new Admiral that he had never encountered in any other man in the Navy. It was as if he

had had his eyes opened to a truth he had not known to exist. Nelson, he decided, must have had this self-same power to galvanise his captains, to instil in his people the belief that defeat simply was not a thing within the bounds of possibility. And that, one day, there would be retribution. This he understood long before the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations signed off with the promise that: “It is my pledge to the people of Malta that if I have anything to do with it,” there was a perfectly judged pause for effect, “that one day there will be a reckoning for this crime against humanity.”

Chapter 21

Monday 9th December 1963

Emergency Field Hospital, Pembroke Barracks, Malta

Marija Calleja shivered and drew her shawl close. She ached from head to toe after a third successive long and exhausting day mostly spent on her feet. Margo Seiffert had taken one look at her twenty minutes ago, handed her two aspirins, and taken her off the hastily organised 'ward' - three big tents linked by awnings to the barracks block the Army had made available - and brought her into the cluttered 'hospital office'. The office had a telephone which had to be 'manned' at all times, a desk piled with medical reports, and around the walls, wooden orange crates filled with supplies.

The British, as every Maltese knew, had a prodigious talent for improvisation; for sorting things out as they went along. Most of the time this was not good news but in a crisis it was a positive boon, with everybody pitching in without complaint and officials who would normally have endlessly obfuscated to avoid a thorny problem, suddenly desperately eager to be of service. Hence, the Pembroke Barracks Emergency Field Hospital had been magically conjured into existence out of practically thin air inside a day of the bombing.

However, as Marija sat at the desk slowly creating little heaps of ordered paperwork and 'watching' the telephone, the miracle of the new field hospital did not take her mind off her numerous physical vexations, or the nagging, insidious worm of doubt – distant terror, really – that had dogged her ever step these last two days.

Peter Christopher's ship had been badly damaged.

She did not know if he was dead or alive...

"How are you feeling now, Marija?" Margo Seiffert asked a little amused to have caught the younger woman in a rare moment when her thoughts were far, far away.

"I'm okay, I suppose."

The older woman gave her a sternly maternal look, and decided not to take issue with this somewhat disingenuous claim. Her young friend was as

exhausted as the rest of them and almost certainly hurting in a lot more places. Later she would order Marija to retire to one of the cots she had had placed in the adjutant's room.

"Admiral Christopher asked me to keep a particular eye on our 'guests' in the fort," Margo confided. "Personally, I don't think they are likely to come to any harm from the men who are guarding them," she shrugged, "but if everybody knows that I and my nurses will be regularly checking the wellbeing of the prisoners, then well..."

Marija got the message.

Margo did not really want to have anything to do with her 'countrymen'. Unlike the British, she would have had no qualms about putting the *killers* up against a wall and shooting them.

"It isn't your fault," Marija said sympathetically.

The older woman's lips twisted in contempt at the actions of her 'fellow Americans'; her eyes despaired. She had not been back to the United States for sixteen years, now she never would for it was an alien place and since the October War it could never be her home again. Some things were beyond forgiveness.

"I know," she snorted, shaking off her brief introspection. "Anyway, stop what you are doing and go make friends with the..."

"They're just people, Margo. Obeying orders..."

"We hung a whole slew of Nazis and Japs after the forty-five war who honestly believed claiming that they were obeying orders was their get out of jail card."

Marija did not argue.

She walked – actually if one was being pedantic she mostly limped – stiffly along the corridors towards the circular defence works beyond the modern barracks, and gained access to the bridge across the dry moat to the old bastion – Pembroke Fort – where the eleven prisoners of war were being held on the Officer's Mess level. The soldiers at the gates escorted her inside with wan smiles which she returned.

"Captain Nathan Zabriski, ma'am," the handsome, blond young man with an arm in a sling and a battered brow introduced himself, rising from his iron cot. "I'm the senior POW."

"I am Marija Calleja," she had replied. "Doctor Seiffert has asked me to personally confirm that you and your men are receiving all necessary medical

care, and that you are all being treated properly.”

The airman grimaced and shrugged helplessly, confused and ashamed.

“Ma’am, most of us would be dead if *your* Navy hadn’t pulled us out of the sea. I guess we’d all have got ourselves lynched by now if *your* soldiers weren’t protecting us.”

Nathan Zabriski’s cot was the nearest the door in the dimly lit – by hurricane lamp – limestone vaulted space. Several of the other prisoners of war had sat up or stood up and a couple were approaching. The guards outside had wanted to accompany Marija into the ‘cell’; she had politely informed them ‘that will not be necessary’.

A man said something in Italian.

Marija half-turned, replied in the heavily accented Italian she had learned at her Sicilian mother’s knee.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

“What will they do to us, signorina?”

“*They* will protect you and feed you and send you home when the time comes,” she informed the man as he emerged from the shadows. “Despite what you did.”

Several of the prisoners cast their eyes down to the stone floor.

Marija turned back to Captain Zabriski, speaking again in English.

“I am to ascertain whether you have any complaints?”

The airman shook his head.

“No, ma’am.” The American shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Look... This is kinda awkward, but... Our SOP, sorry, our *Standard Operating Procedures* authorise us if captured to supply our *enemies*,” he stopped, knowing intuitively that this was completely the wrong word, “name, rank and service number, and that’s all any of us have given the British. But...”

Marija did not immediately know what to make of his agonized indecision. She said nothing and waited, sensing that the young officer’s angst was shared in equal measure by many of the other men in the room.

“But you see,” he shrugged, haplessly, “we were told that war had been declared. I mean, we wouldn’t have flown the mission if we hadn’t thought...”

Marija’s almond eyes widened. Still she said nothing.

“We were told that British V-Bombers had nuked New York and

Charleston, ma'am!"

There were vehement nods from all the Americans. The three Italians looked to each other, jabbering questions.

The Italian who had spoken up before stepped forward. He was a stocky man in his thirties wearing a blue boiler suit, which, presumably, the Navy had supplied him with when they recovered him from the sea three days ago.

"I am Lieutenant Enzo Maldano of the Regia Aeronautica, signorina," he announced in Italian. "I too was briefed that there was war; that British cruisers had bombarded Genoa and that British bombers had 'carpet bombed' Messina and Naples..."

Marija frowned.

"I know nothing of this!" Troubled she left the prisoners – hissing and squabbling amongst themselves as men who believe they have been duped are wont to do – and sought out Margo Seiffert, to whom she recounted what she had just learned.

Margo listened, initially with weary incredulity.

Presently, she sighed and reached for the single phone in the Emergency Field Hospital's 'office'. She waited for the operator to come on the line.

"This is Dr Margo Seiffert; I must speak to somebody on Admiral Christopher's staff immediately."

Marija was astonished when this demand was accepted without demur.

The older woman handed Marija the handset.

"When somebody comes to the phone tell them what you told me. If they don't take you seriously or try to fob you off send a messenger to find me. I'm going to talk to those *people* in the fort!"

Marija waited, a little nervously.

The minutes passed, the line clicked and whined.

"This is the duty desk, Lieutenant Siddall speaking..."

"Jim?" Marija uttered in surprise.

"Is that you, Marija?"

"Yes, why, I don't..."

"I was promoted by Admiral Christopher. I work for him now. In political intelligence..."

Marija remembered belatedly what she was supposed to be doing.

She recounted her conversation with the POWs. In a rush, more excitedly than perhaps she would have done in the hearing of a stranger,

reaching the end of her tale a little breathless.

“I’ll make sure Admiral Christopher knows about this as soon as possible,” the man at the other end of the line promised.

Marija was half-asleep, dozing fitfully about two hours later when a gentle hand touched her shoulder. It was Margo, who had virtually frog-marched her to her bed when she had got back from ‘interrogating those idiots in the fort’. Margo had ruthlessly pulled rank on Captain Nathan Zabriski and ‘ordered him to spill the beans’.

‘Fucking schoolboys!’ Margo had complained, her face flushed with exasperation and her eyes alight with righteous anger. ‘They’ll talk to *us* but they won’t talk to the fucking British unless *we’re* there to witness it!’

It was around midnight Marija guessed when she and Margo were ushered into the POW quarters where they discovered former Staff Sergeant Jim Siddall in a creased new khaki uniform giving Captain Nathan Zabriski the full benefit of his unblinking scrutiny.

“Right, Captain,” the big man decided sarcastically. “Now that your guardian angels have arrived perhaps you’d like to tell me what you told them earlier this evening?”

Once he opened his mouth the American airman could not stop talking.

The story emerged in a flood of words.

His story began with the chaos of the unscheduled rotation from his normal base at Arnold Air Force Base at Tullahoma, Tennessee, to Barksdale in Louisiana. It continued with an account of how the crews of eight of the 100th Bomb Group B-52s ‘rotated’ to Barksdale AFB on an apparently routine training deployment were quarantined from all other 100th Bomb Group personnel while their aircraft were fitted with special ‘bomb bay kits’ to carry ‘big wire-guided non-nuclear iron bombs’, and new, previously top secret advanced ‘radio-control bombing modules’ were installed in their *Stratofortresses*. Then the whole base was locked down: *DEFCON2 – one step short of war*. They had waited in their ready rooms for two days before the order had come. They had all been relieved to be given a non-nuclear mission. War had broken out with the Brits, both sides had carried out ‘demonstration’ strikes against each other; New York and Charleston had been hit; US Navy submarines had ‘taken out Glasgow and Liverpool in retaliation. In the North Atlantic British and American carriers were ‘slugging it out’ and SAC – Strategic Air Command – had been tasked to

‘systematically dismantle, dislocate and degrade the enemy’s command and control capabilities’. The B-52s had topped off their tanks over the Arctic. The long flight over the North Pole, Scandinavia, and across the devastated wasteland of Central Europe had been uneventful. ‘Unreal’. It had been a text book operation right up until the moment the first wave commenced the low-level element of the operation seven minutes late.

“We’d anticipated there’d be a CAP over Malta, at least two, maybe four fighters at altitude at all times. A pre-condition of the operations plan was that the first wave had to go in so hard the CAP got drawn down to sea level before we hit the initial points to start our attack. But because of the FUBAR over the timings the CAP was still at altitude when we got to our IPs. We knew what was going to happen next when we started our bomb runs.” The young officer’s jaw jutted defiantly for a moment. “Nobody broke formation. They don’t call us the ‘Bloody 100th’ for nothing...”

Chapter 22

Monday 9th December 1963

Estuary of the River Douro, Oporto, Portugal

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher gazed spellbound at the lights of the city as HMS Talavera wallowed gently in the lee of the breakwater. The waters of the River Douro ran down her sides. Emergency diesel generators worked noisily in the night powering the jury-rigged arc lamps which illuminated both stricken ships. A little over a hundred yards away the fire-scorched flank of the County class destroyer HMS Devonshire lay in the middle of the channel, moored fore and aft like her smaller, equally wounded consort. Sailors of the *Armada Portuguesa* and civilian dockyard workers and medical staff worked tirelessly alongside the crews of the two ships, and a flotilla of small craft surrounded them both.

HMS Plymouth stood guard off the mouth of the estuary, slowly quartering the big seas as the wind gusted up to force nine. Over forty members of the frigate's crew were still onboard Talavera; and without them the ship would surely have been lost. Over half Talavera's crew were dead, missing, seriously or walking wounded. Peter Christopher was among this latter category and despite his protests was due to be sent ashore; Talavera and Devonshire were to be patched up and steamed down to Lisbon where suitable dry dock facilities were to be had, once there a proper assessment of their damage could be carried out and repairs effected. However, before that could happen to Talavera most of her crew had to be taken off and the five hundred pound unexploded bomb lodged against the aft bulkhead of her 4.5 inch magazine had to be either disarmed or removed.

There were spits of icy cold rain in the wind.

Captain David Penberthy joined his acting-Executive Officer at the bridge rail. Together they stared into the twinkling lights of the city along the banks of the river a mile or so further inland. Alongside, launches and lighters bumped against Talavera's misused plates as the badly injured were carefully lowered down and carried away.

"Well," Talavera's Captain guffawed, his exhaustion relenting for a

moment, “that was a thing, wasn’t it?”

Neither man had honestly believed they would reach a safe harbour.

HMS Plymouth’s tow rope had parted twice; the second time both ships had rolled wildly in the violent cross seas for an hour that had seemed like an eternity before they had continued at a snail’s pace towards the rocky coast. Sanctuary seemed utterly unreal, dreamlike. To stand again on a deck that was not gyrating, plunging and falling – each time as if it was the last time – was pure bliss. They had stopped worrying about the unexploded bomb fifty feet from where they stood enjoying the lights of the city of Oporto, long since. If the bloody thing went off, so be it.

“I wish I was staying with the ship, sir.”

“Well, you’re not and that’s that!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the younger man chuckled. The effort hurt his chest, and made his jaw ache.

“Apart from the fact you’re pretty badly knocked about,” David Penberthy went on, wearily affable, “Talavera’s going to be out of commission for a while and chaps like you are badly needed elsewhere in the fleet.” He allowed himself a second, forced guffaw. “You never know, you might even get posted to the Med.”

Peter Christopher doubted he was going to be that lucky. The way things were going it looked like the World was about to try and blow itself up a second time. Then what would become of his and Marija’s tryst? Had she heard of Talavera’s woes? Was she still safe on Malta? Was anyone, anywhere safe anymore?

“I’m assigning that scallywag Griffin to you as your personal attendant,” the Captain of HMS Talavera added, just a little smugly. Leading Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin was the ship’s black sheep. The man had been a tower of strength the last three days and his attachment to Talavera’s EWO – Electrical Warfare Officer - who had taken the rascally Griffin under his wing and miraculously curbed the foolishness that had regularly seen him hauled in front of Captain’s table in every ship he had ever sailed in until the last year, was well known. When the Skyhawks had made their strafing runs Jack Griffin had probably saved Peter Christopher’s life by rugby tacking him out of his CIC chair to the deck as cannon shells had ripped through the thin aluminium skin of the compartment. “The last thing I need is a trouble-maker on the ship at a time like this.”

The younger man grinned in the darkness.

“Forgive me if I venture to say,” Peter Christopher rejoined respectfully, “that I fear you protest overmuch, sir.”

“Maybe,” the other man conceded. “Tomorrow hopefully, we shall discover what else has been going on in the World while we’ve been *preoccupied* with our own little local difficulties.”

“I’m not entirely convinced that I actually want to know.”

The Captain of HMS Talavera laughed ruefully, relieved to hear the self-deprecating irony in his EWO’s voice.

Each time the wind veered the stench of burning, of leaking bunker oil and corruption wafted back onto the destroyer; in the background the pumps strained and roared, and dirty water sloshed over the side in streams all along the amidships main deck. The bodies of the dead were in bags beneath tarpaulins on the decks, others lay below in shattered compartments, their mangled remains hopelessly enmeshed in the twisted steel.

Two hours later after one last round of farewells – Guns, his friend Peter Weiss was staying with the ship, as were other warrant officers and leading rates he had known since the October War – Peter Christopher stepped into the waiting arms of the men in the whaler taking the last of Talavera’s walking wounded to the shore. Jack Griffin jumped nimbly down after him. Both men had lumps in their throats as they stared back at their ship when the small boat pushed off.

There was a large crowd, mainly comprised of local civilians, on the quayside. A cheer went up as the first man stepped ashore from each boat that came alongside. There were ancient ambulances and buses, motors running noisily, clattering along the dock. Doctors in white coats and nurses in prim, starched uniforms surrounded each injured man.

Peter Christopher doffed his filthy, salt-fouled cap as he walked into the lights. A nurse began to shepherd him into the shadows.

“I go where Commander Christopher goes, luv,” Jack Griffin declaimed loudly.

The hospital was clearly swamped by the sudden – albeit expected – rush of seriously injured casualties, several suffering from horrific burns, from the two damaged British destroyers. Peter Christopher walked among the men waiting to be assessed and taken away to the wards of what seemed in the darkness, no more than what in England before the war he would have

described as a large cottage hospital. The knowledge reinforced his gratitude to the Portuguese for stepping in to help and risking the ire of its powerful Spanish neighbour.

“Lieutenant-Commander Christopher!”

Peter had not meant to drop off to sleep in his chair; it had happened anyway.

A concerned-looking, rumpled man of ample girth rolled this way and that through the crush in the reception hall, waving hopefully.

“I’m Donald Wyndham, Assistant Honorary Console in this beautiful city. I’ve been sent to find you.”

“I wasn’t lost,” the younger man replied, yawning so hard his whole body shook with the exertion of it.

“No, of course not.” Wyndham looked around. “We’ve booked rooms at several hotels for those of your men who aren’t in need of urgent medical attention. As you see, the locals are doing their very best but they’re a little bit *swamped*, as it were. The first tranche of, er, survivors, was taken to the Naval Hospital but that was soon overwhelmed. There’s talk of flying in personnel from England but the medical services at home are no less *stressed*...”

And so it was that Peter Christopher found himself in a room in the Nuvo Reunion Hotel overlooking the River Douro. Of course, he did not know about the stunning vista from his bedroom window when he arrived. He was too tired, too far gone and it was the middle of the night.

His kit, all his possessions including his wallet were still on the Talavera; as was everything except the clothes he stood up in and the portrait of Marija he had retrieved from its shattered frame. Marija had sent him the studio head and shoulders monochrome picture, six inches by four, which he had had mounted in a frame in Edinburgh. She wore a small gold crucifix on a slender chain hanging from her neck. Her skin was clean and clear, her eyes focused a little off camera to show her face in half profile and her hair was pulled back in a traditional, and to modern eyes, almost Edwardian way. He sometimes thought there was something Sephardic, eastern in her – for Malta was the mixing pot of the Mediterranean and its people were proud of the fact - and in the portrait her eyes were smiling...

He always slept better when his head touched his pillow with a picture of Marija floating across his mind’s eye. The bed groaned, he rolled onto his

side and slept.

...In the sunshine that fell in shafts between great thunderous clouds the carrier nosed cautiously into the Grand Harbour, the pilot boat chugging almost beneath her overhanging flight deck. On deck there was only a token parade, perhaps a hundred men lining the side fore and aft of the island bridge and the flight deck was empty, every serviceable Sea Vixen and Buccaneer having flown off to land at RAF Luqa at dawn.

Inside the Grand Harbour breakwaters the motion of the big ship eased.

He climbed the steps to the Flight Operations Bridge where the redundant Flight Officer nodded friendly acquaintance and went to stand on the open bridge wing.

Malta at last...

On the rampart walls on the Valletta side of the Grand Harbour there were only a few people to welcome the carrier's arrival at her new home port; but many of those who paused to watch the carrier's slow progress waved. Guns barked from the saluting platform opposite the broken shell of Fort St Angelo where so many Navy men had died on 5th December. More guns were saluting the Rear Admiral's flag which slapped and crackled, streaming in the gusting wind from the carrier's lattice mast beneath the constantly revolving radar bedsteads.

He stared hard up at the bastions where he could see small groups of men and women waving, or just staring at the rusty, weather-beaten big ship slowly coming to a dead stop. Tugs were positioning themselves at her bow, ready to push the great vessel's head around. She would turn in the deep water opposite French Creek; moor up alongside Parlitorio Wharf, where she would disembark most of the crew before being moved into dry dock sometime tomorrow.

The carrier had been at sea for over three months and notwithstanding she was a relatively young ship – only four years in commission – she had steamed hard and operated in many of the World's oceans in those four years and was long overdue a major refit. Not that HMS Hermes could not still fight her weight if it came to it; as she had proved, time and again in recent weeks.

He stared up to the ramparts, a little vexed that he could not name the different curtain walls and redoubts...

She was standing alone.

*Not atop the towering bastions.
But on the Valletta quayside half the ship's length away.
He shouted for binoculars...
She was exactly as she was in her portrait.
Waving, gently amused, happy in her tears...*

Chapter 23

Monday 9th December 1963

UKIEA Building, The Cabinet Room, Cheltenham, England

The President of the United States of America sounded as if he was in a solemn mood as befitted the crisis of the times.

“In asking Chief Justice Warren to Chair this Commission into the Cuban Missiles War I do so in full confidence that he will unravel the conspiracy that plunged this great country into the darkest hours in its history...”

The inner circle of the War Cabinet had listened in silence until this juncture.

“Do we know who this Warren man is, Tom?” Margaret Thatcher asked the Foreign Secretary. Her political antennae told her that John Fitzgerald Kennedy was going to dissemble shamelessly about how the old World had been brought down by some kind of highly implausible, and equally unsubstantiated – and for that matter, impossible to meaningfully authenticate – coalescence of malignant forces inimical to American democracy. Before he finished he was probably going to invoke ‘apple pie’ like his mother had made him when he was a toddler at her knee. The notion that Rose Kennedy would make anybody, let alone her own spawn ‘apple pie’ or any other pastry was as absurd as the concept of attempting to explain away the most terrible war in human history as some kind of Machiavellian conspiracy. Even if there had been a conspiracy it had been JFK’s job to root it out before, not after he unleashed the dragons of thermonuclear war. And while she was thinking about it, it would have been nice if Joe Kennedy’s wastrel, playboy second son had consulted his allies *in anticipation* of, rather than *during* the all out first strike!

The Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Edward Heath, spread his hands, giving Tom Harding-Grayson - until last week the Permanent Secretary to the late Sir Alec Douglas-Home - who was now overseeing what passed for the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration’s foreign policy in the post-war era, leave to answer the Angry Widow’s question.

James Callaghan, the Secretary of State for Defence, and the de facto Deputy Prime Minister sighed: “If we could listen again when the blasted man starts talking about what he’s going to do about the mess *his* conspirators have *allegedly* made. But that probably won’t be for a while.”

Nobody in the room was an avid fan of conspiracy theories. Most successful people in politics understood that conspiracies never worked and when one was caught in the act of conspiring, as one always was, and it always went down badly with voters.

“Chief Justice Earl Warren is sixty-two years of age,” the Foreign Secretary declaimed. “A lifelong Republican he ran for the Great Old Party’s Vice Presidential nomination in 1948. He’s the only man to have successfully run for Governor of California three times, before which he was the Attorney General of that State. He became the fourteenth Chief Justice of the United States in 1953. Despite the fact that he is a Republican he is socially liberal; he’s against segregation by dint of race and colour in the public school system and is known to support the Civil Rights agenda that was espoused by various members of the Kennedy Administration, notably the President and his brother Bobby, prior to the October War. Despite the parlous state of the rule of law in some areas of the United States, especially those which suffered nuclear strikes during the war, he is a vehement opponent of the suspension of civil liberties in virtually all circumstances. He is known to have taken the White House to task for its casual attitude to declaring states of emergencies, and has publicly deplored occasions when the National Guard and Federal Armed Forces have been called in to contain what he considers to be legitimate and constitutionally justified protests against the widespread suppression of individual and civil liberties, not to mention inalienable human rights.”

The three politicians in the room stared at Tom Harding-Grayson, a mixture of surprise and mild astonishment in their faces. The question had been asked; he had instantly pulled a marvellously concise and eloquent profile of Chief Justice Earl Warren out of his hat like a magician conjuring a white dove into existence.

The fifth member of the select gathering, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Henry Tomlinson smiled owlishly. The new Foreign Secretary was his oldest friend in Government and – this was a thing he could vouch for in confident verisimilitude – possibly the best informed

and intelligent man in his extraordinarily wide acquaintance.

“A sound man, then?” The Prime Minister observed, half-smiling.

“If the President thinks we’re going to fall for this nonsense he’s got another thing coming!” Margaret Thatcher declared.

“Forgive me, Margaret,” Tom Harding-Grayson countered mildly.

The Home Secretary had honestly believed she had learned a thing or two about crisis management in the last year; until that was, the last fortnight. The hardest thing was not keeping so many balls in the air at once; it was focusing on the one that actually mattered at all times. She had been completely taken off her guard by the Prime Minister’s reminder – to the members of the newly formed War Cabinet – that what they did in the *present* was critical to what they did in the *future*. It seemed so obvious but it was so easy to forget. Whatever they did *now* had to be with one eye on that *future*. It was an object lesson in strategic rather than tactical thinking, a window into the mind of a man with a vision. Idly, she wondered if this was what it was like being close to a man like Churchill or Franklin Roosevelt at the height of the Second World War. Yes, we limp from one crisis to the next but one day, if we stick to our work, a better World awaits us tomorrow...

Margaret Thatcher forced herself to focus on the Foreign Secretary.

“That may not be the important thing,” Tom Harding-Grayson continued, suspecting that the highly-intelligent, thirty-eight year old mother of two was going through one of those problematic phases that most politicians went through when they first attained real power and influence in government. He had seen the same thing a score of times in his career; and in the case of the Angry Widow he was untypically confident that she would quickly come to terms with her changed realities. The Prime Minister had given her a glimpse of a vision without for a moment understanding what he had done; without understanding he might conceivably have sparked something extraordinary. The Foreign Secretary met Margaret Thatcher’s gaze. “Whatever we think about it, the Americans appear to have stumbled upon a new narrative; a new legend. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that this might yet, even at this eleventh hour, give them, and us, a way out of the impasse that we both find ourselves in.”

The Angry Widow objected instantly.

“They gave Franco and his henchmen free rein to attack Gibraltar; they

bombed Malta and killed hundreds and hundreds of innocent people, Tom!”

“Yes,” the Foreign Secretary agreed, not yielding ground for he had realised – even if other senior figures in the Government had not in recent months – that the Angry Widow trampled over people who did not have the conviction or the guts to stand up to her. “And their agents in Ireland were almost certainly behind what happened at Balmoral. And let us not forget the aggressive posturing of the United States Navy in the Western Approaches. Or the apparent, albeit clownishly inept machinations of a certain Loudon Baines Westheimer II, to rabble rouse malcontents within the, er, *previous*, now dissolved Cabinet. But that’s *not* the point, Margaret. While the White House was entrenched behind the battle lines of ‘*it was us or them*’ and were determined to hold the line that it was the Soviets’ fault and that we ought to have in some way supported their stance more effectively than, apparently, by their lights, we did,” he manufactured an impish grin, “other than to confess their sins and ask for absolution, Kennedy’s people had nowhere to go without surrendering the high moral ground. Now they’ve got an escape route and if they have the wit to see it, a way to honourably step back from the brink with us that they never had with the Soviets.”

In the background the voice of the President changed pitch, warning the highly attuned ears of the listeners in the Cabinet Room that he was about to move past purposeless conjecture, forget scoring cheap political points and hopefully, remember that he was actually supposed to be a leader and a statesman.

“*However,*” Jack Kennedy said with a solemnity that might not have been wholly false, “*in the context of the affairs of man there is truth in the recognition that words are only words, and that our fears and hopes can only be addressed by actions. I am content to leave the judgement on my part in the momentous events of the last thirteen months to Chief Justice Warren,*” a self-deprecatory hesitation, presumably to allow him to flash a boyish grin at the American people, “*and to the battalions of historians that will surely study our age with limitless intellectual energy and forensic analysis for as long as human beings continue to walk this Earth. To me, as your President in a time of renewed international crisis, the sacred duty falls upon me to ensure the survival of the American people and of our way of life. Even as I speak Secretary of State Dean Rusk is speeding a proposal to our British ‘friends’ that we hold a face to face, leader to leader summit at which our*

current problems can be discussed and resolved. In so doing we disregard the fact that the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration unilaterally broke off diplomatic relations three days ago; and that thus far our diplomats have not been granted safe passage to return to the United States. Moreover, as a token of our peaceful intentions towards the United Kingdom, our staunchest allies in the Cuban Missiles War of October last year, I have ordered the US Navy to immediately comply with all the provisions of the unlawful Total Exclusion Zone declared by the UKIEA which comes into effect in less than three days time.”

“Unlawful!” Margaret Thatcher scoffed softly.

“Further to this concession I wish to restate the United States’ unchanged view of the legitimacy of the governments of Spain, Portugal, Italy and Sicily, and of Corsica and Sardinia. It is the view of my Administration that the declarations of independence by the latter island nations, of Corsica and Sardinia, by separate self-appointed military juntas are illegal under international law. Sardinia is rightly an integral part of the polity of Italy; Corsica likewise, is a part of France, notwithstanding the somewhat chaotic governance of that troubled land at this time. The United States of America recognises but does not in any way support or endorse the right-wing, authoritarian regime of the Tuscan League whose writ runs the length of the Italian Peninsula, and to a lesser extent, throughout Sicily. I reiterate that the US Government regards the dictatorships of General Franco in Spain, and of António de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal as affronts to the democratic principles enshrined by our founding fathers in our constitution. I have issued an executive order to all arms of the United States Government that all existing bilateral and multi-lateral defence and economic agreements and undertakings with and to Spain, Portugal and Italy are, as of ten o’clock Eastern Standard Time, suspended for a period of twenty-eight days.”

Tom Harding-Grayson was frowning.

The President was explaining to the American people what a good egg he was and reassuring the New York Stock Exchange that nothing he had just said was likely to impinge upon business as usual. And if it did then Uncle Sam would ensure nobody was out of pocket.

“What is it Tom?” James Callaghan asked quietly.

“JFK has just suspended a whole raft of measures designed to give the Portuguese colonies in Southern Africa exemption from US import and

export tariffs. The value of the Portuguese escudo will fall like a stone against the dollar. Salazar's already got a guerrilla war spreading across Angola. As for Mozambique," the Foreign Secretary shook his head. "Salazar's bound to turn to the South Africans for help in Mozambique..."

The problem with this was not immediately apparent to the others in the room. Realising as much, Tom Harding-Grayson tried to explain.

"Southern Africa is like a house of cards. If one card falls the contagion could easily spread to the next, and so on. Several of the guerrilla movements in the region were essentially Soviet backed nationalist entities. However, just because the Soviet Union doesn't exist anymore it doesn't mean there aren't still Soviet advisors and weapons on the ground, or that the movements themselves have melted away. For example, the African National Congress was never a Soviet tool. Most of its leaders were sheltered and many were educated, in Britain..."

Everybody was suddenly listening to the President of the United States of America.

"You will have read disturbing reports about United States Air Force participation in attacks against British interests and warships in the Central and Western Mediterranean Sea..."

"And in the North Atlantic!" The Angry Widow hissed.

"I will say this once, and once only," John Fitzgerald Kennedy asserted, his voice quivering with emotion. The sermon was reaching its crescendo; demanding a leap of faith. "Not one of these actions was ordered by, or sanctioned by my Administration and anybody who is found to have knowingly participated in, either by deed or commission, in inducing American servicemen to take part in, and in many cases, die, in the course of those actions will be pursued by my Administration and prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

The Prime Minister exhaled a long slow reflective breath.

"He's started speaking off the cuff," he remarked. The others in the Cabinet Room knew how meticulously Edward Heath prepared his every public utterance. As befitted a Balliol man and a former President of the Oxford Union few men in the UKIEA understood better how to construct a coherent, consistent and entertaining speech. He might not be the most riveting of orators but he was always good value for money and by the time he sat down and put away his notes, *everybody* knew *exactly* where he stood.

Not so the President of the United States of America. "I think somebody's slipping new, revised notes in front of him as he goes along. He's extemporising off the cuff."

The very idea of it appalled the Prime Minister. The idea that a man could sit down to talk to his nation about peace and war, and then half-way through start making it up as he went along beggared belief.

The possibilities for disaster were almost limitless...

"As I speak I am aware that there may be American servicemen in the hands of the British authorities. I solemnly vow to the American people that I will not attend a peace summit while our boys are held captive overseas..."

"He's just added that," Tom Harding-Grayson gasped. "What's wrong with the man? Is he drunk, or something?"

A thing once publicly promised to tens of millions of one's own people cannot be taken back again except at huge personal and political cost. There was a short pause as the President contemplated the folly of what he had just said.

"I know this will not be an insurmountable problem because in my heart I choose to believe that the vital national interests of both the United States and the old country remain indivisible, one and the same thing and that when good friends differ, the spirit of friendship and reconciliation can conquer all things!"

Chapter 24

Monday 9th December 1963

The Oval Office, White House, Washington DC

Jack Kennedy's hands were shaking so badly he could not hold the tumbler of neat Bourbon his younger brother had tried to press into his hands. After the broadcast had ended he had stared into the middle distance, ignoring everybody in the room. He would have said something but he was out of words; the most loquacious man since FDR to sit in the Oval Office had run out of words to express the stark dissonance of his thoughts.

"Bobby," Lyndon Baines Johnson, every inch the Texan cowboy in his cool unflappability, drawled softly. "You need to leave me alone with the President now."

The Attorney General scowled at the older man.

"You boys might want another war but me," the Vice President shrugged, "I talk to voters now and then. Up close and personal, and they don't want another war. Trust me, they want a lot of things but most of all they don't want another war and if we carry on doing business this way that's what we're going to get. So you take all these other folks outside while I talk to the President."

The tall Texan drew up a chair across the desk from his President.

Presently, the two men were alone.

"Well," the older man said, "I told you jumping on that conspiracy shit Bobby and Dean brought back from State this afternoon was a mistake. You just told the American people you got fooled by the bad guys, Mister President. If we had some bad guys in our hands we could put them on death row but we don't and we probably never will. The next thing that's going to happen is Curtis fucking LeMay is going to come busting into DC like a B-52 loaded for bear because you named and shamed *his* fucking Air Force without giving him a heads up first. LeMay's a son of a bitch but he's *our* son of a bitch and you don't call out a guy like him unless you've seen his hand and you know you've got the table covered."

Jack Kennedy began to focus on the Texan.

“You finished yet, Mister Vice President?”

“Jeez, I haven’t started yet. Who the fuck put in that shit about the Brits stopping our Embassy people coming home? And the demand to hand our POWs back before we agree to talk?”

The President held up a hand.

“That was a mistake,” he murmured, his thoughts elsewhere. “The Greeks called the Straits of Gibraltar the *Pillars of Hercules*,” the former Rhodes Scholar went on. “The Rock of Gibraltar was the northern ‘pillar’, with either Monte Hacho in Ceuta, or Jebel Musa in Morocco being the most obvious southern ‘pillar’. The *Pillars of Hercules* marked the end of the known world in classical times; and beyond them lay *monsters*...”

The Vice President did not reply, instead he glowered at the younger man.

“That is exactly what we have become to our friends and enemies alike, Mister Vice President,” Jack Kennedy ruminated. “Monsters.”

He saw the untouched tumbler of grain whisky by his right hand and pushed it away.

“We have become monsters terrified of our own shadows.” Suddenly, his eyes were clear and he was studying Lyndon Baines Johnson’s rugged face. He reached for the black handset of the telephone linked to the White House switchboard via his personal secretary in the adjoining office.

“How may I help you, sir?” Chimed the voice of Edna Zabriski, the newest of the three permanent secretaries who staffed his White House personal office twenty-four hours a day when he was in DC.

“Would you ask Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara and the Attorney General to return to the Oval Office please, Mrs Zabriski?”

“Yes, Mister President.”

Jack Kennedy’s lips formed an involuntary grin for an instant as he replaced the handset in its cradle. Until Edna Zabriski found her feet at the White House she would remain the one person in Washington DC who was still in his thrall. He met his Vice President’s stare.

“What? No home spun pearls of wisdom?”

“No, we’re way beyond that.”

“What would you do if you were sitting behind *this* desk?”

Lyndon Baines Johnson thought about the question.

“I’d be pissing my pants, Mister President.”

Before Jack Kennedy could answer a side door opened and Edna Zabriski ushered Dean Rusk into the Oval Office. The Secretary of State looked to the Vice President, then the President.

"I want to talk to the British Ambassador," the President said flatly.

Dean Rusk could be a maddeningly pedantic man: "There is no British Ambassador, Mister President. Sir James Sykes surrendered his accreditation when you refused to grant him an interview yesterday."

Jack Kennedy wanted to bite back. He refrained. Calmly he suggested: "I don't care how you do it, Dean. Go up to 3100 Massachusetts Avenue North and knock on the door of the British Embassy in person if you have to but bring Jim Sykes back here. Now please."

Dean Rusk hesitated, opened his mouth as if he was going to protest, and immediately shut it. He nodded.

"As you wish," he muttered and turned on his heel.

Robert McNamara walked into the Oval Office as the disgruntled Secretary of State departed. The Secretary of Defence stopped for a moment and watched his Cabinet colleague depart. He threw the President and Vice President a quizzical glance.

"I expect the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to sit on Curtis LeMay," Jack Kennedy told McNamara, who pursed his lips and nodded his acknowledgement as he removed his glasses to excise a speck of dust from the right-hand lens.

"General Wheeler says LeMay wants a personal *interview* with 'the Commander-in-Chief'. Bus Wheeler says LeMay went out to Barksdale as soon as he heard about the Malta," Robert McNamara's lips twitched into a configuration of mild distaste, "fiasco. LeMay's staffers discovered gaps in the paper trail at the Air Force Department and at the Pentagon, so he went directly to the one place where he knew for certain he would get his hands on the original operations orders and the sequenced coded authentication documents related to the *two* separate B-52 missions."

"Two?" Jack Kennedy rasped, an icy hand clutching at his guts. He had thought he had a handle on the situation. Now it seemed he had been catastrophically wrong. "You said two, Bob?"

"There was a second mission involving four other B-52s targeting Gibraltar. The second mission was aborted because the Spanish Air Force failed to suppress British carrier-based air. Bus Wheeler's got his staff

crawling all over the Air Force Department and the Pentagon to ascertain whether there are any other 'rogue operations orders' in the system. Le May has the FBI and his own security people rounding up anybody who had anything to do with the drafting, transmission and authentication of the mission orders received at Barksdale AFB on December 3 at 22:57 hours."

Jack Kennedy's eyes were widening, pupils dilating.

"The Air Force got an order to carpet bomb the two key Mediterranean bases of our British 'allies' and nobody at the Air Force Department queried it?"

The rumble of distant thunder filtered into the Oval Office like an ill omen from the gods.

"No. The authentication codes checked out. LeMay says the CO at Barksdale wasn't happy about it but after he placed a call to LeMay's staff he got on with obeying his orders. He claims to have spoken to a Colonel Seedorf at the Pentagon but we have no trace of any such officer on LeMay's staff. Two Pentagon staffers with that surname have been arrested for questioning as a precautionary measure. However, it seems that they were not involved in this matter..."

There was another clap of thunder.

Except it was not thunder because everybody in the room felt the ground flinch beneath their feet and heard the blast wave rattle against the bullet proof windows of the Oval Office; within seconds Security Service men with drawn hand guns were rushing the President of the United States along the corridor and down into the subterranean Situation Room bunker complex that ever since the October War, had been partially mothballed to permit hurried and much deeper extensions to be constructed.

Jack Kennedy, the Vice President and the Secretary of Defence were hurried through bare concrete rooms and dusty passageways heavy with dust and the fumes of fresh paint. Within less than a minute they had been corralled in the relative safety of the Situation Room. Secret Service Agents and Marines – still in their ceremonial guard duty uniforms but now carrying M16 automatic rifles grimly barred every door, every corridor.

Washington DC was under attack.

Twenty feet underground beneath ten feet of reinforced concrete the drum roll of big explosions sent shivers through the bed rock to register on the stunned minds of the men and women sheltering in the White House

Situation Room.

“Is there any coffee?” The President inquired, strangely relaxed now that the worst had happened. If he was to die tonight he would die with a mug of coffee in his hands. He had never really been that afraid of dying; he had sat out most of the nightmare of the October War in the Oval Office despite the pleas of his family and advisors. The American people had had no opportunity to run to shelters that in most places did not exist, so he had had no personal inclination to run and hide from the consequences of his actions.

It was Edna Zabriski who placed the steaming mug on the blotter before her President some minutes later. The middle-aged, matronly woman grimaced apologetically.

“I’m sorry it took so long...”

“Do you have family in DC, Mrs Zabriski?” Jack Kennedy asked gently.

“Mr Zabriski was a contractor with Boeing in Seattle,” the woman confessed shyly. “I live with my sister in Georgetown...”

The huge Boeing plant in Seattle and the giant naval base and dockyard at Bremerton had been virtually undamaged by the two megaton-sized air bursts over Dabob Bay and Sammanish, even though the death toll in the city and the area surrounding Puget Sound had eventually topped out at around three hundred thousand, of whom approximately half had died of injuries sustained in the initial strikes.

“Did they find your husband’s body?” Jack Kennedy asked quietly.

“Yes, I was one of the lucky ones, Mister President.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” The woman made as if to go. “No, stay with us, Mrs Zabriski,” the Commander-in-Chief directed, “this is as safe as any place in DC.”

No reports from above ground filtered down to the Situation Room for almost twenty minutes. Then the arrival of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, shouldering past the stone-faced Secret Service Agents and Marines, broke the log jam and suddenly there was far too much information.

“There have been as many as twenty major bombings in the city,” General Earle Wheeler reported with a stoic impartiality. “There are also accounts, unconfirmed, of gunmen roaming the streets killing at random.”

Trucks filled with high explosives and fuel and chemical tankers had been driven up to Government buildings and detonated without warning. Many of the buildings which had been attacked had – due to the late hour –

been virtually empty; conversely, because hardly anybody was present where only small fires had been started by the initial explosions there had been nobody to stop those fires spreading out of control. Vehicles had blown up in the parking lots adjacent to the Pentagon and several dozen projectiles – thought to have been launched by an improvised trench mortar of some kind – had been fired into the Pentagon itself. The Navy Department building on Constitution Avenue was on fire, as was the State Department complex. The list was long and growing.

Bobby Kennedy ran into the Situation Room.

“Dean is dead!” He blurted. “So is one of his Secret Service guys. The Washington PD says he was right next to the truck that blew up outside the British Embassy!”

Chapter 25

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Villa Nova de Gaia, Lisbon, Portugal

Clara Pullman yawned and stretched as she walked through into the kitchen of the ancient but thoroughly modernised villa on the hills overlooking the Estuary of the River Tagus. The sprawling city of Lisbon was beginning to emerge out of the grey haze of the morning. She had been to Lisbon many times during the 1950s and with one partner or another, walked its streets and relaxed on the waterfronts, fallen a little in love with the city, its people and with the Portuguese, whose language she had acquired a limited but conversationally fluent familiarity.

The tall spymaster, Sir Richard – call me ‘Dick’ – White had departed before dawn leaving Arkady and herself in the ‘protection’ of three amiably formidable ‘minders’. The trio looked like soldiers out of uniform to Clara. Each man carried a Browning 9-millimetre semi-automatic pistol and each man had that hard, weathered tan that spoke of lives lived outdoors and a casual acquaintance with danger.

The Head of MI6 – the British Secret Intelligence Service – had kept Arkady going on strong black coffee and ‘pep’ pills, presumably amphetamines, most of the night. Clara had not expected the debriefing to be so immediate or so intense, nor had she anticipated being in the same room with her lover while it was going on. Dick White and a second man, a sallow-faced acolyte who had darted questions at Arkady in Russian and at Clara in French, and spoken English with a pronounced Germanic accent, had scratched notes all night long in a big, legal-size hardback notebook.

He had been introduced as ‘Max’.

‘Red Dawn,’ Arkady Pavlovich Rykov, once Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin’s personal translator, and afterwards a Colonel in the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* – the KGB – who had been in fact, Dick White’s ‘mole’ inside that organisation since late 1956, explained, ‘was not initiated as an *apparatus* of the Soviet State because in the event of a catastrophe who could say whether the state, in any meaningful sense, would

survive. Red Dawn was an *idea* which became a *movement* in the years after the Great Patriotic War which ended in 1945. Because the Americans had the atomic bomb and for several years, we, the Soviet Union, did not, the annihilation of the Mother Country was a very real possibility. In such a climate of fear strange and dangerous decisions are often made in haste and later, rued at leisure. In inculcating a 'will to resist' in the face of utter defeat, the men in the Kremlin created a terrible monster. A monster that was so terrible and came to be regarded as being so threatening to the integrity of the Soviet State that in the years before the October War, the leaders of the Red Dawn movement were ruthlessly persecuted. Many were sent into internal exile in Siberia, or posted to closed cities, some were imprisoned and, I daresay, some were simply *disappeared*. In October 1959 my old mentor, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev called me to a private meeting at his dacha outside Moscow and anointed me his *personal witch-finder general*. By that time Red Dawn had infiltrated every organ of the Soviet State. The Red Dawn movement and the Soviet State had become indistinguishable; a war party that would never make peace with the western democracies.'

Her lover had previously told Clara that he had been 'turned' by the CIA and that his KGB masters had finally caught up with him. He had claimed his former comrades – who had been torturing him in an Ankara basement – were killed by the first air burst over the Turkish capital shortly after they had wearied of beating him and gone outside to get a 'breath of fresh air'. Some hours later he had freed himself and ended up at the United States Air Force Base Hospital at Incirlik where her flight to Beirut had been diverted when the first bombs went off that night. She already knew this part of the story was a lie. In reality, Arkady had been on the run from Red Dawn for several weeks before the October War, desperately attempting to contact Dick White so that he could be could 'come in from the cold'. He had been on his way to Incirlik when the war happened; but she said nothing. Mostly, she listened.

After the October War Red Dawn had literally, come out of the woodwork; risen like an evil Phoenix from the ashes of the wrecked USSR. Since the movement had been ubiquitous wherever the Soviet State had a presence; in embassies, trade legations, the KGB, the army, the air force and the navy, even in sporting and other cultural agencies, all that was missing was a guiding hand in the nightmare aftermath of the war.

'I do not believe that there is a single guiding hand. However, there are

many 'guiding hands', more likely locally in the devastated lands, and nationally in those places less affected by the war. For example, I would predict that in the United States of America - large tracts of which survived the war untouched including Washington DC - Red Dawn has coalesced into a loosely nationalistic underground movement capable of developing complex strategies and carrying out extremely ambitious operations. Red Dawn will have insinuated itself into mainstream political parties, the military-industrial complex, local militias and extremist groups of the right, rather than the left since the FBI indiscriminately targets all left-leaning groups and largely leaves the red-neck, racist, anti-Semitic and other right wing coalitions to their own devices. Red Dawn will have a presence in governmental institutions, trades unions and on University campuses across America. I have no way of knowing how deeply any, or all of these organisations, groups and factions may have been penetrated by Red Dawn, or for that matter, the level of commitment of individual members of the Red Dawn movement to their cause. Some areas of the American state will have been hardly touched by Red Dawn; others, a minority to be sure, will have been deeply compromised. For example, National Guard formations may have been suborned, or parts of critical military command and control infrastructures perverted. It is likely that the widespread civil unrest in many parts of North America is fomented by Red Dawn sympathisers. In the United Kingdom the situation is different because although Red Dawn was probably more deeply embedded in Western Europe than was possible in the United States, the war damage in even the less relatively heavily damaged countries like the United Kingdom and France was so severe that the movement itself would have been fractured. Martial law was declared in the United Kingdom following the October War and the UKIEA clamped down ruthlessly in the wake of the first post-war wave of assassinations and bombings. The original Provisional Government of West France reacted with great violence also. Red Dawn's own internal organisation was splintered by the war and then further fragmented by the actions of the authorities. In the devastated areas of the Mother Country, Red Dawn would exist only in the form of disparate fiefdoms, perhaps unwilling or unable to co-operate one with another. In the Balkans, Turkey and Armenia, it was inevitable that Red Dawn would find an affinity with several of the pre-existing and entrenched - for generations - competing ethnic and religious groupings. In the near future

it is in this area, and perhaps in Asia Minor as a whole, that Red Dawn will pose the greatest immediate threat to the existing hegemony. If, as I expect, the surviving resources of the former Turkish State are mobilised by Red Dawn the greater part of the world's known oil reserves will eventually fall into its hands as what is, in effect, a new Ottoman-type empire expands to engulf the whole Middle East.'

Clara had listened with horror and fascination.

'It might be that Red Dawn burned itself out in uncoordinated spasms of violence immediately after the October War in the United Kingdom, France, Malta, Cyprus and elsewhere. On Malta, for example, 'only a few diehards' remain. In the United Kingdom, the surviving remnants of Red Dawn will most likely, have been subsumed into the widespread criminal sub-culture peculiar to all command economies in which the strict rationing of food, fuel and other essential supplies underpins the existence of every citizen.' The Russian had concluded: 'I fear for what might happen in America, but what manner of monster might emerge from Asia Minor in the coming years gives me nightmares.'

Dick White had prompted the Russian to express a view on the recent events in the Iberian Peninsula, the surprise attack on Malta and the attempted assassination of the British Royal Family.

Although the details were news to the battered former KGB Colonel; nothing he was told remotely surprised him.

'If you are asking me if I see the hand of Red Dawn in these events,' he had shrugged, 'I'd say they were consistent with the activities of a subversive movement embedded within agencies of the American government hoping to drive a wedge between the two countries which Red Dawn views as being most implacably inimical to its *crusade*.'

Clara had thought that 'crusade' was an interesting and a rather frightening word to use; and so had Dick White, who had queried it in a moment.

'A certain American general talks about bombing his enemies *back into the Stone Age*,' he had reminded the tall Englishman. 'I think that gentleman misses his mark. It is not to 'the Stone Age' that we have bombed ourselves but back towards a new World order that a mediaeval mind would well understand. A World in which war and warriors are the ruling class; a World in which 'renaissance' is a dirty word; a World in which people will be

driven again to live in citadels; and in which the champions of Red Dawn see themselves as latter day Templars, or Teutonic Knights. Europe and the *Russian* parts of the Soviet Union are in ruins. Red Dawn will seek to insinuate itself into and then dominate what will inevitably become a battleground between competing religious, political and militaristic theosophies. The Americans have bombed the World we knew back into a World that has much in common with the World of the European wars of religion of the seventeenth century. Whatever happens, it is almost inevitable that there will be thirty years, perhaps more, of war in Europe, Asia Minor and the Middle East. All that we have seen so far are a few scattered, *experimental* ‘opening shots’ in the coming war. Red Dawn is merely flexing its muscles...’

Clara Pullman warmed herself by the stove, gazed out across the peaceful, unsullied vista of the city of Lisbon.

Dick White had been more sanguine about the future than Arkady.

‘If I learned anything from the forty-five war,’ he had countered, ‘it was that nothing is ever quite as bad as it seems.’

The spymaster had decided that Arkady and Clara should remain in Portugal for ‘the time being’. Meanwhile, he had to go back to England. ‘I look forward to meeting you both again in due course,’ he had promised before driving off into the night with ‘Max’.

Clara went to the big bedroom at the southern end of the villa. Thick drapes were drawn across the tall windows designed to allow the light to flood the room every morning. Without troubling to discard the plain cotton dress she had discovered in one of the wardrobes she slipped beneath the sheets and cautiously snuggled up against her lover’s back.

He half-groaned, half-sighed in his sleep.

Clara’s thoughts wandered out across the stormy seas to where HMS Hermes and her consorts were already fighting the endless ‘future war’ that Arkady had foretold.

She wondered what would happen to the long list of names ‘Max’ had scribbled; the names of Red Dawn members, activists and ‘sleepers’ – thirty-one names – that Arkady had dictated. Wondered also, what the people behind those names were doing right now.

Most of all she wondered if, in this brave new World, if she would ever trust another human being again.

Chapter 26

Tuesday 10th December 1963

The Pembroke Barracks, Malta

A radio had been set up in the corner of the quadrangle now filled with tents and rows of hospital cots. It seemed that overnight Radio Malta had temporarily relocated – from its antiquated, low-power emergency transmitting station on Gozo - to a shed at RAF Luqa where, utilising one of the base's redundant World War II era masts, it was broadcasting again at maximum strength. It had been playing music – mostly dance music – with half-hourly news reports. Everybody who heard those reports knew instantly that the censorship regime of the last year had been abandoned.

“Sir Julian Christopher, the new Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in the Mediterranean, who addressed the Maltese people last night, has promised to extend a hand of friendship to leaders of the Nationalist and Labour Parties. Mr Borg of the Nationalists has welcomed this development but Mr Mintoff has thus far declined to comment...”

Marija Calleja, pausing in her work sorting dressings in the cabinet Margo Seiffert had had moved – ‘so that it is actually where it needs to be, closer to the patients’ – to its present location from the store room at the back of the fort, and listened to the purposeful voice of the announcer. There was a note of hopeful optimism in the man's normally stentorian delivery, as if he had been set free.

“Some news from elsewhere in the world; the two British destroyers damaged by air attacks in the Atlantic are reported to have safely reached Oporto in Portugal. Both ships suffered heavy casualties but no casualty lists have yet been released. In naval engagements in and around the Straits of Gibraltar the British report the loss of two frigates to air attack but continue to blockade the Straits. His Royal Highness Prince Philip; the Duke of Edinburgh's doctors in Scotland report that he is now out of danger, although there is no news as to whether he might still lose one or both of his legs...”

Marija sniffed back a tear.

If there had been any news about Peter Christopher the Admiral would surely have let Margo know; so no news was good news.

She hoped...

“There are reports on American radio and television networks of numerous explosions and of heavy gunfire in the capital of the USA, Washington DC. Details are scarce but in one account a hospital spokesman speaks of scores of casualties and of ambulances and fire engines being fired upon by persons unknown. Less than an hour ago the Reuters agent in Valletta told me over the telephone that there may have been some kind of coup attempt in the American capital, although at this time there is no confirmation of this report. It is not known whether the trouble in Washington was connected to President Kennedy’s State of the Union Address, in which he blamed the atrocities against Malta and Her Majesty the Queen on ‘dark elements emerging from the shadows’. In washing his hands of responsibility for the actions of the US Air Force and ‘other agencies beyond the control of the Administration’, President Kennedy has won few friends...”

Marija smiled a grim private smile. A week ago the radio announcer would have been arrested for so frankly stating ‘the news’.

Lilting dance music began to emanate from the radio.

Margo had ordered Marija to go home and stay there for at least twenty-four hours.

‘No, no arguments!’ Her friend had declared. ‘You are tired, you are hurting all over and I don’t want you having a fall and doing yourself an injury. We have quite enough *real* patients as it is!’ Marija was to go home to Sliema and to let her mother ‘fuss over’ her.

“Your taxi awaits you, ma’am,” a tired but smiling Lieutenant Jim Siddall, lately of the Royal Military Police, now a ‘political intelligence officer’ on the staff of the new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, announced wanly as he looked into the small office.

Marija was a little disorientated.

“I don’t understand...”

“Doctor Seiffert has ordered me to drive you back to Sliema.”

“Margo cannot order you about,” Marija objected.

“When my boss, Admiral Christopher, refers to somebody by their rank,”

he explained, patiently, “and that rank is Commander in the Navy, that person outranks me so, yes, Doctor Seiffert *can* ‘order me about’, actually.”

“Margo is retired from the Navy. She was not in *our* Navy,” she corrected herself, “*your* Navy, I mean. Or at least that’s what I think I mean. I’m so tired I don’t know what I mean...”

“It is on my way,” the big man assured her. “I have a meeting in Valletta with Mr Mintoff’s people.”

Marija did not think he would enjoy that encounter.

As the spokesperson and the public face of the Women of Malta protests – protesting against the detention without trial of so many Maltese men she had met Duminku, or as the British knew him ‘Dom’ a diminutive of his Anglicized name - Dominic Mintoff a number of times. The forty-seven-year-old former Rhodes Scholar at Hertford College, Oxford, and leader of the Maltese Labour party had been placed under house arrest several times in the last year. By profession an architect and journalist, Dom Mintoff was the kind of man who was not going to forget that ignominy any time soon. He had actually been Prime Minister of the colony for three years in the 1950s, and until the October War had been itching to be the first Premier of an independent Maltese Archipelago. Unlike many Maltese politicians Dom Mintoff was never, ever going to be cowed by or in any way supplicant to the colonial power.

Marija looked in on Margo Seiffert to wave goodbye.

“I don’t want to see you again until Thursday!” The older woman informed her. “Promise me that you’ll try to rest?”

Marija had nodded, they had exchanged a hug and pecking kisses and she and Jim Siddall had walked the short distance to where the man had parked his vehicle, a Land Rover in desert livery. She let him hold the door and did not object when he steadied her elbow as she stepped into the cab,

“Have they found any more survivors at HMS Phoenicia?” Marija asked after a minute of jolting along the pot-holed coast road to the south through the coastal village of St Julian’s. Her driver had been based on Manoel Island opposite Sliema for his whole tour on Malta; he must have made a lot of friends among the base personnel who had been killed on Friday.

“No,” he retorted flatly. “They won’t, either. A bomb like the one they dropped on the fort kills everything and everybody in its way. They say the blast collapsed both bomb shelters. Some of the outer walls of the fort are

still standing, but inside...”

“I’m sorry.” Marija understood herself well enough – bearing in mind the fact she had never had a boyfriend, not one that was real, flesh and blood and next to her, rather than thousands miles away, and that she really knew nothing at all about men – to know that a man like Jim Siddall would be good for her, and to her. But knowing it was not wanting or wishing it to be so, and she felt a little guilty even to be entertaining such thoughts while she waited to hear news of Peter.

The big man at the wheel of the Land Rover chuckled ruefully, guessing she was not just thinking about the people whose lives had been blown away by that final fuel-air abomination dropped by one of the doomed B-52s of the 100th Bomb Group.

“If my wife’s still alive in England I’m still married,” he confessed because that’s what you did when you glimpsed the end of the World. If there was another war the end would come quickly, fierily and there would be no time to confess one’s sins; so now was as good a time as any. “My boy Jack would be nearly seven now, if he survived last winter. Doris couldn’t hack the military life and I wasn’t going to buy myself out of the Service. One day I came home and Doris and Jack were gone. Back to her people in Wolverhampton, that’s in the English Midlands, almost as far from the sea as you can go in the old country.”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry, that’s so sad...”

They fell into quietness for the rest of the ten minute journey to Sliema.

The soldier helped her down from the cab, did not linger.

Marija watched the Land Rover drive off down Tower Street towards the waterfront. She had expected the normally crystal clear blue waters of Sliema Creek to be fouled with HMS Agincourt’s leaking bunker oil and was surprised to find the December sun glinting off an oddly idyllic calm sea. Across the anchorage Fort Phoenicia looked strangely normal until a more careful inspection found no silhouettes of buildings protruding above the indestructible ancient bastion walls. The spire of the church was gone, as were the angled limestone roofs of the barrack and office blocks.

The door opened and her younger brother, Joe grinned at her.

They hugged each other, stood back.

“Ouch! You look sore,” her twenty-three year sibling decided, frowning with concern.

“I’m all right. I’m just a little tired. Margo sent me home to rest. Well, it was an order, really. She’s got quite bossy the last day or so, I suppose it must be because we’re surrounded by all those military people at the Pembroke Barracks.”

He younger brother was grinning, relieved and reassured by his sister’s chattiness.

“Apparently,” Marija explained, “because Admiral Christopher had Margo’s old Navy rank included on the written authorisation to set up the hospital at the barracks she outranks practically everybody. All the soldiers tiptoe around her, it is quite funny really.”

Belatedly, Marija saw her brother’s knapsack just inside the door of the family’s apartment.

He glanced back down at his feet.

“They’ve taken me back on at the dockyard,” he confided, smugly.

“Does Margo know?”

“Margo knows everything!” Joe Calleja reached into the house and hefted the rucksack. He sobered a little. “There were a lot of guys killed and injured in the docks. I think everything has changed. I wish I was sure it was for the better.”

Marija’s shoulders sagged.

“Peter’s ship was attacked,” she sniffed, on the verge of a flood of tears. With Joe she did not need to be brave, level-headed, or reasonable unless there were witnesses and notwithstanding they were standing in a busy street with people walking by all the time, they were as good as alone. “The same night we were bombed. Nobody knows if he is alive or dead...”

Her brother embraced his sister very, very gently as she began to sob.

Chapter 27

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Government House, Cheltenham, England

“My word,” Sir Richard White, Head of the Secret Intelligence Service remarked dryly, “you’ve been a busy little bee, Tom,” he added, shaking the shorter man’s hand.

“It is a funny old World,” the Foreign Secretary agreed, waving his premier spymaster to a chair by the guttering fire which had taken the edge off the chill in the air. “I always thought ‘Red Dawn’ was one of those intelligence myths, you know, like the existence of a hypothetical Fellow of Trinity College who isn’t a KGB plant?”

The spymaster blanched at this.

“Red Dawn is a damnably better subtext for what’s been going on lately than anything anybody else has come up with, Tom.”

The two men had been friends since they had worked together in MI5 in the Second World War. Like other wartime intelligence officers their *Who’s Who* entries explained away their war service as ‘attached to the War Office for the duration’ or some such similarly anodyne form of words. Tom Harding-Grayson had not been alone in thinking transferring Dick White from MI5 – where he had been respected and successful – to Head MI6, where he had been neither, in the years before the October War, had been a blunder.

“Did you hear Kennedy’s speech last night?”

“No,” the spymaster apologised.

“He played the conspiracy card and virtually accused the US Air Force of going ‘rogue’ on him.”

“Ah, that’s not good.”

“The Yanks will parley with us but only if we hand back their POWs first.”

“I didn’t realise we were at war?” Dick White queried urbanely. “Did I miss something?”

Tom Harding-Grayson guffawed.

“The reason we’ve not attempted to deal directly with the White House is that they’ve shown very little inclination to take our calls lately, and frankly, it is the considered judgement of the UKIEA that we haven’t a clue what the blighters actually want. You cannot negotiate with somebody who doesn’t understand their own vital strategic interests. To do so would be a recipe for disaster.”

Dick White absorbed this unhurriedly.

“My source for Red Dawn is Arkady Pavlovich Rykov,” he said in little more than a whisper.

His old friend blinked at him.

“Wasn’t there a young fellow called Rykov who was Stalin’s interpreter at Yalta and Potsdam?”

“Yes. The same man; later he was Nikita Sergeyevich’s protégé.”

Tom Harding-Grayson’s eyes narrowed.

“He was Khrushchev’s man, too?”

“Yes. He was a colonel in the KGB.”

The new Foreign Secretary gave his principle spymaster a thoughtful look as if he half-suspected he was the potential victim of a particularly fiendish practical joke.

“And how long has Arkady Pavlovich been in your pocket?”

“Since the end of 1956; the way the Hungarian Rising was put down was the last straw. For the record; Rykov’s not the sort of man who is ever in anybody’s pocket, Tom,” Dick White avowed dryly. “Red Dawn was a thing of the Stalin era which, shall we say, got so out of hand that by the late fifties Khrushchev was afraid it would destabilise the entire Soviet system. I don’t know if Operation Anadyr, the attempt to base ICBMs on Cuba was a thing sponsored by members of the Red Dawn movement inside the Soviet hierarchy, of just a bad call by the Politburo, or even by Nikita Sergeyevich himself. I don’t know if Red Dawn poisoned the atmosphere in Moscow so badly that the Soviets backed themselves into a corner they couldn’t get out of over Cuba. What I do know, or more correctly, strongly believe, is that the Red Dawn movement is real and that the Soviet leadership was worried enough about it in the late fifties to attempt to systematically purge it, and when that failed to ask a man like Arkady Pavlovich Rykov to penetrate its higher echelons.”

The Foreign Secretary looked at the calm, unflappable man dressed

immaculately, impeccably despite having stepped off an RAF Comet twenty minutes before knocking on his door.

“So you’re basing your Red Dawn *theory* on the word of a single Soviet spy who may, or may not be telling the truth?”

The spymaster said nothing.

Tom Harding-Grayson continued to analyse *the problem*. He and his old friend had not always seen things eye to eye, especially when it came to the Americans, and although they had agreed to disagree more often than not, their minds did not operate along parallel lines. What made perfect sense to the Head of MI6 did not necessarily fit into the bigger picture Tom Harding-Grayson tried to keep in his head at all times. Spies were wont to see plots and conspiracies in the most innocent of errors, miscalculations or misplaced ambitions. That was what they were paid to do and their lives, occasionally, depended on that corrupted view of everybody else’s reality.

“It is all a bit far-fetched, old man,” he said presently, clasping his hands together and casting his gaze into the dwindling glow of the embers in the hearth. Getting by on the same coal ration as the ordinary worker and his family was problematic at this time of year and the winter had not really bitten yet. “I’ll grant that it offers an explanation for some of our troubles.”

“Rykov’s most recent intelligence comes from the Levant, Tom. Red Dawn is a more coherent and tangible movement in that part of the World. If Red Dawn has significant tentacles and capabilities in Western Europe and North America, the animal may be a completely different beast. Perhaps, a more opportunistic, disjointed force simply exploiting the civil and military dislocation caused by the October War. Remember, Red Dawn was not created by Stalin as a political instrument; more as an ongoing blight upon humanity after he was dead. Hitler tried to do the same thing at the end of the forty-five war. Remember how obsessed we and the Americans were about the so-called Alpine Redoubt that hundreds of thousands of fanatical Nazis, so called ‘werewolves’, were supposedly going to hold onto for all time? The only difference is that Hitler died too soon to do more than inflict scorched earth on his own people; Stalin had the best part of a decade to get Red Dawn off the ground, a decade in which to exploit the simmering ethnic and religious tensions in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the World. Nearly a decade in which to lay the foundations of a movement whose central *raison d’être* is to promote a virulently nihilistic antidote to everything the

Western World has stood for since the Renaissance.”

The Foreign Secretary smiled bleakly.

“Goodness, we’ll make a philosopher of you yet, Dick.”

The spymaster leaned towards his friend.

“Tom, if even a small part of what Arkady Rykov has told me is true our current difficulties are as nothing to what is to come.”

There was a knock at the door. A young woman in a shabby dress stole into the room and handed Tom Harding-Grayson a slim Manila folder with a much overwritten cover, and departed as swiftly as she had appeared. The Foreign Secretary opened the file.

“Excuse me a moment, Dick,” he murmured distractedly as he perused the contents of the file marked *‘Urgent and Immediate’*. After a few moments he reached for the phone on his desk. “I’d like to speak to Captain Brenckmann in my office please. Yes, as soon as possible. Thank you...”

Dick White waited patiently.

“Something’s going on in Washington,” his friend told the spymaster, looking up from the file. “We’re intercepting more radio broadcasts reporting a large number of explosions and sustained gunfire around government buildings including the Pentagon and fighter bombers overflying the city.”

“A coup, perhaps,” the Head of MI6 speculated.

“Is that really likely?” Countered the other man, in no way discounting the idea.

“Ninety percent of North America was untouched by the October War. However, the perceptions of most Americans I have met in the last year is that their country was ravaged as badly, if not worse, than any other ‘democracy’. This, and the fact that the war changed the rules of the political game by removing America’s one unifying ‘enemy’, the Soviet Union, has bred a somewhat febrile atmosphere in which many of the more extreme elements in American Society – to paraphrase a senior member of the US intelligence community, ‘back-woodsmen, miscellaneous crazies and religious nuts’ whose numbers have been swelled by disaffected ex-servicemen summarily dumped back into civilian life by the so-called ‘peace dividend defence cuts’ – have filled the vacuum left by what I suspect future historians will probably term ‘the great American democratic deficit’.”

“Go on,” the Foreign Secretary prompted.

“The situation is made for a movement like Red Dawn to exploit. Federal mismanagement of the immediate aftermath of the October War reignited the ‘states rights’ issue in Massachusetts and the Carolinas and even, to a degree in New York State, and of course in the Pacific north-west. Perhaps, the most de-stabilising of the handful of Soviet strikes was the one that destroyed large areas of Chicago. Notwithstanding that the American industrial base was, and remains, so vast and so riddled with redundancies, the balance of industrial and therefore, economic power has shifted, become more diverse and in time will create a far more resilient and probably, much wealthier America. But in the meantime the American people are suffering a period of rapid re-adjustment. Unemployment has soared despite the drive to return to pre-war levels of production because the inefficiencies in the system are suddenly being ruthlessly purged. With all the non-jobs and sinecures being squeezed out of the US economy it isn’t surprising that there should be widespread industrial discontent. Don’t forget that profound racial tensions were bubbling up in the Deep South long before the October War. The burgeoning Civil Rights movement led by charismatic figures like Martin Luther King hasn’t gone away, in fact, the events of the last year have served to drive forward the struggle for equality. In such a climate it is hardly surprising that with an intensely partisan political system and large areas of territory under a variety of different kinds of martial law, or no law at all, that the ‘crazies’ should start ‘coming out of the woodwork’. Personally, I thought the process of societal disintegration would take longer in the States; several years, perhaps. However, that a major insurrection might be in progress at this time, relatively speaking so soon after the October War speaks to me of the influence of a guiding hand. Red Dawn might well be that guiding hand.”

Tom Harding-Grayson’s eyes narrowed.

“You don’t sound very surprised to hear about explosions and gunfire and fighter jets flying over Washington DC, Dick?”

“I’m not. My analysis was that it was bound to happen sooner or later.” He shrugged apologetically. “If I’d come to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, your predecessor, or to you as Sir Alec’s principal advisor with this before now you’d have sent me away with a flea in my ear. You’d probably have accused me of being alarmist.”

“Perhaps,” his friend conceded. Dick White was right; dear old Alec

Douglas-Home would never have taken the spymaster seriously again if he had come to him with a hypothesis linking Red Dawn to a future armed insurrection in America.

"I'd never dream of sending a fellow like you away with any kind of flea in his ear, Dick," Tom Harding-Grayson remonstrated.

"You know what I mean, Tom."

There was a new knock at the door.

Captain Walter Brenckmann was tired and dishevelled in his crumpled US Navy uniform and he had not shaved for thirty-six hours. He had just been roused from a troubled sleep having despaired of the quixotic mission the British envisaged for him when they had brought him back to Cheltenham. His one 'conversation' with 'his people back home' had been an unmitigated disaster in which he had said one thing to Dean Rusk and Bobby Kennedy and the US Secretary of State and the Attorney General had heard *another*. He had tried and failed to rationalise the misbegotten trans-Atlantic telephone exchange by reminding himself that politicians only ever heard what they want to hear; but it did not change the fact that he had had a shot at trying to get the fools in Washington to understand what was going on and he had not just blown it, he had made things worse.

Listening to the President's State of the Union Address he had asked himself how soon the missiles would be flying and when the bombs would fall?

The newcomer viewed the Head of the Secret Intelligence Service warily.

"This is Sir Richard White, Head of MI6," Tom Harding-Grayson announced unnecessarily.

"Call me 'Dick'," the tall, handsome man in his fifties said to the unkempt former US Naval Attaché to the Court of Balmoral. "I hear you share *our* fervent desire to avoid further unpleasantness between our two countries?"

"Yes, sir."

"Reuters is reporting explosions and heavy fighting in the streets of Washington DC," Tom Harding-Grayson said flatly, coming to a decision that he fully understood would be the making or the breaking of his career, and possibly of the British people.

Chapter 28

Tuesday 10th December 1963

HMS Dreadnought, 117 miles West of Vigo

Commander Simon Collingwood stood over the Plot Table in the control room of the Royal Navy's first – and only – nuclear-powered attack submarine while he methodically deconstructed, and then as painstakingly, reconstructed the operational plan he had been considering ever since the two United States Navy boats had latched onto HMS Dreadnought like a pair of four thousand ton steel limpets.

Both of the Dreadnought's jailors had similar acoustic signatures and since one of them, USS Scorpion, SN589, had been identified from a previous encounter by her sound profile, it was likely that both vessels were Skipjack class hunter killers. It was this realisation that had placed a malicious seed in Simon Collingwood's mind.

Under the terms of the 1958 US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement Dreadnought had been constructed around *exactly* the same S5W reactor and propulsion system as the boats of the Skipjack class. Although the hull forms of the British and the American boats were different, they 'sounded' very alike, especially when they were in close company or making speed at a distance. This shared 'acoustic profile' was much less of a problem for the hunted than it was for the hunters who, in dire straits, had at all times to be absolutely sure they were not *hunting* the 'wrong' target.

The Commanding Officer of the Dreadnought had been observing how his jailors were going about their business for the last twelve hours. While it was clear that the American captains were manoeuvring independently; he had seen enough to know they were both using the same, somewhat unimaginative 'playbook'. Understandably, their priorities were to: one, not collide with each other or their 'prisoner', and; two, not to give Dreadnought any excuse to start a shooting war in which, most likely, all three boats would probably be sunk with all hands. While Simon Collingwood was not planning to get himself killed – well, not if he could help it but accidents happened – if the price of getting out of jail was to risk a collision...so be it.

“Mr Forton,” he said quietly to his bearded Executive Officer, “the boat will come to Action Stations. As *loudly* as possible, if you please.”

The other man grinned wickedly as he raised the intercom microphone to his lips.

“This is the Executive Officer. The boat will come to Action Stations! Repeat, the boat will come to Action Stations!” He nodded at the crewman opposite the plot. “Sound the collision alarm!”

The crew of the Dreadnought, pre-briefed, compartment by compartment, division by division clattered noisily about their business.

“Down planes,” Simon Collingwood called. “Ten degrees down angle. Helmsman, come left ten degrees...”

Right now the control rooms of the two shadowing Skipjack class submarines would be coming to life with very a rude shock. Reports would be ricocheting off the bulkheads, heads would be being scratched, and officers of the watch urgently summoning their captains.

“Make you revs one hundred, Mr Forton.”

“One-zero-zero revs, aye, sir!”

“Reverse planes. Up angle ten degrees!”

Dreadnought’s turning dive became a rolling ascent as she slowly porpoised down and then up some one hundred and fifty feet in the water column.

“Scorpion has broken right and come up to ten knots. Away Doppler.”

The USS Scorpion had been trailing a thousand yards astern.

“Bandit one has come to a full stop, sir.”

The other boat had heard Dreadnought’s sudden, unexpected emergence from silent running and plotted her turn. Now she was listening; trying to work out what was going on. So far, so good; one jailor had broken away to reduce the collision risk, the other had passively stood off.

“All stop!” He called.

The boat stopped softly vibrating and glided to a halt at a depth of two hundred and thirty feet, slowly, imperceptibly at first, assuming a bow up attitude.

“Let’s have lots and lots of running about all over the boat impersonating headless chickens if you please, Number One.”

The word was passed and soon men were trampling up and down the boat, hitting bulkheads with wrenches and scraping anything that made an

appropriately unhappy screeching sound against available exposed metal surfaces. And then ever so slowly Dreadnought's bow rose higher and the boat began to slowly slip back into the waiting depths.

"Five zero revs please," Simon Collingwood ordered.

At three hundred and thirty-five feet the boat's gentle descent slowed and stopped.

"Four zero revs."

Still the depth gauge remained steady.

"Three-zero revs."

Dreadnought began to slip backwards again.

"Three-five zero feet!"

"Three-six-zero feet!"

Simon Collingwood knew what the men in the American boats would be thinking. Dreadnought was in distress; and no submariner would ever wish that on another.

"Flood torpedo tubes one and two," he ordered very quietly.

On an older, smaller diesel-electric boat the water rushing into the forward tubes would have been audible in the control room. Not so on the Dreadnought.

"Tubes one and two flooded down, sir!"

"Flood tubes three and four."

Simon Collingwood did not believe the American boats would fire on Dreadnought but if they did he did not intend to die wondering. Both Skipjack class boats were standing off, slowly circling.

"One hundred revs if you please."

"One-zero-zero revs, aye, sir!"

"Ten degrees left rudder. Hold the boat at two-seven-zero feet."

HMS Dreadnought turned wide circles beneath the North Atlantic with her jailors watching from afar for over twenty minutes before turning onto a course that intersected the Portuguese coast north of Oporto, and increasing speed to twelve knots.

Obediently, the two Skipjack class jailors fell in behind the British submarine. After an hour one of the pursuers came alongside Dreadnought's port side at a range of about five hundred yards, probing the renewed silence of her quarry.

Simon Collingwood had predicted the manoeuvre. The US skippers

were not about to be lulled into a false sense of security because that was not the way either the US Navy or the Royal Navy trained its submarine commanders. However, Dreadnought's antics and her dogged attempt to head for Portugal would have suggested to them that their prey was damaged and therefore, less dangerous. Because of this it might make what he had in mind much more likely to work.

Another hour passed. The USS Scorpion trailed in Dreadnought's wake, her companion boat quartered the ocean about a mile ahead.

"Full right rudder!" Simon Collingwood rasped. "Helmsman, reverse your course. Come down to four-zero revs please." The acknowledgements rattled back.

The USS Scorpion might be trailing at the same depth as Dreadnought, or not. If she was then she was going to have to take drastic evasive action. Either way, the game had begun in earnest.

The jarring pings of active sonar shattered the quiet.

"That was Bandit One getting nervous, sir!" Reported the sound room. "Scorpion is still running silent."

Again, sonar raked Dreadnought.

"Bandit One is turning right... Coming around onto our stern..."

Simon Collingwood frowned.

Why was the second American boat trying to match Dreadnought's potential collision course with its sister? He had come across one or two gung ho sorts training in Connecticut prior to joining the boat a year before her projected completion at Barrow-in-Furness. However, what Bandit One was doing was not gung ho; it was positively dangerous.

"Scorpion is maintaining revs and heading!"

Okay, I've got one Skipjack class hunter-killer on a possible collision course on my bow, and another steaming up my prop wash.

This is going to be interesting!

More shrill pings deflected off Dreadnought pressure casing.

And then as the other boat fell in directly astern the pings became mushy, confused in the boat's wake or missing completely; or returning off a target beyond Dreadnought...

"Bandit One is painting Scorpion for us," Max Forton chuckled, meeting his Captain's eye as he looked up from the plot.

Collinwood acknowledged this with a nod.

“All stop! Repeat, all stop!”

Max Forton raised an eyebrow.

“Scorpion and her chum know where we are. We’ll let them think they’ve won this round.” More active pinging scourged the boat.

Minutes passed slowly.

“Scorpion is on our port bow. Very close...”

In this game of underwater blind man’s bluff played with three to four thousand ton chess pieces nothing was more dangerous than one of the players *not* following standard operating procedures and ignoring the customary courtesies between former friends. If the three participants had been trying to kill each other things would have been so much simpler; as it was Dreadnought’s running silent and erratic manoeuvring was a nightmare for her jailors whose nerves would be rubbed red-raw by now.

The Captain of HMS Dreadnought could hear and feel the USS Scorpion’s churning multi-bladed single screw and the soft thrumming of her turbines. The other boat was less than a hundred yards away, perhaps; and a little deeper. He could not help holding his breath as the sound faded astern. Both US submarines knew exactly where he was but they could not manoeuvre freely because they had just got in each other’s way.

“Maximum revs please,” he demanded, fighting not to smile too widely. “Come to two-seven-zero degrees. Make our depth three-zero-zero feet.”

Simon Collingwood felt better now he had seized back the initiative. The United States Navy could either race Dreadnought out into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, search for the Hermes Battle Group or fall back on the USS Enterprise and her consorts patrolling the Western Approaches south of Ireland. If they followed Dreadnought into the west; that was well and good, he would play hide and seek again in a few hours at a time and under conditions of *his* choosing. If the two Skipjack boats went south he would put himself between them and the Hermes’s northern screen. If they turned back to secure the undersea flank of the fleet around the USS Enterprise, the giant new super carrier that was the pride of the US Navy, he would follow them.

HMS Dreadnought surged forward.

Chapter 29

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

If General Curtis LeMay had been smoking one of the fat cigars he had been famous for pugnaciously jamming between his jaws in dozens of wartime photographs, he would have involuntarily chewed it to bits.

As the Sikorsky SH-3 Sea King transporting him from Andrews Air Force Base on the short hop to the White House rose off the tarmac he got his first good look at the pillars of smoke rising from the city on both sides of the Potomac. The main targets had been government buildings, the embassies of friendly countries, and the British Embassy. Part of the Navy Department block on Constitution Avenue had been demolished – or collapsed spontaneously, nobody knew for sure – after two massive truck bombs detonated in front of it. The Main State Building, the huge State Department complex close to the river had been targeted with petrol tankers and a clutch of truck bombs, and as at the Pentagon there were stories of gangs of heavily armed men in military fatigues gunning down survivors and marauding through the wrecked building after the initial assault. There was a still pitched battle in progress in and around the Pentagon, Marines and National Guardsmen having been thrown into the ongoing fire fight as they arrived through the night. LeMay's own aircraft had been delayed nearly an hour in a holding pattern over Andrews Air Force Base as C-130 Hercules transports delivered elements of two battalions of the elite 101st Airborne Division to bolster the defence of the capital.

“Tell me again what's going on at the White House?” The Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force demanded, yelling above the roar of the rotors.

“A bunch of crazies with Bazookas tried to slug it out with the Marines holding the perimeter, sir. There were a couple of hits on the West Wing, some bullet damage but the Marine Corps pretty much wiped out the *insurgents*.”

Curtis LeMay's expression grew very sour.

Whereas the defenders of the White House had shrugged off every

ragged assault to date, the two platoons of lightly armed Marines and the squad of Washington PD officers guarding the grounds of the Pentagon had been wiped out in minutes. The building's internal security force had been driven deep into the complex before reinforcements from elsewhere started to arrive. By then well-organised 'insurgents' equipped with automatic weapons and wire-guided anti-tank munitions had already established defensive positions within the building commanding unrestricted fields of fire over the main approaches. It was not until Virginia National Guard tanks and armoured personnel carriers arrived that a path up to and into the great construction had been secured – with the loss of seventy men and five armoured vehicles - and the insurgents' outer gun line breached.

FUBAR did not begin to describe the catastrophe. Scores of government buildings, embassies and office and suburban housing blocks were burning. Gangs of *insurgents* had roamed the streets all night stalking, murdering, looting and terrorising innocent unarmed civilians. Scores of firemen and policemen had been gunned down going about their duty; and the atrocity was still going on with seemingly unabated ferocity and intensity.

Nobody was talking about casualty numbers; it was too early for that and vicious spasms of new fighting kept breaking out across the city. No sooner was one hot spot damped down than another flared up somewhere else. The latest outbreaks of violence seemed wholly unconnected with the sieges and stand-offs which had developed as the first troops and armour had been fed into the battle. Out in the suburbs there were disturbing reports of the homes being attacked and the families of government officials and diplomats being executed. One account told of a family of a senior Treasury Department official being forced to kneel down in the street outside their burning home before being riddled with automatic gunfire. Panic was spreading like a deadly contagion. In the middle of the fire fights shops and marts were being looted, vehicles stolen and with every passing hour the situation grew murkier; not least because the telephone system was down across three-quarters of the city.

A dystopian apocalyptic nightmare was playing out in the streets of the capital of the most powerful nation in the history of the World.

The Sea King's loadmaster leaned over Curtis LeMay's shoulder.

"The White House is still taking sporadic incoming small arms fire, sir," he reported. "The pilot says we'll be approaching low and the landing is

going to be fast and dirty. He says the sooner everybody's safely on the ground the better he'll feel, sir!"

The Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force was never prouder of *his* people than in moments of dire adversity. He half-turned and patted the younger man's arm.

"That's the way I feel about it too, son!" He bawled back, flashing a fearlessly bellicose smile.

In the grey light of the early morning the smoke lay like a dank autumn mist across large areas of the city as the Sea King raced north-east towards the White House, swooping down, flaring out at the last moment, hitting the soft, rain soaked ground hard and rolling several yards before coming to a jarring halt. The door was flung open and Curtis Lemay and his entourage jumped down onto the muddy, churned grass of the West Lawn.

Everybody crouched down and looked around; everybody except the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force. Douglas MacArthur had rehearsed his famous return to the Philippines; made damned sure the cameramen were standing in the right place before he stepped off that landing craft and got *his* feet wet. There were no cameramen waiting for Curtis LeMay's *return* to Washington DC but the *Big Cigar* had no doubt which *return* was going to have the greater impact on American history. History was not about the last war or the one before, it was about the here and now and he *knew* that *his* country needed him a goddam sight more than the poor goddammed Filipinos had needed that asshole MacArthur back in 1944.

Curtis LeMay stood tall; his back ramrod straight while everybody around him hunkered down as low as they could without falling over. Curtis LeMay did not need a film crew to make him do his duty! He had never hidden from anything in his whole life and he did not intend to start at the age of fifty-seven.

If some no-good, cowardly, traitorous bastard 'insurgent' wanted to take a pot shot at him he did not give a goddam flying fuck about it! The whole goddam Luftwaffe had tried to kill him a dozen times over Germany in the forty-five war; what chance did some useless waste of space, unpatriotic, un-American disgrace to the human race have of shooting him now?

He stood tall, shot his cuffs and flicked dust of his jacket. When an officer reported to his Commander-in-Chief – even when he knew that the aforementioned President loathed him – it was that officer's sacred duty to

honour him. The chain of command was there for a good reason; he might not like the orders he had been given by this President, or by this Administration, but if the Chief of Staff of the Air Force did not obey orders what right did he have to expect *his* people to obey *his* orders? Moreover, whatever his disagreements with the Kennedy Administration, Curtis Emerson LeMay was nothing if not a diehard patriot who was perfectly willing to sacrifice his life in the defence of his country.

A bullet whined past and kicked up dust on the West Wing veranda.

The Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force watched other rounds clipping splinters off the stonework around the already holed and cracked windows.

The cowardly bastards could not even shoot straight!

He marched unhurriedly up to the White House, stiffly erect while practically every other member of his entourage; part staff, part bodyguard squatted low and eyed the chaos around the home of the President of the United States of America with suspicion and no little outrage.

Curtis LeMay's own personal outrage had been fulminating ever since he had received the first reports of the Malta 'incident' in Arizona, where he was racing his prized Allard J2, former Le Mans car. Racing fast cars had become his release from the pressure-cooker stresses of building up and maintaining Strategic Air Command at the highest levels of operational efficiency throughout the 1950s. The brutal denouement of the October War bore staggering testimony to the success of LeMay's regime in those years, although few would have guessed that '*Bombs Away LeMay*' did not take anywhere near as much satisfaction from the performance of *his boys* as most Americans imagined. Like many larger than life characters LeMay was a more complex man than he liked people to think; his obvious joy at renting out and taking part in events held at former US Air Bases under the auspices of the Sports Car Club of America, ought to have suggested to his critics and detractors that the damnation of his nation's foes was not the sole preoccupation of his long and distinguished career. There was perhaps, no finer leader of men in the service of his Commander-in-Chief than Curtis LeMay and right now the situation called for a man cast from exactly his template.

"Who is in charge here?" Demanded the man who, in real life, made John Wayne look and sound like a one-hundred-and-twenty-pound weakling.

A hulking Secret Service man advanced.

Before he could speak the Chief of Staff of the Air Force cracked a ruggedly grim smile. Bullets were pinging off the building in the background. The ‘pinging’ was punctuated by the barking detonations of grenades in the middle distance.

“Take me to the President, son. We’ve got a battle to fight and *my* President needs to know *his* Air Force is waiting to unleash Hell on *our* enemies!”

Nobody was going to stop Curtis LeMay presenting himself in the Situation Room but the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force was not prepared for the crowd of panicky, ashen-faced men – and a handful of women – milling dispiritedly in the corridors outside the heart of the bunker complex. His scowl deepened as he was briefly baulked at the doors to the Situation Room. Inside, he was immediately struck by the stillness and the oddly confident stoicism of *his* President. All around John Fitzgerald Kennedy flunkies and Cabinet members, worried staffers and political hangers-on danced attendance on their master, or sat shocked, despondent and exhausted around the long oval central table.

The President was deep in conversation with Robert McNamara; the latter looked around, startled by the commotion of LeMay’s entrance. The airman ignored his immediate political chief and strode up to his Commander-in-Chief, drew himself to his full height, stuck out his formidable chest and saluted crisply.

“General LeMay reporting, sir!” He announced, knowing that it was the drama of moments such as these that mattered most in times of crisis. “What are your orders, sir?”

Jack Kennedy did not get up from his chair.

There were men in his Cabinet who had wanted the ‘maverick’ former commander of SAC arrested months ago; or if not arrested, removed from his post. That had not been a realistic option before, or since, the October War and the President had never seriously entertained it. The wisest of his predecessors in the White House had always contrived to find a way to accommodate prima donna Generals and Admirals like LeMay – Generals MacArthur and Patton, and Admiral King came to mind from recent history – because when the going got tough men like them were the rocks upon which victory or defeat turned. Curtis LeMay had won the October War; without

him, it might have been the United States that was laid waste by the thermonuclear fires.

“It is good to see you, General LeMay,” Jack Kennedy drawled, his calm seeming too implausible to be real in the febrile atmosphere of the Situation Room. “Bob,” he said quietly, speaking to his Secretary of Defence, “call Bobby and get the Secret Service to clear the room please.”

Having given the order, the President rose to his feet and beckoned Curtis LeMay to walk with him to the head of the room where there was a lectern and a pull-down movie projector screen. The Chief of Staff of the US Air Force had waved away his own senior staffers. Suddenly, the older man found himself locked in *his* President’s gaze.

“Mistakes have been made,” Jack Kennedy said. “We have all been guilty of oversights. I choose to look forward in this,” he quirked a grimace, “our darkest hour.”

Curtis LeMay looked *his* President in the eye.

“What’s Bus Wheeler got to say about all this?” He asked bluntly.

Jack Kennedy frowned with pain for a moment.

“The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was shot by a sniper two hours ago, General. I have been informed that he was declared dead on arrival in hospital.”

The word at Andrews Air Force Base was that Earl Wheeler was being flown to Bethesda Naval Hospital; wounded but alive. That news had been old before LeMay’s Sea King had taken off on the perilous flight to the White House.

“You are the ranking officer, General LeMay,” Jack Kennedy went on, like the airman he too had learned to put away his emotions at times like this. Around them the Situation Room was already noticeably less crowded and quieter.

Robert McNamara returned with Bobby Kennedy at his shoulder. The Attorney General had aged fifteen years since Curtis LeMay had last seen him a month ago. The younger Kennedy brother did not have the natural gift of exuding grace under pressure; he had not been tested in the fire of battle the way his elder sibling had been in the Pacific in 1943. Perhaps, in time he might develop the same assurance under impossible stress but LeMay doubted it.

“What we have is a military situation,” Jack Kennedy stated as the other

men circled him. “Washington is under siege.” He made and held cool eye contact with the acting professional Head of all United States Forces. “General LeMay, you are authorised to use all forces at your disposal to put down the current insurrection and to restore order in this city and its environs.” He steeled himself, added: “Show no mercy.”

Chapter 30

Tuesday 10th December 1963

British Overseas Airways Flight A107

Edward Richard George Heath, Prime Minister of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration, remained unconvinced of the wisdom of employing one of the three surviving British Overseas Airways Corporation's Boeing 707s for this *expedition*. However, it was symptomatic of the madness of the World in which they lived that whatever his private reservations he was compelled to concede, that Tom Harding-Grayson's suggestion was not without merit. If half of the much reduced Cabinet was to be shot down then it might as well be shot down in an *American* aircraft. The situation seemed so dire, so beyond comprehension and reason, that every little gesture mattered. Besides, several months ago the RAF had fitted 'Speedbird 712' – the aircraft's call-sign – with every available modern communications device; so theoretically, the jet airliner should be able to remain in contact with, if not home, then radio stations and relays which might in an emergency, be capable of making contact with the Government compound at Cheltenham.

Presently, Iain Macleod, the newly appointed Minister of Information, the Foreign Secretary and the former American Ambassador, Loudon Baines Westheimer II were arguing fiercely three rows back from where the Prime Minister was trying to rest. He had been humming Bach to himself, imagining himself conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Albert Hall. Music was the thing he missed most. He was of the 1939-45 wartime generation who had grown inured to the death of friends, acquaintances and developed a knack of sublimating much of his grief. He thought occasionally of all the people who had died in the October War - died or just ceased to exist, disappeared – but did not dwell upon the fallen for therein lay a terrible melancholy he could not, and would not allow to rule his waking thoughts.

Tom Harding-Grayson was patiently explaining the purpose of the mission to Loudon Baines Westheimer II, a most uncouth and almost totally

ignorant man, who clearly thought the whole enterprise was some kind of charade in which the object was to score points off his naive British hosts.

Every few minutes a new report was received.

It seemed that large tracts of Washington DC had been carpet bombed by the United States Air Force, and tanks and infantry were systematically hunting down the last of the ‘terrorists’. Twelve hours ago the ‘terrorists’; had still been ‘insurgents’, now they were beyond the pale, vermin to be eradicated with overwhelming firepower. Nobody knew how many people had been killed other than that among the dead were the British Ambassador and several of his senior aides, the United States Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and Clarence Douglas Dillon, the Secretary of the Treasury. Several Deputy and Assistant Secretaries had lost their lives or were missing in the mayhem, and as many as twenty Senate and Congressional members were confirmed dead. The total death toll was likely to run into thousands. It was unclear whether a handful of ‘terrorists’ were still holding out in the ruins of the Pentagon; and a pitched battle was continuing around Washington Dulles International Airport in Virginia, less than thirty miles from the centre of the American capital. Meanwhile, ‘terrorists who had fled the city were dug in at Washington National Airport’, situated in Arlington County, close to downtown Washington DC.

The United States Government was in stasis, paralysed by the nightmare. This was either the worst or the best time to launch a last gasp mission to the beleaguered Kennedy Administration; and Edward Heath did not pretend to know which. The peace mission had been initiated and organised at breakneck speed via the one remaining secure back-channel – in retrospect mistakenly neglected in recent weeks, between the UKIEA’s Government Communications Headquarters at Oakley, less than five miles from the post-October War Government compound and the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley, Virginia – that remained open to the former allies. It was Dick White, the Head of the Secret Intelligence Service and nominally, the master of GCHG who had made direct personal contact with John McCone, the Director of the CIA. The Central Intelligence Agency’s Headquarters situated across the Potomac from Washington remained an apparent island of tranquillity in the eye of the seething storm which currently swirled around the capital.

The message had been simple.

Premier Heath is flying to Washington to discuss the World situation with President Kennedy.

The acknowledgement had come back: Situation dangerous. If Premier Heath comes at this time it is at his own risk.

The communication was by teleprinter.

GCHQ had filed a flight plan for approval.

Affirmative.

In approximately four hours time Speedbird 712 would land at Andrews Air Force Base; assuming it was not shot down by one or other of the warring parties.

“Ambassador Westheimer,” Tom Harding-Grayson groaned, “your presence on this flight is an unambiguous token of the UKIEA’s good intentions. You were never ‘held hostage’ at Brize Norton; the fact of the matter was that your State Department refused to discuss arrangements for your safe transport home. You and your staff were nobody’s ‘hostages’, you were abandoned by your own people. Furthermore, I feel duty bound to remind you that you have *no* official status in this delegation...”

“Where does that leave Brenckmann?” The American retorted contemptuously.

The Prime Minister stood up in the aisle, stretched.

The men nearby fell silent.

“Ambassador Westheimer,” he said, moving back along the plane so as to avoid having to raise his voice overmuch above the engines. Seeing the Prime Minister moving a stewardess – attired in an immaculate BOAC uniform – approached solicitously. The big man motioned her to resume her seat, smiling gravely. He stood over the hulking Texan who had conspicuously failed to represent the interests of his country in England in recent months. “Please believe me when I say that I find Captain Brenckmann’s presence on this mission and his likely role, as perplexing and as uncomfortable as you do. However, at this eleventh hour I am prepared to go to any lengths to avert war between our two nations. If that is your wish, also, I and my colleagues will be happy to continue to engage with you in this great discourse. If not, pray keep your opinions to yourself.”

This said the Prime Minister went back to his seat hoping against hope to compose his thoughts before Speedbird 712 reached its destination. It was a forlorn hope.

“May I speak with you, sir,” Dick White asked, his tone indicating that he might have been reading Edward Heath’s mind.

“Of course. Take a pew, Dick.”

“Thank you,” the tall spymaster murmured, sitting down in the seat across the aisle from the Prime Minister. He had had very few dealings with Edward Heath prior to the October War. The Head of MI6 did not usually have much reason to socialise with the Government’s Chief Whip, or the Lord Privy Seal in peace time. The Premier had spent most of the year before the war travelling around Europe attempting to negotiate the United Kingdom’s entry into the European Common Market, the child of the European Coal and Steel Community masterminded after the 1945 war by Jon Paul Monet to ensure that France and Germany would henceforth be too economically inter-dependent to ever go to war against each other again. The Prime Minister had been a passionate believer in a European pipe dream; the ultimate antidote to quell all fears of future continental wars like the 1914-18 and the 1939-45 bloodlettings. The October War had destroyed his dreams of a better, safer World, stolen from him most of the things he loved and yet he persevered, and he still believed in decency and justice in international affairs. He was in many ways far too moral a man to be entrusted with power in a World that had taken a step back into the dark ages. “I thought you ought to know that the situation in Washington is,” he shrugged, “increasingly opaque.”

Edward Heath smiled wanly.

“Opaque, Dick?”

“The people at Langley *believe* that ‘mopping up operations’ are in progress but other reports indicate virtual anarchy. I strongly suggest we divert to a safer location until such time as we have a better feel for what is going on...”

The Prime Minister shook his head.

“Our respective navies are shadow boxing in the Western Approaches. We have no idea what the Spanish will do next. Who knows what other atrocities might be committed against our territories in the Mediterranean. I don’t know if I care for this Red Dawn nonsense but it gives us a plausible pretext to engage again with our former friends in Washington – those who survive, that is – and I intend to clasp it with both hands very much in the manner that a drowning man will cling to anything that comes within his

reach. I cannot do that if we land at New York or Quebec, or Boston. If we get shot down over Washington; Jim Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher will have to carry on.” He ran a hand through his hair. “And that is my final word on the subject.”

The spymaster accepted this without further comment.

“Red Dawn,” he said, leaning across the aisle so that he did not broadcast his meaning beyond the hearing of the two men. The airliner was less than half-full. Other than the Prime Minister and his ten man delegation, the only other passengers were sixteen Royal Marines in full combat kit and armed to the teeth; and seven plain clothes Police Special Branch officers responsible for Edward Heath’s personal security. Dick White and his master sat in a small oasis in the mid-section of the aircraft with nobody nearby. “Red Dawn,” he repeated, “may be a chimera but *if* it exists in anything like the manifestation I have had described to me, then it offers not only an explanation of *some* of the more troubling and inflammatory recent events,” he hesitated, took an intuitive leap, “it offers a subtext that our American ‘friends’ might embrace. Red Dawn may well be our *only* common ground with the Kennedy Administration.”

Edward Heath contemplated this stark realisation.

A little over two years ago he had been looking forward to the day when Europe would be united in a community of nations sworn to live in peace for all time. A European Union that would banish the spectre of war from the continent for future generations and possibly, lead to a new golden age...

“A part of me,” he confided, sharing a confidence he would never have shared before the cataclysm, “cries for retribution. Even now I wonder if I’m doing the right thing. If our people discover what really happened last year will they ever forgive me if I succeed in making a peace?”

If the spymaster was discommoded by this shocking outburst of frankness he hid it superbly.

“The great thing,” he replied, “is to be able to see both sides of the picture,” he decided, “because it enables us to understand the true nature of our own best interests, sir.”

Chapter 31

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Pembroke Barracks Emergency Field Hospital, Malta

By the time Marija Calleja stepped off the bus outside the gates the sun was threatening to break through the early morning overcast and for December it was pleasantly mild. Her mother had wrapped her thickest woollen shawl around her daughter's shoulders before she left the house in Sliema, her protestations growing ever fiercer as Marija moved closer to the door.

'Dottorressa Seiffert said for you to stay at home until tomorrow!'

"I am perfectly well, Mama!" This was a protestation that was neither wholly true nor untrue. After twelve hours of uninterrupted, deep sleep in her own bed, Marija felt much restored if not in any meaningful sense '*perfectly well*'. Most of her aches and pains were gone – the worst ones, anyway – and from experience she knew she was, once again, capable of being of service at Pembroke Barracks. Or rather, she would be after Margo had told her off and grudgingly agreed to assign her to a very specific range of 'light duties'.

Trying to explain this to her Mama was pointless.

However, because she prided herself on being a good Catholic daughter, she had made the effort: 'I know I can be *useful* at the Pembroke Barracks and if I stay at home all day I'll only start worrying about things I cannot do anything about.'

For example, she would brood over Peter Christopher.

There had still been no news and it was gnawing at her, an insidious canker that was liable to reduce her to a hollow shell of her real self if she allowed it to fester. No, it was better to be busy. If and when bad news arrived, she would deal with it then. Deep down her mother understood this. Like all mothers she was torn several ways, desperate to protect her little princess. Mother and daughter had hugged for long moments on the doorstep before Marija trudged slowly to the top of Tower Street to await the next bus heading north to St Julian's and the Pembroke Barracks.

On her arrival Margo Seiffert did not waste her breath chastising Marija for ignoring her orders. Instead, the two women embraced.

“A lot of the beds are empty now,” the older woman explained, leading her friend out into the tented quadrangle. Other nurses looked up, waved, smiled at the newcomer. “Admiral Christopher has opened up every military hospital and infirmary on the Archipelago to the civilian authorities, and families are being encouraged to come into the wards to care for their loved ones.” She sounded a little unsettled by the idea; it smacked of clinical anarchy and she had no intention of allowing stray civilians to wander unsupervised around *her* hospital. “Anyway, as you can see from the empty beds it has taken the pressure off us.”

Margo Seiffert decided that Marija was ‘to keep an eye’ on the ‘prisoners’.

Marija did not know if she liked being a pseudo ‘Red Cross Visitor’. Moreover, she had mixed feelings about fraternising with men whom she regarded as ‘the enemy’ and who had, not to put too fine a point on it, tried very hard to kill her and her family last Friday night.

“You,” her friend had said with a twinkle in her grey eyes, “are on the lightest of light duties today. Is that clear *Nurse Calleja*?”

Marija had nodded guiltily.

The POWs had been allowed onto the ramparts of the old circular fort at the seaward point of the triangular defensive bastions of the Pembroke Barracks. The breeze out of the south was warm and a haze concealed the eastern horizon as Marija climbed up to the battlements to check on her charges. Two of the POWs, an American and an Italian had been transferred to Kalkara for minor surgical procedures, the remaining nine men turned to greet her arrival with guarded smiles and mostly hooded eyes.

Captain Nathan Zabriski, who had been standing apart from the others, approached her.

“We missed you yesterday, ma’am,” he said, tight-lipped. He had been smoking a cigarette which he had crushed underfoot.

“Doctor Seiffert sent me home to catch up on my sleep, Captain,” Marija reported. “I am to be your guardian again today. Although, I don’t think it is very likely your *British* captors mean you any harm.”

Marija and the airman’s eyes fell upon the two unarmed soldiers, a lance-corporal and a private wearing the insignia of the Pay Corps who had escorted the POWs up onto the battlements. The two men were chatting amiably, smoking cigarettes and evidently, wholly disinterested in ‘guard

duty'. There had been an armed sentry at the gates to the fort but otherwise *the British* had donned their kid gloves. The man and the woman grinned at each other before they remembered they were not supposed to behave like normal human beings.

"You look less," Marija was finding it hard to be as distant and detached from the American officer as she ought to be, "battered today, Captain?"

"I'm fine, ma'am. We're being treated well."

"My name is *Marija*," she informed him. "Doctor Seiffert was an officer in your Navy. I am a Maltese civilian."

"I'm sorry, ma'am..." The man caught himself. "Marija." He grimaced. "My Ma's middle name is Maria."

They had wandered idly to the wall and now they gazed into the haze. Inshore two small fishing boats, high prow and stern painted in the blue and red and yellows of the ancient Phoenicians bobbed on the gentle swells.

"I grew up on Air Force Bases in the mid-west," the man offered. "Everything for hundreds of miles was flat, just farmlands and prairies. We once lived in a place that was over a thousand miles from either the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean.

Marija leaned on the pitted limestone rampart.

"Your father was in the air force?"

"He was with the 7th Bomb Wing at Carswell until a couple of years before the war. That's in Texas. He went to work for Boeing in Seattle when he and my Mom split up. That kind of messed up Mom for a while. She had had crazy times when I was a kid but after Pa left she, well, sort of changed. She was angry all the time. Betrayal does that to you, I suppose? I don't think my Pa found anybody else, or anything, it was just that after he left the Air Force he didn't want to be with Mom any more. It was like it was the Service and base life that had kept them together all those years and when he stopped flying the big birds... Hell, I don't know. You think you know your Mom and Dad and then something like that happens..." He shook his head, eyes misty. The moment of self pity quickly passed. "After the October War my Ma moved up to Washington DC to live with my Aunt Ida. The last thing I heard she was applying for a government job..."

Marija said nothing.

"Sorry, you don't want to hear about my..."

"Don't be sorry, Captain," she assured him. "We all have our stories and

sometimes I am afraid that people have stopped listening to them.”

The man and the woman lapsed into silence.

The voices of the other men speaking lowly did not register.

“From what I overheard some of the Brits saying,” the American prompted, nervously breaking the spell, “you have quite a story yourself?”

Marija laughed.

“No, not really.” But instantly, she wanted to explain. “When I was nearly six years old I was trapped in a building that was hit by a bomb. Me and my little brother, Joe. He was unhurt; I was trapped by falling masonry. My pelvis and my legs were crushed. They would never have found us but for Joe’s crying.”

“Oh, right...”

Marija was not worried that the young American officer did not know what to say.

“They didn’t expect me to live,” she explained. “And when I did they didn’t expect me to ever walk again. If it wasn’t for Commander Seiffert and a British Naval Surgeon called Reginald Stanley Stephens, I’d have lived a different life.” She half-turned to study the airman. They were – give or take a year – the same age. He was a handsome boy with, she suspected, a placid disposition. In another time and place he would smile mostly with his eyes and confuse more girls than he knew. “I lost nobody who was close to me in the October War. I don’t know about on Friday night, things are still too confused. People I know must have been hurt, or killed, because so many are dead and injured...”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“There is nothing to be said, Captain. The World is the way it is and we must carry on as we may.” Looking away she peered into the blue-grey haze out to sea. She could not begin to imagine what it was like living a thousand miles from the ocean. That sounded so profoundly unnatural as to be...

“Marija!”

Margo Seiffert was trotting up the curving stone steps to the battlements with a flustered grin on her face.

“Marija!”

The younger woman’s heart missed a beat.

“Peter is safe!” Her friend called breathlessly immediately she spied Marija on the opposite side of the fort. “Peter is safe!”

Marija stared at her.

Why was Margo looking so worried?

And why was the World going around in circles?

Chapter 32

Tuesday 10th December 1963

HMS Dreadnought, 357 miles WNW of Vigo

“Full left rudder!” And so the dance begins again, thought Commander Simon Collingwood. He was not as much surprised as intensely irritated that the USS Scorpion had clung onto Dreadnought’s wake with such tenacity for the last sixteen hours. The Scorpion’s Skipjack class consort had broken off the chase nine hours ago and headed north, presumably into a blocking position between Dreadnought and the Enterprise Battle Group.

The submarine heeled into the high speed turn.

“Reverse course! Come to zero-nine-five degrees!”

“Zero-nine-five, aye!”

Collingwood waited until the boat had steadied on the reciprocal course:

“All stop! Repeat, all stop!”

Now they would really find out what their opponent was made of!

The last time Dreadnought had turned back she had targeted the Scorpion with active sonar. For some seconds both boats had exchanged shrill, nerve jarring electronic pulses and fallen silent almost as one. Short of opening their bow tubes and trading salvos of torpedoes; they had gone to the brink.

Lieutenant-Commander Max Forton moved across the control room to stand by his Captain’s shoulder.

“I don’t understand why this chap is hanging on to us like grim death,” he confessed. “I mean, we must be close enough to the Enterprise or one of her escorts for them to have put a sub-hunter or a chopper into the air over us. They’ve probably got half-a-dozen sonar buoys in the waters hereabouts. So why in blazes is this beggar is still charging up our bloody prop wash?”

Simon Collingwood had been thinking about that for several hours.

He did not like any of the conclusions he had reached.

The USS Scorpion had actually stopped ‘charging’ the moment Dreadnought’s wheel had gone over. The American boat was coasting to a halt about a mile away, more or less bow to bow with her British quarry.

Bandit One, the Scorpion’s sister had headed away at high speed,

discounting any fanciful idea that she had suffered some kind of mechanical problem and been forced to abandon the chase. Ever since then the Scorpion had easily kept pace with Dreadnought, never falling more than three miles astern, which told Collingwood that both the US Navy subs had a speed advantage over his boat with its older hull form. Although the Skipjack boats might not have the teardrop hulls he had heard mooted for the subsequent class of US nuclear attack boats – the Thresher class – they shared the same power plants and propulsion machinery, and they were clearly more ‘slippery’ through the water than Dreadnought. To have maintained contact so easily their speed advantage had to be at least two or three, perhaps as many as five knots. If that was not bad enough, and it was not in any way good; he was beginning to suspect that the Americans probably had superior passive sonar equipment, and this and the knowledge that his every move was almost certainly now being tracked by air-dropped sonar buoys, somewhat limited his options.

Simon Collingwood was not entirely disheartened; he had drawn the two Skipjack class boats away from the Hermes Battle Group and, if and when the acoustic and sonar records of the last forty-eight hours were properly analysed, a huge amount of operational and tactical information about the relative performance of the Dreadnought and her American cousins would be gleaned for future reference. Moreover, this had been achieved without anybody actually getting killed, which was always good news.

It went without saying that the game had been tremendous fun.

“Right full rudder!” He called, coming to a decision. “Make five-zero revs! Make our course one-eight-zero degrees. Make our depth one-zero-zero feet if you please!”

Dreadnought’s Executive Officer raised an eyebrow.

“We’re not getting away from that chap,” he grimaced, jabbing a finger at the USS Scorpion’s symbol on the tactical plot. “And I don’t think he’s going to let us get anywhere near the Enterprise Battle Group. We’ll cut out losses and report in to Fleet HQ. I should imagine we’ll be redeployed south to cover the Hermes’s northern screen.”

The USS Scorpion held her course until she was directly astern of the Dreadnought and then formatted on her, heading south.

“Persistent bugger, isn’t he?” Max Forton complained.

His Captain frowned.

He had anticipated his US Navy counterpart would have understood that the game was over, let the range open and commenced patrolling just to make sure Dreadnought did not put about and attempt to creep around her to the north. Carrying on the chase was not playing the game; nor was it wise.

“What on earth does he think is going to happen next?” Max Forton asked rhetorically. “Sooner or later we’re going to fall in with Hermes’s anti-submarine screen. After what those fellows have been through the last week they’re going to be a tad trigger happy, methinks!”

“Active sonar on standby, if you please!” Collingwood demanded. This thing needed to be stopped before it got even more dangerous. “Prepare to send by Morse code in the open.”

He did not quite know why but he was getting a very bad feeling about the situation. He was not quite sensing an icy hand clutching at his vitals; but the hairs at the nape of his neck were beginning to stand on end.

“S ONE-ZERO-ONE TO SSN FIVE-EIGHT-NINE STOP WELL PLAYED STOP GAME OVER STOP RESPECTFULLY SUGGEST YOU BREAK CONTACT AT THIS TIME STOP ADVISE AGAINST CONTACT WITH ROYAL NAVY SURFACE UNITS PATROLLING SOUTH OF THIS POSITION STOP PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE MESSAGE ENDS”

Nothing happened.

“Scorpion is holding at two miles, sir.”

Collingwood and his Executive Officer looked thoughtfully at each other.

“Send,” the Dreadnought’s commanding officer ordered, “S ONE-ZERO-ONE TO SSN FIVE-EIGHT-NINE STOP PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE MY PREVIOUS TRANSMISSION MESSAGE ENDS”

HMS Dreadnought was closed up at action stations but some hours ago all internal hatches had been dogged open.

“Quietly if you please, Number One,” Simon Collingwood murmured, “let’s close up the boat and warn the torpedo room to be ready to flood down the tubes again.”

The word was passed through the ship in hoarse whispers.

“Yeoman, prepare the following signal for broadcast in the clear to Fleet HQ: DREADNOUGHT TO C-IN-C FLEET STOP COPY C-IN-C FIRST SUBMARINE SQUADRON STOP HAVE ATTEMPTED TO BREAK CONTACT WITH USS SCORPION AND COMMUNICATED MY

INTENTION TO THAT VESSEL STOP I ANTICIPATE POSSIBLE HOSTILE ACTION MAY BE IMMINENT STOP I HAVE DETERMINED NOT TO FIRE THE FIRST SHOT STOP.”

Suddenly, he could have cut the atmosphere in the control room with a knife.

“Append our current position, course, speed and depth to that report at time of dispatch please.”

“Scorpion is flooding her tubes!”

Simon Collingwood held up a hand before Max Forton could order Dreadnought to respond. Scorpion had the prime tactical position.

“Sir?” The other man asked.

Collingwood began to game the options: Scorpion could have fired on Dreadnought at any time in the last few hours; the best time would have been when her prey gave in to the inevitable and abandoned its flight a few minutes ago.

“Revolutions for twelve knots please!”

“Scorpion is conforming to our course and speed!” Then: “Belay that! Scorpion is coming right and increasing revs... She’s altering right to pass along our starboard side, sir!”

“Maintain current course and speed!” Collingwood directed as he tried to unravel what was going through the mind of his counterpart in the Skipjack class submarine’s control room.

“SPLASH ONE!” Yelled a gruff voice from the sound room. “Bearing green-two zero! FAST PROPELLORS! Three thousand yards! TORPEDO IN THE WATER!”

The Captain of the Royal Navy’s first and only nuclear attack submarine understood everything in a fraction of a second with a perfect clarity; a perfect clarity that made absolutely no difference to the fact that within minutes he and all his men would be dead.

“SPLASH TWO!”

Commander Simon Collingwood would have panicked if he had thought it would have done any good. He was astonished at how calm his voice sounded when he started giving orders.

“TEN DEGREES RIGHT RUDDER!”

“MAKE MAXIMUM EMERGENCY REVOLUTIONS!”

“OVER-RIDE ALL SAFETIES!”

“DOWN BUBBLE!”

“MAKE OUR DEPTH THREE ZERO-ZERO-FEET!”

“FLOOD ALL TORPEDO TUBES!”

Chapter 33

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

The Vice President of the United States of America, Lyndon Baines Johnson stepped forward in the steady rain that had begun to fall twenty minutes before the Boeing 707 in the dark blue and white livery of the British Overseas Airways Corporation landed. The easterly wind which had blown wintery rain across Virginia and Maryland had carried away the pall of smoke that had hung across Andrews Field like a dirty fog, when dawn had finally broken after the most terrible night any of those in the reception committee could ever recollect.

Edward Heath, hatless in a nondescript gabardine raincoat had paused in the doorway. The low clouds and the rain still obscured the agony of the city to the north-west and he was a little relieved. In the Second World War he had been an artillery man; fought all the way from Normandy to the Rhine and beyond, witnessing in detail the pitilessness of war. He collected his wits and walked carefully down the steps to the tarmac followed by his Foreign Secretary, Tom Harding-Grayson and Iain Macleod, his Minister of Information. While the VIPs disgorged from the front of the airliner Sterling submachine gun-armed Royal Marines and several less military-looking dark-suited Special Branch bodyguards decamped hurriedly from the rear door.

The British Prime Minister had never met the Vice President. Both were tall men whose imposing physical presence and uncompromising characters cowed many lesser mortals. The two men eyed each other like heavyweight prize fighters stepping forward from their respective corners, each mindful of the other's sledgehammer right fist.

They shook hands.

"Welcome to the USA, Mister Prime Minister."

Edward Heath had visited America many times before the October War. Prior to America's entry into the Second World War he had toured the north-east on an Oxford Union sponsored debating tour, later he had returned to

visit old friends and on various political missions, meeting many luminaries of the Eisenhower Administration and leading Congressional and Senate members. But he had never met Lyndon Baines Johnson whom he knew to be one of the most formidable operators on Capitol Hill. He looked the man who was a heartbeat from the Presidency in the eye, oblivious to the tumbling rain.

“I am glad to be here in one piece, Mister Vice President.” He turned and introduced the two ministers who had followed him down the steps, and then their American hosts were anxiously ushering their VIP visitors into the limousines parked nearby, engines running in the rain. There were trucks and Jeeps waiting to transport the Royal Marines and Special Branch men. Dick White and Walter Brenckmann were guided into the last limousine by worried-looking Secret Service agents.

The three most senior British VIPs found themselves alone in the back of the Vice President’s personal vehicle; Edward Heath and Lyndon Baines Johnson facing forward and Tom Harding-Grayson and Iain Macleod sitting with their back to the driver’s compartment.

LBJ grinned and patted the side of the limousine.

“They tell me this car is bullet-proof,” he explained.

“Let’s hope nobody decides to test it!” Iain Macleod retorted.

“What is the current situation, Mister Vice President?” Edward Heath asked, not wanting to be drawn into what he considered inconsequential diplomatic small talk.

The Texan gave him a ruminative glance, and briefly, he eyed the other two occupants of the rear compartment of the armoured limousine.

“I’ll leave the fancy talk to the President,” he prefaced, sighing. “The *situation* is pretty fucked up, that’s what it is. When this is over we’ll have to rebuild the capital again from the ground up.”

The convoy of limousines, trucks and Jeeps sped past lines of tanks and armoured personnel carriers.

“We pulled elements of the 3rd Armoured Division out of the city to secure the perimeter of Andrews Air Force Base,” the Vice President said flatly. “Curtis LeMay’s got F-4 Phantoms overflying the area, and A-1 Skyraiders loitering over Harrisburg just in case we get any trouble anywhere near the perimeter. The President is still holed up at the White House but we’ve re-established secure communications. We don’t know when it will be

safe to pull the President or his senior staffers out of the White House *defended zone*. What we have to discuss is too important to wait; do you have any objection to commencing the summit via a remote communications link to the White House, Mister Prime Minister?”

“I have no objections. I agree with you that the events of the last twenty-four hours here in Washington make our business even more pressing.”

A secure area within the base was still being fortified as the British party decamped. Deep in the Officer Quarters Block where VIPs were routinely accommodated Walter Brenckmann approached Edward Heath and saluted.

“Thank you for the ride back home, sir,” he said flatly. “Consistent with my agreement with the Foreign Secretary, now that I am back on US territory I can no longer confidentially advise you or members of your party.”

The Prime Minister shook the American’s hand.

“Good luck, Captain Brenckmann.”

Edward Heath watched the other man go. The naval officer’s own people would most likely accuse him of treason. If there had ever been such a thing as justice in the World it was temporarily in abeyance.

“They’ve actually got *real* tea!” Iain Macleod exclaimed triumphantly: “And fresh milk!”

Tom Harding-Grayson was studying a sheet of paper.

“Somebody needs to get their head screwed on the right way round at the State Department,” he observed distractedly. “Did somebody say there was *proper* tea?”

Edward Heath viewed the proposed agenda for the ‘Anglo-US International Summit’ and shook his head.

Opening remarks by the President and by Prime Minister Heath.

Item 1: The Release of United States Personnel held as Prisoners of War and, or diplomatic hostages by the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration (UKIEA).

Item 2: The repatriation of the bodies of United States personnel.

Item 3: The recovery of US dual key and other nuclear

weapons systems from territories under the control of the UKIEA including weapons held in CENTO stores in Cyprus.

Item 4: Steps to reduce bilateral military tensions between the UKIEA and the United States.

Item 5: Future spheres of national interest and the free navigation of US ships.

The Prime Minister looked up.

“We shall see,” he declared, wondering if the windowless room into which the party had been shoe-horned was bugged. They had discussed that possibility during the latter stages of the flight. Dick White had assured them that it was unlikely since the rooms they were going to be using were regularly frequented by senior members of the Kennedy Administration awaiting, or post-embarkation from one of the two Presidential jetliners based at Andrews Air Force Base.

‘Administration members don’t as a rule care to have their every word overheard,’ the spymaster had observed.

Edward Heath did not actually care if the Americans were spying on the delegation. The last two great military powers on the planet were on the verge of a war that would inevitably, sooner or later, go nuclear. One more mistake, a single stupid misunderstanding or miscalculation might set the World set ablaze again.

“Tell our hosts that their agenda is acceptable to us in every respect, Tom.”

The Foreign Secretary frowned. “Prime Minister, I...”

Edward Heath’s face was dark and his eyes hard with impatience.

Chapter 34

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Lisbon Portela Airport

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher stepped off the bus onto the tarmac and gazed across the rainy, windswept aerodrome. He might have been standing on the apron of Brize Norton; there were so many Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm aircraft and helicopters dispersed around the airfield. Even as he watched there was a whining roar of engines and a Comet 4 slapped down on the runway a quarter of a mile away.

“This way! This way!” Sir Richard Templar, the British Ambassador, fussed with growing urgency as he tried to marshal the newcomers into a reception line. In despair he looked to the tall young naval officer who was, unnervingly, the absolute spitting image of his father at his age.

Peter Christopher turned to his bearded companion, a stocky hard-faced leading rate with mischievous eyes and arms like chords of teak.

“Sort out these fellows, Jack,” he grunted, forcing a smile for the sake of the harassed diplomat.

Leading Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin folded his arms and glared at the other men spilling from the ancient bus.

“You heard what the officer said!” He bellowed menacingly. “Form up in a line! Mind your spacing! And shut your traps until ‘the dignitary’ has got back into his car! Any questions?”

Nobody had any questions.

Only five of the twenty men on the ‘airport detail’ were actually survivors from HMS Talavera, the rest were new recruits who had got off a plane from England the previous day. The new recruits were the ones in the brand new uniforms. Talavera’s survivors, Peter Christopher included, were decked out in borrowed, ill-fitting rigs and all of them still showed the bumps, bruises and bandages of the desperate battle to save their ship.

“Who the Devil is this in aid of, Sir Richard?” HMS Talavera’s former Electronic Warfare Officer asked wearily. He had had only a night’s nightmare-interrupted sleep since he had been sent ashore in Oporto.

Nobody would tell him what the Navy planned to do with him; trying to get information about Talavera and the disposition of the surviving members of his Division was a waste of time, and he bitterly resented kicking his heels on a wet aerodrome when all he really wanted to do was to get back to sea. He had overheard loose talk about the Hermes Battle Group and the RAF giving ‘Franco’s boys what for’ but otherwise he did not a clue what else was going on in the World.

“The Prime Minister of Portugal wishes to meet with and shake the hands of several of the heroes of the Battle of Cape Finisterre,” the older man replied with a forced calm. “What he particularly wants, I suspect, is to have his picture taken shaking the hand of the son of the man who has recently been made Supreme Commander of British Forces in the Mediterranean. Had Prime Minister Salazar declined to assist HMS Talavera and HMS Devonshire by opening Portuguese waters to the Royal Navy,” he hesitated, throwing a look over his shoulder at the transports, bombers, jet fighters and helicopters parked and moving around the airfield, “and assisted in your rescue to the absolute limit of his available resources, you wouldn’t be standing here now. HMG requires you to comport yourself in the best traditions of the Service.”

Peter’s expression became one of bemusement.

What was the Ambassador talking about?

“Er, my father is no longer C-in-C Pacific Fleet, sir?”

“Goodness, you really have been all at sea!”

The younger man did not think this was a particularly sympathetic or helpful comment and his irritation was barely contained when he spoke.

“Yes, sir. I have been ‘all at sea’ lately.”

“Forgive me,” Sir Richard Templar apologised, instantly realising that in his anxiety he had been unforgivably crass. “Your esteemed father, Sir Julian, has been appointed the new Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations. His command includes everything from the Atlantic approaches to the Straits of Gibraltar to Cyprus and the miscellaneous enclaves we still hold in the Middle East.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.” The younger man realised he had missed something else: “Excuse me, you said ‘Sir’ Julian?”

“He was knighted for his role in Operation Manna by Her Majesty

shortly before he departed to take up his new command at Malta.”

“Oh, I see.”

“According to the telegram I got from the Foreign Office,” Sir Richard continued, “Her Majesty was pleased to make Sir Julian a *baronet*, the first such since the October War. There was some confusion in Cheltenham initially, I gather, because Her Majesty also administered an accolade...”

Peter Christopher was staring uncomprehendingly at the older man now.

“Her Majesty dubbed Sir Julian’s shoulders with the flat of a sword,” the older man explained, exasperated at the ignorance of the younger generation. “That’s a knightly thing. A baronetcy is the only hereditary honour in Her Majesty’s gift which is not a peerage. It is superior to any knighthood except that of membership of the Order of the Garter.”

“So my father has been knighted,” Peter Christopher checked, quizzically, “but even though he’s now ‘Sir Julian’, he’s not really a knight?”

“He’s perfectly entitled to the appellation ‘Sir’!” Exclaimed the British Ambassador in exasperation. “As will you be if you survive your father!”

“Oh, I see.”

Sir Richard Templar shut his eyes for a moment.

“The baronetcy is hereditary,” he added.

“Oh, right ho...”

“Good, I’m glad we sorted that out,” the Ambassador groaned.

Two big black – rather elderly – cars were approaching.

Peter Christopher realised Sir Richard was giving him a very odd look.

“What is it, sir?”

“Nothing! Nothing! It’s just that I knew your father when he was your age. It’s uncanny, the family resemblance, I mean. Uncanny...” Sir Richard Templar broke off, stumbled away to greet António de Oliveira Salazar, the Dictator of Portugal.

Salazar impressed Peter Christopher as a mild-mannered, softly spoken man with a somewhat reluctant smile. He seemed far too harmless to be one of the two surviving pre-World War II dictators. He looked a little younger than his seventy-four years, but still somewhat tired and grey.

“I trust you are recovered from your injuries, Commander Christopher?” The old man asked solicitously, in lightly accented English.

“Very nearly, sir. Thank you for your concern. The Royal Navy will be eternally in your country’s debt for everything that you’ve done for us in the

last few days, sir.”

Peter Christopher could imagine Sir Richard Templar almost swooning with relief. Just because he was one of the new ‘technical’ officers in the Navy it did not mean he did not know how to comport himself in public. For all that he had joined the Navy to play with its ludicrously expensive ‘toys’ it did not mean he was not aware of, and enthralled by the traditions of the Senior Service. He belonged to a band of brothers which traced its spiritual lineage back to the coterie of captains who had gathered around Admiral Lord Nelson’s table before the Battle of Trafalgar. To Peter Christopher the Royal Navy was the living embodiment of everything that was best in his nation; and he was fiercely, indefatigably proud of it. He knew exactly what was expected of him and he played his part in the morning’s small drama as if to the manner born.

“My men,” a measured flick of the eyes momentarily to his left, where the parade line stood, “the Royal Navy; and my country are indebted to the Portuguese people, sir.” A dutiful nod to the old dictator: “And to you, sir!”

“In these times it is important for nations to know who they may call their friends,” António de Oliveira Salazar declared, evidently more than satisfied with what he had just heard.

Two flash bulbs exploded and Peter politely, respectfully without being overly deferential, invited the old man to review ‘*your honour guard, sir.*’

Ten minutes later he gave the order for *the honour guard* to stand easy as he watched the dignitaries drive off into the mist.

“The bus will take your men back to the Consul’s office down on the waterfront,” Sir Richard Templar explained, mopping his brow with a white handkerchief. “The Naval Attaché has set up shop down there. If you’re lucky he should have your orders by now.”

The younger man did not ask what those orders might be. He half-expected to be put on a flight back to England in the next day or so and if that was to be his fate he was not in a hurry to embrace it.

“You’re all off to the Hermes,” he was told by a middle-aged, sallow-faced Commander. “Weather and the Spanish Air Force permitting, I’ve got you pencilled in for the first Wessex shuttle tomorrow morning. Make sure you and,” he paused to consult a checklist, “LEA Griffin are at the airport at eight tomorrow morning. Don’t be late.”

“The Happy ‘H’?” Jack Griffin chuckled when he learned his fate.

“Out of the frying pan in to the fire,” Peter remarked. “They’ve got you down as an ‘Officer’s Steward’ on your papers.”

Both men laughed.

The Naval Attaché was handing out new accommodation chits.

“Hotel *Armada de Tagus*,” Peter Christopher’s ‘Steward’ muttered, reading his chit. “Sounds like a dive?”

Peter Christopher did not care.

There were only two things on his personal agenda between now and tomorrow morning: writing a letter to Marija, and catching up on his sleep.

Much to Jack Griffin’s disappointment the *Armada de Tagus* was a genteel, old-world sort of rest house that usually catered for retired civil servants and antique Portuguese naval officers. It had about it the faded glory of the days when Portugal had been in the first rank of European superpowers. Like Portugal itself, the hotel had seen better times and was quietly falling down, its walls cracked and its paint flaking.

There were no English language newspapers in the lobby or the lounge so the headlines of the local papers meant nothing to either of the Navy men. Thus, for a little longer they remained blissfully unaware of the Portuguese nation’s horror at the unprovoked ‘carpet bombing of Malta’ by ‘American terror-flyers’.

In his shabby first floor room Peter flattened the creased portrait of Marija Calleja on the rickety table beneath the grubby window. He stared at the photograph for a long time; his troubles slowly dissipating into the humid atmosphere of the old port city.

Dear Marija,

I feel like I have been out of things for an age, although in truth I have only been out of touch for a week or so. I hope that this letter will reach you before you hear what befell the Talavera in the Atlantic last week.

Suffice to say that although a lot of good men were lost we eventually made it to Oporto. I was knocked about a little but not so badly that the damage isn’t already mending. The ship did not get off so lightly and she’s out of commission for a while, so I am to be posted to HMS Hermes. What use a destroyer EWO will be on a twenty-five thousand ton aircraft carrier I have no idea! Never mind, I’d got

myself in a fine old lather worrying about being sent back home again and at least that isn't going to happen quite yet.

Maybe one fine day the Hermes will sail into the Grand Harbour and we shall finally meet face to face.

Goodness that will be a thing!

Suddenly all he wanted to do was sleep.

I am falling asleep as I write this so I'll put down my pen for the moment and pick it up again before I go to the airfield tomorrow morning. All being well this letter will get into a diplomatic pouch and reach you without the normal delays.

Although he put down his pen as he had said he would; he found himself getting his second wind, and picked it up again before he lost his train of thought.

Between you and me things were a bit sticky at times in the last week. I did not think we'd make it. The ship was so badly knocked about and the seas were so big I thought we were done for. I took to carrying your picture as close to my heart as the inside pockets of my jacket allowed. As you know I'm not one of these fellows who turns metaphysical at the first sign of trouble. My life did not keep flashing before my eyes, or any of that nonsense, but thinking of you and feeling that a part of 'you' was with me, well, that helped a lot.

That sounds so lame, he chided himself.

Completely unromantic, too...

But am I trying to be romantic?

Yes, I have all sorts of 'romantic' thoughts about Marija; and yet, Marija is more than that to me.

So much more...

She symbolises the possibility of a future with...hope. Yet I am not courting Marija Elizabeth Calleja. One day perhaps I will, properly; but that is not what I am doing today. Today I am talking to the one person in the World I trust with *all* my secrets, and with *all* my fears.

I cannot help thinking that what happened to Talavera and the Devonshire was my fault and every time I close my eyes to try to sleep I find myself replaying the seconds before the attack, asking myself what I did wrong? What else could I have done? Nobody's said anything. Nobody's mentioned a Board of Inquiry. But I still feel responsible.

Earlier today I shook the hand of the Prime Minister of Portugal – a mild-mannered old fellow, not at all what you'd expect of one of Europe's last surviving pre-war dictators – and pictures were taken for the papers as if I was some kind of hero. Afterwards, I could hardly look anybody in the eye. I'm an electronics enthusiast who joined the Navy to play with the expensive toys on the big ships. There were so many new gadgets and gizmos on HMS Talavera that I thought all my Christmases had come at once! I never expected there to be another war; I honestly never expected to hear or see a gun or a missile fired in anger. No, I imagined I'd get to play with my marvellous toys and occasionally stand a bridge watch or two in heavy weather just so I would not be a complete disgrace to the family's seafaring escutcheon. So much for all my plans! I am a fraud. A complete fraud!

It was so good to have confessed it. If he was not the 'Fighting Admiral's' son they would have put him on the beach by now. Because of him scores of good men had been killed; because of him the Skyhawks had surprised the two destroyers off Finisterre...

There was a knock at the door.

Peter turned over the sheet he was writing.

It was Jack Griffin.

"There's a bloke downstairs who says he from the *London Times* and the First Sea Lord has given him permission to 'interview you', sir." When Peter Christopher stared at him like a rabbit in the headlights of a speeding lorry, the other man added: "he says you can read the First Sea Lord's letter if you don't believe him..."

Chapter 35

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Flight Briefing Room, Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

Edward Heath had not been ready for the ‘shock of the modern’ that awaited the delegation from the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration in the ‘summit room’. The hall was some kind of hastily reconfigured briefing facility in which comfortable hard-backed chairs were arranged down each side of a sturdy oak table. At the head of the table was a large television and behind it a camera of the type the Prime Minister had only ever previously seen in a BBC television studio or at the outside broadcast of a major sporting event. One end of the room was a tangle of power cables and the big, multi-lens camera bearing the logo of ‘NBC News’ was attended by a team of three civilians in shirtsleeves.

“All this technology should make it possible for you to see the President as he speaks,” Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Vice President of the United States of America explained, evidently very proud of this unambiguous statement of American technological mastery.

The other members of the UKIEA delegation – Tom Harding-Grayson, Iain Macleod and Dick White - eyed the ‘technology’ with mistrust and looked to Edward Heath for a lead as to how to react.

“Most impressive,” Edward Heath decided. “Presumably, this equipment will also record our deliberations?”

The Vice President did not know the answer to this question so he turned to his staffers.

“Yes,” he confirmed after a short delay. “Is that a problem, Prime Minister?”

Edward Heath shook his head.

The United States Air Force had treated its guests from England with immense solicitude as if the ongoing Battle for Washington was happening on another continent rather than less than twenty miles away. A light luncheon had been served, stewards had come and gone bearing tea, coffee and biscuits while the delegation waited for the final technical arrangements

to be complete.

“First, I apologise for not being able to greet you at Andrews Field in person, Premier Heath,” Jack Kennedy drawled. The black and white image of the President sitting at a desk in front of a huge flag of the United States of America flickered and juddered briefly before steadying.

Moments earlier the President’s younger brother had burst into the room and introductions had only just been concluded before the link to the White House Situation Room was declared ‘live’.

The Attorney General was dishevelled and badly shaken after his traumatic journey across the embattled city in a Marine Corps armoured personnel carrier. His convoy had come under heavy fire twice before it escaped downtown Washington.

A technician thrust a microphone in Edward Heath’s face.

To his credit the British Prime Minister did not flinch. Any man who had been the Chief Whip of the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland for the best part of a decade, and thereafter been the man entrusted with negotiating his country’s entry into the European Common Market was of necessity, an adroit and gifted public performer.

“We completely understand your local difficulties, Mister President,” he replied loudly. “I wish you every success in your continuing fight against elements clearly antipathetic to the democratic process to which both our Administrations are dedicated to uphold.”

There was a two to three second signal delay.

“Thank you, Prime Minister. I am informed that the State Department Agenda for this summit is agreeable to you?”

Again, the delay.

“Yes, Mister President. However, I am sure we can make a structured discussion of each point in turn redundant in the course of our respective opening remarks.”

This time the delay was nearer ten than three seconds.

Jack Kennedy craned his head to one side, listening to an advisor off camera. Whatever had been said to him he waved it away.

“In the event that this television link is lost during the course of our discussions the Vice President will speak for the United States of America,” he said soberly. He let this hang in the ether for a moment. “There are many

people in America who believe that God has forsaken the World,” he continued. “I am not among their number and I am convinced that free men of good will can one day remake a better new World out of the ashes of the old. If I ever needed proof that my country has turned in upon itself in its anguish, events in Washington in the last twenty-four hours, speak more loudly than words ever can. We have *all* made mistakes since the October War and dark elements within *both* our nations have taken advantage of those mistakes. Today we are living with the tragic consequences. It is my view that there is no profit in dwelling on past mistakes and it is my hope that you have come to the table in the same spirit.”

Edward Heath waited for the President to go on.

Seconds ticked by before he realised it was his turn to speak.

Again the microphone was brandished in his face.

“Thank you for those most statesmanlike sentiments, Mister President. If I may I should like to start with a personal aside. I know that you and my late, much-esteemed predecessor, Harold MacMillan, spoke often before the war. I know also that Mr MacMillan held you in high regard and always spoke well of you among his senior colleagues, one of whom I had the honour to be for many years. I say this because your remarks today would have confirmed Mr MacMillan in his opinion.”

The Prime Minister knew he was embellishing the truth a little and wondered briefly, if he had over-egged his compliment.

“I greatly miss my old friend’s wise advice, Prime Minister.”

No, I probably got it about right.

“As do we all,” Edward Heath agreed solemnly. “If I put the proposition to you that never have two countries been more vexed by a common language than our two countries in the last year,” he continued, “would that find a resonance with you, Mr President?”

“Possibly...”

“Then let me speak plainly to you,” Edward Heath promised. “It is my belief that a Soviet-inspired underground movement which goes by the name of ‘Red Dawn’ may be behind the incident at Balmoral Castle in which CIA-sponsored operatives in the Irish Republic have been implicated; in fomenting the bellicose actions of the fascist regimes in Spain and Italy; and in so deeply infiltrating certain parts of the United States military that its agents were able to convince patriotic American service personnel to mount

attacks on former allies.”

There was a long delay.

Jack Kennedy was oddly hesitant. “We know of ‘Red Dawn’ as one of many KGB projects that never got off the ground. It dated back to the Stalin era and was believed to have withered on the vine after Stalin’s death,” he said, picking his words with great care.

Edward Heath nodded. “Sir Richard White,” he continued, “the Head of the Secret Intelligence Service is a member of the UKIEA delegation, Mister President. I have authorised him to fully brief CIA Director McCone and any other member of your Administration you might care to nominate on *all* available intelligence currently in our possession relating to the Red Dawn movement.”

“That’s very generous of you, Prime Minister.”

“I prefer to see that ‘generosity’ as a pragmatic token of our good faith, Mister President. We find ourselves at this present sad pass not because we have been saying the wrong thing to each other, but because since the war we have *failed* to talk to each other.” He did not give Jack Kennedy room to get a word in edgewise. “Further to this, in relation to items one and two on the agenda for this summit prepared by your State Department; the eight US Air Force survivors of the 100th Bomb Group’s attack on Malta, and all former diplomats in the United Kingdom whose accreditation was withdrawn last week will be returned to the United States at the earliest possible time. Ambassador Westheimer travelled to Washington with my party so that he might participate in the organisation of flights to collect his people still in England. The United States Air Force may send a plane to Malta to repatriate your airmen at its convenience. Your service personnel in our custody in Malta have received appropriate medical and other care according to their need and, to ensure their welfare, a former Retired US Navy Surgeon Commander, a Doctor Margo Seiffert, has been tasked by the C-in-C Mediterranean to act in lieu of the Swiss Red Cross on behalf of your people.”

Jack Kennedy absorbed this unhurriedly.

In his State of the Union Address he had dug himself a hole and the British Premier had just thrown him a rope. However, he was not so grateful that he did not know there was not going to be a price to be paid.

“That’s most helpful,” he confessed, deciding this was not the time to

play hard to get.

“I regret,” Edward Heath continued, “that the other items on the ‘agenda’ cannot be discussed other than as part of a broader bi-lateral settlement. The British people will soon be aware that Americans based in the Republic of Ireland are implicated in the attempted assassination of Queen Elizabeth and her family. Likewise, they will realise, if they don’t already, that Operation Manna would not have been necessary if *your* Administration had kept its word on grain and fuel supplies to its hard-pressed *former* NATO allies. In time it will also become evident that tens of thousands of my people died, and continue to die because Congress has mandated that all antibiotics manufactured in the United States be reserved for *Americans*. I could go on but I am a guest in your country and you and I have already agreed that we must look to the future, not the past.”

Lyndon Baines Johnson cleared his throat.

“Premier Heath,” he prefaced, dourly, “you’re not the only guy in the room who has constituents he needs to keep sweet.”

“Sweet?” The Englishman retorted flatly. “Sweet, Mister Vice President? American broken promises and parsimony would have seen millions of *my constituents* die of starvation and disease this winter if *I’d* failed to mobilise the military resources at *my* disposal.”

The Texan held up his hands.

“A lot of my people on the Hill reckoned that if the British Empire can afford to keep more ships in the water than the United States Navy you really don’t need our foreign aid.”

Iain Macleod got to his feet and moved around to speak quietly in Edward Heath’s ear. The Minister of Information was unusually calm and collected, however, he had seen the rage building in his old friend’s eyes and, notwithstanding their differences in the last terrible year, he hoped he was still close enough to the urbane, cultured highly intelligent man who had shouldered the whole weight of carrying his hard-pressed country through its most desperate hours, for his counsel of caution to be heard.

The Ted Heath he had known before the war had been a cheerful, solicitous friend to whom personal loyalty and respect were two-way streets. In fact he had been that rare animal, a politician who valued his personal integrity above party politics who rarely stepped back from discussing unpalatable or inconvenient facts with his friends, foes, or with the voters.

The Vice President was seriously misunderstanding his man if he thought Ted Heath was a man who would bow to the famous 'LBJ treatment'.

"I think we probably want to ask for a brief adjournment now, Ted."

Across the table the American delegation watched with eyebrows arching.

Edward Heath sat back from the table.

"Take that filthy thing out of my face!" He pushed away the fluffy microphone. He ignored the television screen at the end of the table and met the Vice President's unblinking, steely stare with a similarly unrelenting scrutiny.

His chair scrapped loudly on the floor as he stood up.

Chapter 36

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Dockyard Creek, Senglea, Malta

Samuel Calleja had seen his younger brother walking towards him from the seaward end of the dry dock. Work gangs were crawling over the wreck of HMS Torquay making final preparations to flood the basin. A great steel patch had been welded over the gaping wound in the starboard side of the wrecked frigate; the whole ship had become a scene straight out of *Dante's Inferno* with men hammering and welding plates over every hole and crack in the vessel's thin skin.

The plan to right, float and tow the hulk around to Marsa Creek where all removable equipment would be salvaged 'in due course' was madness. Attempting to right the ship *as the dock was being flooded* was insane. He had protested to his British overseers, who shrugged off his vehement objections and politely explained that the dock needed to be 'made available' and 'this way is quicker than breaking up the ship *in situ*'. The pumps were already blowing compressed air into the compartments sealed by the welding teams.

"Papa said it was a bit of mess," Joseph Calleja whistled, approaching his older brother, "I thought he was exaggerating. You can't really see that much from the Valletta side." He stared at the unreal sight of a two-and-a-half thousand ton, nearly four hundred foot long warship lying on her starboard side. But for her superstructure coming to rest against the side of the dock and the blocks preventing her lying directly on the bottom of the dock, she was literally 'on her beam ends'. Their father had shown him black and white photographs of HMS Kingston wrecked in this very dock during the 1945 war; he had never honestly believed he would ever see the like of it in his life time. "Can we really right her with the cranes we've got, Sam?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Nobody's ever tried doing a thing like this before."

"We ought to check that the *Times of Malta* sends a photographer," Joe Calleja suggested unhelpfully.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?"

“No, I promised the British I’d be a good boy for the duration.”

“So, no union meetings?”

“I’m still a member of the *Workers’ Council*, big brother,” the younger Calleja reminded the older sibling. “Just because of the latest panic it doesn’t mean our people don’t have a right to have their voices heard.”

“Our people! You should hear yourself speak, Joe!”

As they sparred the two brothers had begun to study the elegant lines of HMS Tiger, moored alongside Parlatorio Wharf on the other side of Dockyard Creek with the Daring class destroyer HMS Decoy moored along her outboard, port flank.

“What’s the rush to get the dock open again?” Joe asked idly, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the broken frigate.

“If I knew that I probably wouldn’t be allowed to tell you,” Sam Calleja retorted. “Not that it’s hard to guess. The Fleet is expecting reinforcements now that there’s a new man in charge; one, perhaps, two big carriers and their escorts.” He sniffed the cool air. The dusk was almost gone, replaced with the night. In the near distance oxy-acetylene torches burned dazzlingly in the gloom and sparks flew in glittering showers. Across the glassy waters of Dockyard Creek the arc lights burned over HMS Tiger, the lead ship of the last class of big gun cruisers that would ever be built for the Royal Navy.

The older brother relented a fraction.

“Tiger is off-loading armour-piercing main battery rounds and taking on anti-aircraft reloads, and HE shells with the latest time delay and proximity fuses. The rumour is that she’s off to Cyprus as soon as she and her escorts have rebalanced their magazines with AA munitions.”

Joe Calleja sobered a little.

“It doesn’t sound so good in Cyprus?”

“No, not since Crete declared independence a couple of months back. Some sort of leftist coup.”

The younger man did not ask his brother how he was so well informed. Sam had always been obsessed with what was going on in the outside World and their mother lived in constant terror of being told one day that Sam was leaving Malta. Joe’s frustration that Sam had never converted any of his curiosity about faraway places into politics and activism at home; had always been a source of the friction between the siblings. Marija was almost as bad, of course, but at least she had finally, reluctantly ‘got involved’ – *big time* -

when she had led the Women of Malta protests.

“Does it matter if the Greeks don’t run Crete anymore?” He asked realising the moment he asked it that it was a stupid question.

“That depends who the new overlords are, doesn’t it?” Sam Calleja sneered dismissively. “And how they feel about the British sailing in their waters?”

Joe Calleja had once, not so long ago, believed that the World was a fairly simple place. If you did not like something you protested, fought against it, bloodlessly if at all possible. Then around a year ago he had been arrested in the middle of the night, dragged off to the Empire Stadium at Gzira and over the course of two nights been beaten very nearly to death by goons taking orders from two men with American accents. He would have died in that place if a squad of British Redcaps, Royal Military Policemen, under the command of Staff Sergeant Jim Siddall had not interrupted the work of the torturers. Later he been told that the big Redcap who had since become terminally sweet on Marija had taken one look at what was going on in the Empire Stadium and ordered his men to ‘beat the crap’ out of the Internal Security thugs running the ‘reception depot’. Marija said the big Redcap had just been promoted and was working for Admiral Christopher. His sister had also confided to him that many years ago when the Admiral had last been in Malta he had carried a flame for *Dottoressa* Seiffert.

Life was full of surprises.

“Did you hear the new Admiral on the radio?” He asked his elder brother.

Sam Calleja shook his head. His wife had spoken of little else other than the rousing, reassuring bluster of the new ‘Grand Master’ of the Maltese Archipelago. She honestly believed the islands had been sent a new protector, a new guardian angel. Rosa did not understand that all the arrival of the famous ‘Fighting Admiral’ signified was a tightening of their chains. In the next few weeks and months the creeks and harbours of the Archipelago would fill with great grey warships; and Malta’s bondage would be complete again for another generation. The British were never going to take their foot off the throat of the Maltese. He had dreamed that one day they might pack up and depart. He knew now that this was wanderlust. The latest interlopers in the footsteps of the *Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem Knights of Malta* would only leave when they were driven out.

Joe did not pay much heed to his brother's apparent distraction.

"Anyway," he decided, sensing that any further attempt to make small talk with Sam was going to be like walking through treacle, "the main office sent me down here in case we burn out any of the servos on the hawser pulleys, or the crane motors. I'm a fully qualified yard electrician, remember?"

This brought the older brother out of his introspection.

"Whatever you do stay behind something solid tonight," he directed sternly, as if he was addressing a small and somewhat recalcitrant child. "Even if this 'operation' goes perfectly cables will inevitably fail sooner or later. I've already lost a lot of good men. I don't intend to lose any more just to 'tidy up' the dock for the British!"

Sam Calleja watched as his brother ambled off into the gloom, stepping in and out of the back light of the arcs pouring harsh white illumination onto the carcass of the broken frigate in the dry dock. He checked his watch. He had done everything he could to make sure none of his men got hurt tonight; in an hour or so the British would probably find out they should have listened to him in the first place. He hated the waiting.

He gazed across the creek to HMS Tiger.

He had worked on the ship when she had come to Malta to complete her maiden cruise; been onboard when her 'inclining trials' were conducted in the calm of the Grand Harbour opposite the neck of Dockyard Creek. Tiger was a very modern, beautiful ship but for all her state of the art electronics and gunnery control radars she was already obsolete. Like what remained of the British Empire her proud distinguished facade hid the anachronistic fabric beneath the surface; for although Tiger's keel had been laid down on Clydebanks in October 1941 her uncompleted hulk had only been launched four years later after the end of the Second War to clear the slip. For much of the next decade Tiger and her two sisters, Lion and Blake, had been laid up on the Clyde, rusting, before in the mid-1950s it had finally been decided to complete them as light cruisers carrying the latest automatic quick-firing 6-inch and 3-inch guns. Tiger's four 6-inch guns mounted in twin turrets fore and aft could each theoretically fire at least twenty rounds a minute; her six 3-inch high-angle anti-aircraft battery – each barrel capable of firing over thirty rounds a minute – was arranged in three twin turrets, one to port, one to starboard amidships and another forward of her bridge superstructure. If her

turrets did not malfunction – which they did, frequently – Tiger could easily ‘shoot herself dry’ in less than twenty minutes. This was not a problem because by then the theory was that she would have deluged any potential enemy with such a weight of horribly accurate, radar-controlled gunfire that the battle would have long been over. Unfortunately, the main battery usually jammed after a minute or so of continuous firing and there weren’t enough 3-inch, high-angle anti-aircraft mounts to put up a broad enough curtain of fire to deter incoming fast jets.

Tiger was a brilliantly envisaged, poorly and very expensively executed attempt to build a cruiser to re-fight the Battle of the River Plate...

Samuel Calleja stared a little longer at the elegant lines and radar adorned lattice masts of the British cruiser. From his vantage point several hundred yards away he could clearly see men moving on Tiger’s decks.

It was odd that a ship like HMS Tiger; so out-dated before her time in the age before the October War; should be so well-fitted for the kind of war that in all likelihood, she was going to have to fight in the coming weeks and months. Notwithstanding, he had few doubts that the initial explosion of Red Dawn would sweep the beautiful ship aside as its flaming banner swept all before it in the eastern Mediterranean.

History had its own momentum.

HMS Tiger, like the British Empire and eventually the destroyers of worlds - the Great Satan, America – would fall beneath the onslaught. Not since the epochs of the Mongol Hordes out of Asia had western civilization faced such an implacable threat to everything it held dear.

The time of the reckoning was upon them and the men crawling over the grey, floodlit carcass of the cruiser tied up alongside Parlatorio Wharf had no inkling of what was coming.

Ignorance was truly bliss...

Chapter 37

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Flight Briefing Room, Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

“What just happened?” Jack Kennedy demanded flatly. When there was no immediate reply he repeated: “What the fuck just happened?”

Lyndon Baines Johnson and Bobby Kennedy both started talking at once but the President could not see the British delegation walking out of the room ‘off camera’ so nothing they said made much sense for some seconds.

“They’ll be back,” the Vice President declared but the wildest negotiator on Capitol Hill was not entirely convinced and the glimmer of uncertainty sent shock waves of new anxiety radiating out in all directions.

Standing in the back of the makeshift NBC control room in the Aircrew Ready Room next to the Flight Briefing Room, Walter Brenckmann felt like he was witnessing a slow motion car crash and could not understand why none of the parties had seen it coming. He had suspected the President and LBJ would play the good cop – bad cop game; it had worked before. Apart from the fact it was the wrong game and that time was running out; why would not it work now?

Since he had reported to the Base Commander and placed himself at that officer’s disposal ‘in the current emergency’ Walter Brenckmann had been ignored, mildly ostracised and left to his own devices. Eventually, explaining to the NBC producer who had been bussed in at short notice to supervise the communication link with the White House and to record the ‘peace summit’, that he had come over from England ‘with the British’ and would like to observe the ‘technicalities of the communications process’, he had been given a ring side seat without further debate.

He had watched the opening moves with mounting alarm.

Given that Premier Heath and his associates had just flown into an ongoing civil war – no other term began to describe what was going on in America’s capital city – they did not have to be told that the Kennedy Administration needed every friend it could get. Yet the Vice President had switched into attack dog mode at the very moment the British had given him

the two headline concessions over POWs and diplomats that the Administration absolutely had to deliver to the American people; assuming the main players survived the insurrection that was presently burning down Washington DC.

Insanity!

How in God's name did *his* leaders imagine the British were going to react to LBJ's riposte to Edward Heath's entirely factual – and in the circumstances, relatively restrained – statement of the US Government's failures to make good on its earlier promises? It was one thing for the President to suggest that the past was the past and that they should all focus on the future; another entirely to persuade the British to take whatever new promises and guarantees they received with anything more than a very large pinch of salt. For the Vice President to suggest to the British Prime Minister he *did not even plan to make any new promises* was like waving a red flag in front of a charging bull. Especially when that suggestion did not remotely reflect the Administration's *actual* negotiating position. Walter Brenckmann did not know what that position was; he just knew that playing hardball was not it; unless the Kennedy Brothers, LBJ, Robert McNamara, John McCone and the other surviving members of the Administration had had a collective brainstorm!

"Does your microphone broadcast to all the parties on the circuit?" Walter Brenckmann asked the NBC producer with every ounce of his professional litigator's gravitas.

"Yes, sir," the other man confirmed, "but anything I said over the link would go directly to air if we were broadcasting live."

"But you're not broadcasting live now?" Walter Brenckmann queried, trying to keep the visceral horror out of his voice. *Please tell me NBC had not actually been broadcasting the summit live while Washington was under attack?*

"Oh, no, sir. There is a speaker at the White House and another in the Conference Room..."

"Give me the microphone!" Walter Brenckmann said it in the voice he had sometimes had to employ at sea when one of his officers had done something unbelievably stupid, or a bone-headed enlisted man had needed the crap scared out of him.

The NBC man almost jumped out of his skin.

He pulled off his clumsy headset and passed it over with both hands as fast as was humanly possible.

Holding one earpiece to his head Walter Brenckmann raised the microphone to his lips, hurriedly composing himself.

“This is Captain Walter Brenckmann,” he announced in a carefully calculated monotone. “I might not have an honours degree in international diplomacy but I can as sure as Hell tell when a divorce is turning messy, gentlemen.”

“Brenckmann?” The President queried irritably. At this point he probably put his hand over the microphone believing it would make what he said next inaudible. “Who the fuck is this guy Brenckmann?”

“Captain Walter Brenckmann, United States Navy, sir,” the Boston lawyer informed his Commander-in-Chief. “I’m the *guy* who warned Ambassador Westheimer, the State Department, the Attorney General and the Navy Department that our policies were driving the British into a corner and that they were likely to come out fighting. When the British identified the involvement of US personnel in the attack on Balmoral Castle in which the Queen’s husband was crippled and her youngest child killed,” he was a little surprised nobody had cut him off or told him to shut up, so he continued, “that finally crossed their red line. Premier Heath isn’t a *guy* you want to be pushing right now, sir.”

There was a silence.

A long, static hissing silence that dragged on for an age.

Walter Brenckmann waited for the tramp of booted feet in the corridor, the click of rifle bolts and the inrush of Marines.

They were going to arrest him, right?

The lunatics had taken over the asylum; therefore, shooting the messenger had got to be de rigor.

Right?

“I don’t want war with the British, Captain Brenckmann,” Jack Kennedy drawled with a quiet confidence that everybody who heard it knew to be utterly false. “Right now I’d give them all the gold in Fort Knox if I thought that would buy them off.”

“Like I said, sir,” the Boston Lawyer reminded his President, “I’m no diplomat but if this was a divorce I’d be advising you against trying to *buy off* your estranged, er, *partner*. For one thing former wives, I mean, *partners*,

don't always like to have it known that they can be bought off. For another, I don't think you've got enough treasure to pay the bill and the British already know that. The only thing you've got that they want, and that they really need, is friendship, sir. And grain and a few tankers full of crude oil, obviously. It isn't like they're asking for golden elephants. This isn't going to cost you anything you cannot afford. Hell, we're talking small change here. I honestly don't see what the problem is."

Walter Brenckmann imagined – or perhaps, he had really heard – explosions on the line. *At the White House or closer to Andrews Field?* There was no way he could tell.

Still, nobody burst into the improvised studio in the Aircrew Ready Room.

"Put Bobby on the line," the President commanded.

"I'm here, Jack."

"Have you been listening in?"

"Yes," the Attorney General acknowledged tersely. "I'm hearing a lot of explosions at your end..."

"General LeMay has called in Skyraiders to clear out the last terrorist enclaves in the vicinity of the White House."

Walter Brenckmann had seen Douglas A-1 Skyraiders in action in Korea. Big single-engine aircraft capable of carrying huge mixed payloads of napalm, general purpose and cluster bombs, and air-to-ground rockets on under-wing pylons and hard-points. Some variants carried twenty-millimetre cannons and fifty calibre heavy machine guns. A single pass by a Skyraider could wipe out all life in a fifty yard wide swath of any battlefield on Earth. The idea of such aircraft being deployed in the streets of a modern city was so appalling as to be virtually beyond his comprehension.

The President was still speaking, offering reassurance to his younger brother.

"The Army and the Marines have the situation under control in Georgetown and the Embassy District, they've secured Capitol Hill, and the White House perimeter was secured several hours ago as you know. The Marines and the National Guard are expanding that perimeter as we speak. The terrorists are trying to melt away. Only a few diehards are actually still fighting in the city, although the reports from downtown are garbled. There may still be disturbances in progress there. The fighting around the Pentagon

is almost over. Arlington is a no go area because General LeMay is reluctant to order air strikes against the rebels,” Jack Kennedy corrected himself, “*terrorists* who’ve taken refuge in the National Cemetery. ”

Walter Brenckmann coughed. Realising that this had not stopped the dominant siblings of the most disastrous United States Administration in history wasting precious time – *that they did not have* - bringing each other up to speed, the Boston lawyer ostentatiously and very loudly cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen,” he declared, paternally, “you *really* don’t have time for this.”

The brothers would much rather have been talking to each other than the stranger who seemed intent on bringing them only bad news. Walter Brenckmann knew as much. Parties to messy divorce cases invariably opted for denial sooner or later.

“With respect,” he said, not really believing he was having to tell *them* this, “the Attorney General needs to go and talk to Premier Heath *now*.”

“Why?” Bobby Kennedy asked. There was impatience in his tone; but no malice and no suggestion that he was in any way talking down to an underling. He was curious, as if he really wanted to know what the older man knew that he did not. “Why, Captain Brenckmann?”

The former Naval Attaché to the Court of Balmoral thought it ought to have been obvious to the Attorney General. However, in his experience as a litigator very few people actually had any real understanding of what, to a *real* lawyer, often seemed patently obvious.

“Because somebody has to talk to Premier Heath face to face and give him *everything*, and I do mean *everything* he wants. Trust me; you’ll be surprised how little he wants. Grain and fuel will do for now, medical supplies and a hot line to the President will seal the deal.”

“And this will come better from Bobby?” The President queried.

“Yes.” Again, Walter Brenckmann really did not know why *he* was having to tell *them* this. “I mean no disrespect, Mister President,” he explained flatly, “but the Attorney General is the Kennedy brother the Brits don’t hold personally responsible for the death of millions of their countrymen, sir.”

Chapter 38

Tuesday 10th December 1963

Armada de Tagus Hotel, Lisbon

Giles Gerard was a florid, plump man of indeterminate middle-years with a twinkle in his eye and a winning smile. He was exactly the sort of man one would expect to bump into – probably tipsy – below the grandstand of a race course like Goodwood or Ascot checking out the form of the runners in the parade ring. He was wearing a tweed jacket and plus fours and brandishing a bottle of twelve year old *Royal Lochnagar* whiskey.

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher had followed his ‘personal steward’, Leading Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin down to the unpopulated lounge of the hotel privately questioning the wisdom of agreeing to meet the ‘War Correspondent of the London Times’. *The Times*, like the other historic Fleet Street staples, the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and the *Evening Standard* had, with the assistance of the UKIEA re-established themselves in Manchester and in the last few months begun again to publish ‘thin’ daily national editions as and when the availability of news print permitted.

Now that he had set eyes on Giles Gerard the young naval officer’s doubts crystallised. Apart from the fact he was dog tired and likely to say something he ought not to say, his father’s notoriety – long before his recent exploits in command of Operation Manna – had bred in the son an instinctive mistrust of *everything* he read about the Royal Navy in the popular press. The problem was that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce – *the man whose word was law in the Royal Navy* - had as good as ordered him to talk to the bloody man.

The journalist pumped his right hand enthusiastically.

“I expected you to look more weather-beaten, Commander,” the older man guffawed cheerfully. “The Ministry of Information flew me out here especially to do a piece on the ‘Electronic Warfare Whizz son of the Fighting Admiral’,” he explained apologetically. He held up the whiskey. “I brought this to soften the blow. You’re not one of these post-war born again bloody teetotallers are you?”

Peter Christopher shook his head.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jack Griffin sliding away.

“Stay, Jack,” he said softly. He had only ever used the other man’s Christian name half-a-dozen times in the sixteen months of their acquaintance. The majority of those occasions had been when he had pulled the man aside and berated him for some – now forgotten – infraction of Queen’s Regulations or on account of the consequences of one of his famously misfiring pranks. “We’re off duty,” he looked to the smoke discoloured ceiling, “*inside*, and we seem to be the only representatives of the Senior Service in residence. After what we’ve been through in the last few days you deserve a stiff drink as much as I do.”

Giles Gerard raised an eyebrow.

“You said the Ministry of Information sent you out here?” Peter asked as the three men settled in threadbare armchairs. An old man in the faded red and gold livery of the *Armada de Tagus Hotel* materialised to clank glasses on the table around which the chairs had gathered, and departed without a word.

The man from *The Times* nodded as he poured a couple of fingers of amber malt whiskey into each of the three glasses and placed the bottle in the middle of the table.

“The fate of HMS Talavera and HMS Devonshire was the first item on the radio news and front page fodder for all the papers for over two days,” Giles Gerard said. “Stirring stuff, I can tell you! And when the news from Malta started to emerge, well...”

Peter Christopher picked up his glass; as did Jack Griffin, the latter with an odd, uncomfortable hesitancy.

“Malta?”

“Oh, I assumed you’d have been briefed?”

“No, nobody’s told us *anything*.”

“Oh, I see.” The journalist redrew his previously prepared remarks, began anew. “At about the same time you came under attack in the Atlantic enemy bombers were converging on Gibraltar and Malta. The former raid was discouraged by HMS Hermes’s Sea Vixens...”

“What happened at Malta?” Peter demanded hoarsely.

“The Regia Aeronautica attacked ships and dockyard installations and, apparently, the Italians claim, inadvertently, civilian areas at low-level,

while,” Giles Gerard flashed a disbelieving smile, “four B-52s dropped big, and I mean very big, bombs on practically all our major headquarters and bases in and around Valletta...”

Peter Christopher suspected that Jack Griffin was staring at the journalist with exactly the same incredulity that he was; for a moment he was convinced the man from *The Times* was playing some ill-conceived ludicrously cruel practical joke on him. A moment later icy fingers clutched his heart.

Marija!

“But for the fact that the RAF and the Fleet Air Arm happened to be in the middle of a big war game and had nearly twenty kites in the air over Malta,” Giles Gerard went on, “the bastards would probably have got away with it without a scratch.”

Marija...

The two Navy men listened with mounting outrage to the tale.

They nodded grimly at the news that RAF Hawker Hunters had gunned down four B-52s; listened in horror at the bald numbers of the casualty lists. Between one and two thousand dead, as many people injured; most of the major headquarters buildings on Malta demolished, HMS Agincourt sunk at her moorings in Sliema Creek, HMS Torquay capsized in dry dock, HMS Sheffield – the same ship that had taken part in the hunt for the Bismarck in May 1941 – grounded in shallow water in Lazaretto Creek...

“Are we at war with America?” Peter asked, interrupting the journalist’s flow.

“Not yet.” The older man shrugged. “Well, not so far as I know, anyway.”

“My father is uninjured?”

A brusque nod.

“Yes. He landed on the island about an hour before the raid started. He’s spent most of the time since touring the bombed areas and shaking hands.” Giles Gerard decided he had overstated the glad-handing propensities of the ‘Fighting Admiral’. “Sorry, that’s not really true. He’s C-in-C of everything between Gibraltar and the Levant now. Between the Hermes Battle Group standing out to sea off Cape Trafalgar – a nice touch that – and periodic precision strikes by V-Bombers hopefully the Spanish seem to have abandoned bellicosity in favour of licking their wounds and

hiding in bomb shelters. As for the situation on Malta, well, my colleagues on the spot say Sir Julian has been stoking up the old wartime spirit. There are reports that he's clapped and cheered everywhere he goes. Perhaps, the man actually has the 'Nelson touch' after all?"

Peter Christopher raised his glass to his lips and drank deep.

The malt whiskey burned his throat.

Marija, he decided, would have been in Mdina. Miles away from the bombing around Valletta...

Unless she had gone home to Sliema for the weekend to be with her parents...

"You won't have heard about the fighting in Washington, of course?" Giles Gerard asked rhetorically.

No, they had not heard.

"The situation is a tad confused," the older man frowned. "But it sounds dreadful. A full-scale insurrection. Perhaps, an attempted coup d'état. They always used to say that the World was going to Hell in a handbag, didn't they? These days one wonders if *they* weren't right all along!"

Chapter 39

Wednesday 11th December 1963

UKIEA Government Compound, Cheltenham, England

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce was stoically ashen-faced as he laid the latest flash report from HMS Dreadnought on the table in front of the Acting-Prime Minister. He almost jumped out of his skin when the door behind him opened and Margaret Thatcher and Airey Neave rushed into the room.

“Is it true, Jim?” The Angry Widow demanded without preamble.

The man behind the big desk in the Minister of Defence’s office sighed and pushed the note towards her. Before the Home Secretary could pick it up, Airey Neave, formerly her de facto chief of staff and the newly appointed Minister of Supply grabbed it and read aloud.

“IMMEDIATE C-IN-C FLEET STOP USS SCORPION DESTROYED BY SURFACE OR AIRBORNE LAUNCHED TORPEDOES AT 03:07 HOURS ZULU STOP FORCED TO RUN DEEP TO OUTRUN HOMING TORPEDOES AND UNABLE TO RISE TO PERISCOPE DEPTH UNTIL 07:15 DUE TO PRESENCE OF HOSTILE SURFACE FORCES STOP NO TORPEDO WAS FIRED BY DREADNOUGHT IN THIS ACTION STOP FURTHER AAR TO FOLLOW MESSAGE ENDS...”

The former escapee from Colditz looked up.

“This was sent hours ago,” he remarked idly.

Sir David Luce had clasped his hands behind his back.

“Dreadnought hasn’t broadcast again since the initial after action report. My best guess is that if she hasn’t been destroyed that she’s running silent. Presumably, avoiding *hostile* vessels and aircraft.”

Margaret Thatcher had drawn up a chair opposite the Acting-Prime Minister’s desk. She gave James Callaghan, the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party a thoughtful look.

“I’m told the fighting has flared up again in Washington, Jim?”

The big man nodded.

“There are reports that the CIA complex at Langley is now under

sporadic artillery fire. There have been truck and petrol tanker bombs in New York.” He pursed his lips for a moment. “It seems several National Guard units have been stood down. The reports list ‘stand downs’ in several States including Texas, the Carolinas, Virginia and New Jersey. I should caution that *all* of the reports are coming to us via third parties...”

“GCHQ intercepts?” Airey Neave checked.

“Yes. And from several BBC listening stations.”

The Angry Widow looked to the First Sea Lord.

“What is your assessment of the situation in the Atlantic, Sir David?”

“Dreadnought’s last reported position was over three hundred nautical miles west of the Spanish mainland. The only reason she would have been so far west was if she was either attempting to shake off pursuit, or deliberately drawing potentially hostile units away from the Hermes Battle Group.”

“Have the Americans said anything yet?”

There were shrugs around the room.

“The US Navy’s communications net seems to be partially disabled at the moment,” the First Sea Lord remarked. “CINCLANT may be operating without effective political oversight and guidance. One intercept inferred that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was ‘down’; possibly dead. It is chaos in Washington.”

“If Kennedy’s top soldier is ‘down’?” Airey Neave asked. “Who is next in line over there, Sir David?”

The Admiral grimaced.

“General LeMay, I should imagine.”

Margaret Thatcher groaned: “Marvellous,” she exclaimed, “absolutely marvellous!”

“Are there any indications of renewed civil disorder at home, Margaret?” James Callaghan inquired after a troubled quietness threatened to envelop the meeting.

“No. After the outrage at Balmoral the Army and the Police rounded up known troublemakers and anybody the Security Service had previously identified as a *person of interest*. I doubt if that would have scratched the surface of a conspiracy like the one we’re witnessing across the other side of the Atlantic; but it may at least have driven *our* own terroristic elements underground. Bear in mind martial law was applied somewhat heavily-handedly last winter. That may have had a dampening effect on any nascent

Red Dawn cells that survived the October War.”

James Callaghan remembered the bombings and the assassinations in the weeks after the war; and the brutal tactics the Army, reinforced by Royal Navy and Royal Air Force units and the Police, had employed to hunt down those responsible. In the United States there had been no sudden outbreak of lawlessness other than in the bombed areas; the decline towards civil disobedience, and the gradual disintegration of the old social order had spread like a slow, inexorable plague across the continent. The authorities had managed to keep the lid on things in the big cities but in some parts of the country, and out in the back woods, anarchy was embedding itself in the fabric of the nation. Local militias had sprung up, vigilante groups roamed the streets and while regular units of the Armed Services remained loyal, thousands of disaffected career soldiers, sailors and airmen discarded by the Kennedy Administration in a desperate attempt to rebalance the hard-hit American economy with the huge ‘peace dividend’, had provided a raft of recruits to mostly rightist protest groups. The October War might not have devastated the American heartland; it might yet prove to have splintered it.

Sir David Luce glanced at his watch.

“HMS Victorious will be sailing from Portsmouth about now,” he reported. “She’ll be in a position to support the Ark Royal’s air operations in approximately thirty hours.”

James Callaghan tried not to broadcast his unease.

HMS Victorious had been in dockyard hands until eight weeks ago. The old, much rebuilt and modernized carrier was a paper tiger. She had had no opportunity to work up to any kind of operational readiness and until more aircraft and pilots became available – a big imponderable in the present circumstances – her air group was going to consist of a single squadron of De Havilland Sea Vixens and a pair of Westland Wessex helicopters, the latter fabricated from spares cannibalised from unserviceable and crashed machines.

If the omens seemed uniformly oppressive to the Acting-Prime Minister, who had received no word from Andrews Air Force Base since the receipt earlier in the day of confirmation that the Prime Minister’s aircraft had landed safely.

The First Sea Lord’s preoccupations were similarly dark.

History weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Against the might of the Enterprise Battle Group the Royal Navy was about to pit the untried new diesel-electric submarines of the 1st Submarine Squadron, one exhausted aircraft carrier, the Ark Royal, in urgent need of six months in dockyard hands with a depleted air group of less than twenty aircraft; and an old World War II vintage carrier – the Victorious - straight out of dock with a maximum of twelve serviceable interceptors. The USS Enterprise was in company with nuclear-powered cruisers, the US Navy's latest destroyers and boasted an air group of at least eighty fighter, bomber, anti-submarine, tanker, and airborne early warning and electronic warfare aircraft and half-a-score of helicopters.

Sir David Luce remembered the disastrous outcome of the Battle of the Denmark Strait in May 1941 when the elderly, obsolescent battlecruiser HMS Hood and the brand new battleship HMS Prince of Wales – the latter with teams of civilian workers onboard struggling to iron out problems with her main battery – engaged the Bismarck and the Prinz Eugen. The German ships were newly built, state of the art modern warships which had been working up to peak combat efficiency for several months, in Bismarck's case for over a year; HMS Hood was old and tired, a relic from another age, HMS Prince of Wales ought by rights to have still been in dockyard hands. In hindsight the outcome of the battle ought to have been entirely predictable. The Hood had blown up after a handful of salvoes with the loss of over fourteen hundred lives. The Prince of Wales had been handled so badly she had reeled out of the fight behind a smokescreen only minutes later.

For Bismarck read the USS Enterprise; for the Hood and the Prince of Wales read Ark Royal and Victorious.

HMS Dreadnought might already be gone.

The darkness was fast descending upon them all.

Chapter 40

Wednesday 11th December 1963

Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

“Premier Heath,” Bobby Kennedy began, clasping Edward Heath’s hand, “I must ask for your *understanding* in these times.” He released his grip and met the Englishman’s stare with his own, somewhat boyish, intensity. The Attorney General had the natural charm and the winning smile of all of the Kennedy brothers. “The present situation is a thing beyond the experience of any one of us here today; I think we need to give each other the benefit of the doubt, perhaps?”

It had taken several tense hours but things were finally looking hopeful.

Standing at the Attorney General’s shoulder Walter Brenckmann thought the President’s brother had got this latest set of remarks about right. As he had told countless divorcing clients the main thing was ‘to stop digging before the hole gets too deep to climb out of’. While he was not entirely convinced the President and the Vice President had got their heads around the intrinsic wisdom of this concept; at least Bobby Kennedy was running with the ball.

The former Boston lawyer said nothing.

He and the Attorney General were alone in an annexe to the Base Commander’s office with the British Prime Minister, his Foreign Secretary, the owlish Tom Harding-Grayson, and the restless, suspicious-eyed British Minister of Information, Iain Macleod. Edward Heath was the tallest man in the room, although a little thinner in person than the pictures of the well-built man in his pre-war CIA dossier.

The five men were not standing on ceremony; there simply were not enough chairs in the room.

Tom Harding-Grayson touched Edward Heath’s arm.

“If I may, Prime Minister,” he suggested. In the years before the October War his brilliant career, and subsequently his marriage and some small part of his sanity, had foundered on the rocks of a British foreign policy which he was convinced was based on a fallacy. Specifically: the fallacy of the so-call

special relationship with America. The *specialness* of that unwritten compact was always a mischievous thing liable to the capricious whims of the senior partner. It had begun as a personal tryst between Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940, staggered on through the Second World War, and faltered when the United States went it alone with the development of nuclear weapons after 1945. With onset of the Cold War, the crisis over Berlin in 1948 and the start of the Korean War in 1950, the *specialness* of the bonds between the old country and its mighty former colonies was refurbished, only to be very nearly completely derailed by the Suez debacle of late 1956. The 1958 US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement had marked a rapprochement based on the personal chemistry between Dwight Eisenhower and Harold MacMillan, rather than any recognition of the vital national interests of the old and waning global superpower, and the new Romans. The *special relationship* that emerged from the Eisenhower-MacMillan Axis was a fragile thing, not so much a grand alliance as a papering over of the cracks spreading across the geopolitical map of the changing World order.

When all was said and done a *special relationship* that was totally reliant on the close personal relationships between the then President, Dwight Eisenhower and his old wartime friend, Harold Macmillan, the British Prime Minister, and several senior Royal Navy and US Navy admirals, was a profoundly insubstantial scaffold upon which to build an impregnable castle keep. Tom Harding-Grayson's career had disintegrated when eventually, Harold 'Supermac' Macmillan and his complacent – and in some cases inbred and doltish confederates – had wearied of being constantly told the truth. Emperors rarely take kindly to be reminded that they forgot to dress that morning, and every morning. The *special relationship* was a chimera. Its *specialness* was entirely dependent on the perception of *his* nation's vital strategic needs by the incumbent – at any given moment – of the White House. Inevitably, when the status quo of the Eisenhower years dissolved into the dazzling hopes of the Kennedy Administration the *special relationship* came to mean one thing in Washington, and another entirely in London. Therein, lay the seeds of disaster. The Foreign Secretary sighed: "I think the time has come to speak frankly with our *friends*."

Edward Heath nodded, and stepped aside.

Bobby Kennedy viewed the dapper, wiry man in his late fifties with

interest, struck by the grace with which the Prime Minister had deferred to his Foreign Minister.

Tom Harding-Grayson quirked an apologetic smile.

“Unlike the majority of my colleagues in the Foreign Office I always recognised that in the heat of the moment that an American President wouldn’t hesitate to sell *us* down the river. However, please don’t think I say that in a censorious or a pejorative way. In your brother’s position, I might have done *exactly* what he did.”

“Jack did what...”

“I’m sure he did what he thought was the right thing for all the right reasons, Mr Kennedy,” Tom Harding-Grayson conceded. “However, if civilisation is to flourish in the World in the future, *everybody* needs to stop moralising and face up to the new realities. The United States must decide if it is to be the grain basket of the World and the arsenal of democracy as it was in the Second World War, or if it is to worship the idol of some kind of global Pax Americana.”

“We have more pressing concerns at the present,” Bobby Kennedy said tersely.

“Ah, yes. Red Dawn. I suspect that most of the ‘rebels’ in your country have never heard of Red Dawn and would decry it, and its objectives if they had. Oh, I don’t doubt members of the Red Dawn movement will have had a hand in recent events, but what’s going on out there on the streets of *your* capital, Mr Attorney General isn’t wholly, or mainly the work of Red Dawn. What’s going on out there is rather more to do with the forces you unleashed in October last year and your Administration’s wilful failure to address the aftermath. Red Dawn might have been the guiding hand behind the attacks on Balmoral, our ships off Spain and the sneak attack on Malta,” the Foreign Secretary’s voice had acquired a hard, cutting edge, “but those atrocities were carried out with and by the connivance of patriotic American citizens who honestly believed they were carrying out the orders of their President.”

“There is no evidence...”

“We brought copies of the gun camera film from Malta, Mr Attorney General. What else do you want? Pieces of the 100th Bomb Group B-52 that crashed on the island of Gozo?”

Bobby Kennedy held up his hands.

“Since we’re being frank with each other,” he retorted, “as friends may

sometimes be, one with the other,” he added, slowing himself down before he was drawn into saying something irretrievably rash. “The United States will make good on all those promises of assistance to the United Kingdom currently deferred by Congressional order. We can discuss what this means in detail in due course but suffice to say the President will issue executive orders to ensure that food, fuel, medical and other strategic industrial commodities will be made available to the United Kingdom commencing at the earliest possible date.” The Attorney General looked around the circle of faces trying to gauge the mood of the members of the British delegation. “I realise that the most important thing in any friendship is trust, and that trust between our two nations is a thing that will have to be re-established between us. Please believe me when I say that it is *this* country’s most fervent wish to live in peace with the perilously small family of democratic nations that remain on this planet.”

Edward Heath had extended his right hand.

Bobby Kennedy shook it, a broad smile beginning to form on his lips.

There was a knock on the closed door to the annexe.

Dick White, the Head of the Secret Intelligence Service entered.

“I must speak to you privately, Prime Minister.”

Chapter 41

Wednesday 11th December 1963

West Lawn, The White House, Washington DC

General Curtis LeMay flicked an irritated glance at the blood spatter on his right sleeve, and involuntarily raised his hand to touch the sutures recently inserted to staunch the flow of blood from his gashed head. In the distance sporadic small arms fire broke the unnatural quietness of the great city's streets. His eyes lifted involuntarily to the sky as two F-4 Phantoms made a low pass over the White House. Half-a-dozen Skyraiders still loitered at three thousand feet, circling above the Pentagon. As if to mock the desecration of the nation's capital bright late afternoon wintery sunshine broke through the high clouds and the drifting smoke of battle.

Striding purposefully across the muddy west lawn LeMay caught the vile stench of napalm in the air at the same moment he heard the thrumming of the approaching Sea Kings.

Three M-60 Patton main battle tanks were parked fifty yards away. The grey steel monsters were still buttoned down. Armoured personnel carriers mounting fifty calibre machine guns formed a picket line closer in to the West Wing of the White House. The fires in the East Wing had been put out now. All things considered, the old building was relatively intact even if nobody was going to be living or working in it any time soon.

Now, if he could only stop the fucking Navy starting a shooting war in the North Atlantic, they might just earn enough time to figure out what went wrong before something else blew up in their faces!

The President of the United States of America, for better or worse, *his* Commander-in-Chief had ordered all US Forces to back off. Curtis LeMay still had not figured out which part of 'back off' CINCLANT had not understood.

Even the Army understood that if you did not know which of your units was loyal and which ones were rogue you locked everything down until you could tell the difference. You did not get high and mighty or proud about it, *you just fucking did it!* Every air base in the continental United States was

closed to flight operations unless he – personally – trusted the commanding officer.

So what was the fucking Navy's problem?

Hopefully, the President was on the line to CINCLANT putting the useless prick right on the *chain of command* and how he, CINCLANT was about to find himself cleaning latrines in New Mexico if he did not get his finger out of his arse and get a grip of *his* people.

'What do you want me to do?' the Commander-in-Chief Atlantic Fleet had objected angrily when LeMay had asked him what the fuck he was doing allowing the USS Enterprise to launch two Grumman S-2 Tracker anti-submarine birds each carrying two live torpedoes to 'support the USS Scorpion' to, and this was the truly bizarre admission, 'to harass and maintain contact' with the British nuclear boat HMS Dreadnought. The story coming out of Norfolk was that one of the S-2s had gone after Dreadnought after 'she manoeuvred aggressively to threaten the Scorpion' and that subsequently, '*the Scorpion was missing*'. Not wanting to miss the fun the second S-2 had subsequently gone after the British submarine; explosions had been observed but the S-2 had no way of telling if it had made a kill because it had already exhausted its inventory of sonar buoys.

'I want you to disengage,' the Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee had repeated, wondering if he ought to spell the operative word 'disengage' to Admiral Vincent Gray, the numbskull the Navy had appointed CINCLANT in January that year.

The Admiral had angrily retorted: 'I can't let my boys go up against *hostiles* armed with no more than a firm manner and the Navy's best wishes!'

The mystery to LeMay was how, in the same year the Navy had put thousands of well-paid, highly qualified and rigorously trained officers on the beach, it was possible that so many high-ranking retards had remained in positions of authority?

He watched as the Attorney General and a greying man in a Navy Uniform stepped off the first Sea King. The Navy man must be Brenckmann; the guy looked like he had just seen a ghost so somebody had to have told him about the Scorpion by now.

The Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff shook his head in near disbelief and suppressed the urge to kick something or somebody.

Jesus! Those arseholes at CINCLANT must have shit for brains!

Maybe the British sub had taken out the Scorpion like they were claiming.

Or maybe not.

Fuck it!

If you hunt another country's submarine in international waters with S-2s and a pair of Skipjack boats for several days and get so close to it you could reach out and touch it – if it was not under water – how did those Navy pricks think it was going to end? As for the Brits taking out the Scorpion; Curtis LeMay was reserving judgement on that one.

All CINCLANT knew for sure was that *his* A-2s had put four homing fish in the water; it still was not clear exactly why they had done that, and once the first two fish had detonated all that was left of the USS Scorpion was a single distress buoy. HMS Dreadnought had gone deep and tried to outrun the last two homing fish. The S-2s had not been able to find her again after that so the British submarine was probably down, too.

Not content with having started World War III the fucking Navy was out to start World War IV!

Curtis LeMay marched towards the first Sea King.

He walked straight past the Attorney General, who blinked at the big man as he shouldered through the crowd of Marines and Secret Service men. The Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff went directly to Walter Brenckmann and took him by the elbow.

The former Naval Attaché's grey-green eyes fixed on LeMay's face.

"My boy wouldn't have wanted this to turn into the next war, sir," Walter Brenckmann said in a steady, resolute voice.

Curtis LeMay nodded, released his hold on the other man's arm and patted his shoulder. The Navy man had lost one kid in the October War and now it looked like he lost another because those fucking idiots at CINCLANT had screwed the pooch.

Again!

"What do the Brits know?" He asked tersely.

"What we've told them," the Navy man replied flatly. "But they don't believe it and frankly, sir," he added, grimly, "neither do I."

The first Sea King was taking off; the next would race in within minutes carrying the British Prime Minister and his senior advisors. Overhead the sky was full of the roaring of the F-4 Phantoms riding herd on the VIP choppers

as they skimmed low across the tortured city.

“Why not?” Curtis LeMay demanded.

“I’m no submarine man, sir.”

“You’re more of a submarine man than I am, Captain!”

Walter Brenckmann shrugged. He had never met the famous Air Force general before and could not help but compare the public persona, the great American legend with the flesh and bones man whose scowling face impatiently awaited his answer. If he had tried to envisage this encounter five minutes ago he would not have factored in the apparently genuine, man to man, tenor of the quick fire interrogatives flying at his head.

“They say Scorpion manoeuvred so close to HMS Dreadnought that the two boats almost collided shortly before the shooting began,” Walter Brenckmann replied, thinking his thoughts out aloud. “Maybe her skipper worked out what the S-2s were about to do and believed that if he placed his vessel between them and Dreadnought, or simply manoeuvred in close order with the British boat then the S-2s would back off.” The smaller, shorter man shrugged with the weariness of a grieving father. Scorpion was gone and with her over a hundred men including his eldest boy. He did not really care about the reasons why as the numbing emptiness of loss began to consume him like some debilitating virus for which his body had no natural immunity. “I don’t know, General,” he confessed. “Not a lot makes much sense lately. Just ask yourself why the skipper of the British boat would start a fight with boat with exactly the same capabilities as his while the water all around him was full of air-dropped sonar buoys? I mean, he would have to know how a fight like that was going to end. Our sub skippers know we’ve got another twenty nuclear boats; the guy commanding the Dreadnought knew that Dreadnought is the Brits’ *only* nuclear submarine. With respect, sir,” he concluded, “CINCLANT’s version of events is probably as reliable as its version of what happened last year to the USS Beale.”

The Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff let this bitter accusation – for ‘accusation’ was what it was – go unremarked.

“You’ve got to hold yourself together, Captain.”

Walter Brenckmann said nothing, allowing the dull irritation in his eyes do the talking.

Curtis LeMay was unused to dealing with men who were not, at some level, afraid of him. Walter Brenckmann was beyond being afraid of any

man. He did not give a damn about anything the Acting Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee of the United States Armed Forces could do to him.

Where's this guy been hiding?

If he was in my air force he would be major general commanding a Bomb Wing, not wasted on Embassy chores as a lowly four-ringer...

"You and I need to talk to the President," Curtis LeMay decided.

Chapter 42

Wednesday 11th December 1963

HMS Hermes, 32 miles WSW of Cadiz

The single-engine fighter that narrowly avoided crashing into the stern of the aircraft carrier looked exactly like a Second World War era Messerschmitt Bf 109. The iron bomb it had been carrying detonated in the big ship's wake as the fighter hit the sea. A great, ugly plume of white water rose briefly above the stern and was gone.

HMS Hermes's 40-millimetre Bofors anti-aircraft cannons pumped continuously, and on the sponsons below flight deck level and from the bridge wings Royal Marines manned heavy machine guns. High above the leaden Atlantic overcast Hermes's seven serviceable Sea Vixens and three of her five newly arrived Blackburn Buccaneers – low-level strike bombers rather than fighters – were engaging in a surreal battle with scores of antiquated Spanish copies of the aircraft that Hitler had employed to conquer Poland and France two decades ago. Neither the Sea Vixens or the Buccaneers had guns – the former had taken off with the carrier's last Firestreak short-range air-to-air missiles, the Buccaneers with the last half-dozen Sidewinders – and for all that they were faster and were in every respect more advanced, capable and superior to their foes they were outnumbered and basically, not designed to re-fight a Second World War style air battle. Inevitably, now and again one, two or three enemy aircraft broke through to the Battle Group. It had been a gamble coming in so close to land, especially as the fleet was known to be under surveillance by at least one Spanish submarine. However, there had been no choice. The Spanish had started lobbing artillery shells onto Gibraltar from the Andalusian hills to the north and across Algeciras Bay from the west, and then the entire Spanish Air Force, minus its small but potent American-supplied modern component – P-80 Lockheed Shooting Star and North American F-86 Super Sabre fighters – had risen in a large disorderly gaggle over Cape Trafalgar and, albeit slowly, attacked en masse.

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher and his 'steward', Leading

Electrical Artificer Jack Griffin, had arrived on the carrier minutes before the radar pickets ten miles off the Spanish coast had first detected the aerial armada forming thirty miles north-east of Cadiz. The Battle Group had closed up at Air Defence Stations One, he and Jack Griffin had been handed flash gear – balaclavas and gloves – and told to ‘keep out of everybody’s way’. This they had achieved by finding a viewing perch at the bottom of Hermes’s island mast, a great steel structure like that on their beloved Talavera that seemed infinitely smaller and more consistent with the scale of the carrier than it ever had on the old Battle class destroyer. But then Hermes was ten times the tonnage of their former ship.

“I wondered if I’d find you fellows back here!” Declared the Battle Group Commander’s flag lieutenant, a bearded man of Peter Christopher’s own age. “It looks like the first wave is turning away. We’ll be trying to recover our aircraft in a few minutes. Bugged if I know what we’re going to give them to shoot with but never mind, what?”

Peter’s gaze had fallen on HMS Duchess, a Daring class destroyer that had ranged up alongside the carrier and was holding position almost exactly to starboard of the bigger ship at a range of around three hundred yards. A frigate, HMS Plymouth, Talavera’s saviour newly arrived from Oporto was manoeuvring to assume station on the other side of the Hermes.

“Goalkeepers!” The junior officer exclaimed cheerfully.

Hermes’s Bofors guns had fallen silent.

The manoeuvring bell clanged

“You two are to come with me. The Admiral wants to say ‘hello’.” When Jack Griffin hesitated he went on: “Come on, you too!”

Rear-Admiral Nigel Grenville was bent over the chart table on the flag bridge. The ‘flag bridge’ was situated half-way up the carrier’s island superstructure. The space was crowded; radar repeaters and tactical plots were crammed onto bulkheads and most of the windows were screened with heavy steel blast shutters. Hermes did not have the full ABC – atomic, biological and chemical warfare - ‘lock down and wash down’ facilities of the Tiger class cruisers and some of the new frigates coming into service, notwithstanding her twenty-five thousand tons of bulk, she was a relatively small ship in which to accommodate modern jet aircraft, helicopters and all the technology required to support them. Practically every operational space on the carrier was cramped and the flag bridge was no exception.

Peter Christopher presented himself to the C-in-C Hermes Battle Group.

“Welcome aboard, young man.” Grenville was in his late forties, a small, hook-nosed man with piercing faded blue eyes. “You must have had a rough old time on the Talavera? How are you bearing up?”

The younger man was a little taken aback by the transparent and hugely public friendliness of his reception by a man who was, after all, in the middle of a major fleet action.

“I’m raring to go, sir,” he blurted.

“Like father like son!” Grenville guffawed, sliding a glance at LEA Jack Griffin who was doing his best to lurk, unseen behind Peter Christopher’s shoulder. “We’ll have a proper chinwag once we’ve seen off the Spanish Luftwaffe,” he promised, turning back to the younger man. “In the meantime you and PO Griffin can make yourself useful in here.”

Jack Griffin was bemused.

He opened his mouth to speak as the manoeuvring bell clanged again and the big ship began to heel into a southerly turn.

“STAND BY TO RECOVER AIRCRAFT!”

Peter Christopher did not have time to explain to his ‘steward’ that his days – or rather his day – of ‘stewarding’ was already over. He suspected that Jack Griffin’s promotion was one of many being liberally and possibly, not very judiciously handed out among warrant officers and leading rates from the Talavera and the Devonshire. He saw his father’s hand in that. His ships were suffering damage, he was losing good ships and men at an unsustainable rate, so he would promote from within the body of the survivors and ensure that not one scintilla of irreplaceable battle experience was wasted.

In reality there was very little that Peter Christopher could actually do to make himself in any way ‘useful’. He did not know the ship, or any of its people. He was unfamiliar with Hermes’s electronic warfare and radar systems and had absolutely no practical experience of carrier operations. He and Jack Griffin were worse than spare parts, they were a positive menace. Both men found corners of the flag bridge where they were not directly underfoot and could observe the quiet, unflustered, methodical business of the Battle Group Staff.

The first returning aircraft, a Buccaneer thumped down onto Hermes’s deck with a reverberating thud and a scream of jet engines. The moment the

aircraft's landing hook caught on one of the four arrester cables the pilot shut the throttles and hit the lever to fold the big beast's wings. A glance astern found the dark silhouette of a Sea Vixen on final approach as the Buccaneer rolled onto the forward flight deck. Fuel lines were already uncoiling.

Peter Christopher might have been unfamiliar with carrier operations but he knew that the one thing the Captain of any carrier would never, given the choice, do was fuel returning aircraft *on deck* in the middle of a battle while recovering other aircraft. If anything went wrong or the enemy showed up at an inopportune moment the consequences might be catastrophic. He glanced again at the two escorts holding station on each side of the Hermes, each presenting a defiant physical barrier with their unarmoured, paper thin hulls; and knew in that moment, not that he had ever doubted it, that the spirit of Admiral Lord Nelson was alive and well in the post-cataclysm Royal Navy.

Chapter 43

Wednesday 11th December 1963

Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre, Mdina, Malta

Vice-Admiral Sir Julian Christopher hesitated before he picked up the phone in his sparsely furnished and equipped *new* office in what until less than a week ago had been the RAF Officers Club located within the ancient citadel of Mdina. For a moment the steely calm which had characterised everything he done since his arrival in the Maltese Archipelago had threatened to desert him.

“Christopher speaking,” he said. Realising that his flag lieutenant, Alan Hannay was hovering in the doorway he waved him away. The boy was a marvel but this was one conversation he did not want him noting, or given his other skills, memorizing for future reference. Even the C-in-C was allowed a little privacy sometimes.

The line was surprisingly clear, presumably routed via the GCHQ eavesdropping facility at Oakley. There was a low background hiss; no spitting and clicking.

“Sir Julian!” The melodic soprano tones cried with barely concealed pleasure. “It seems an age since we said our farewells at RAF Cheltenham. I know that was less than a week ago but so much has happened in the last few days!”

Julian Christopher did not think that Margaret Hilda Thatcher ‘gabbled’ very often. He was touched that she was apparently so happy to hear his voice that she was unashamedly ‘gabbling’ now.

“The feeling is completely mutual, Home Secretary,” he replied. He did not know who was listening in at her end of the line and did not want to do or say anything which might risk causing her embarrassment. A woman in a position of power was so much more vulnerable to the sniping of her male peers and detractors than a man. It was best not to offer hostages to fortune. “My Staff assures me that this line is secure at my end. May I speak freely?”

“Yes,” the Angry Widow rejoined, sobering a little. “I am also assured

the line has been appropriately ‘scrambled’ by the technical people. I think we may speak freely. I am given to understand by the First Sea Lord that our ships have survived a major air attack in the Straits of Gibraltar?”

The man smiled to himself.

Business before pleasure would always be *this* woman’s hallmark.

“Sir David is probably better informed of the details at this time than I am,” Julian Christopher confessed. “We lost a couple of aircraft unfortunately and several units of the Hermes Battle Group suffered superficial damage. One aircraft, a single-engine fighter, a Spanish version of the old German Messerschmitt Bf 109 which they call the ‘Buchón’, apparently carrying a large iron bomb may have attempted to dive into HMS Hermes’s flight deck. That apart, only a handful of aircraft got through the Hermes’s outer screen. If our Sea Vixens and Buccaneers hadn’t run out of air-to-air missiles we’d have wiped out the attacking force which was comprised of entirely old World War Two type vintage aircraft. Admiral Grenville reports that ‘even the bloody Sea Cats work against Heinkels and Dorniers if the blighters get close enough’.”

Julian Christopher decided he was sounding too triumphal. That was the effect *this* woman seemed to have on him; it was a very long time since a woman had so *seized* him.

“Actually, it is a bad business all round. The Spanish haven’t employed any of their more advanced aircraft. They don’t have that many but if they wheel them out tomorrow we will be in trouble. As for the poor brave fellows they’ve been sending against us in their Second War Luftwaffe hand me downs and copies,” he groaned at the thought of so many obviously courageous men dying for nothing in such a perverted cause, “I think we all rather feel for them. Our pilots take no pleasure in shooting down men who have no real chance of defending themselves, let alone fighting back. I think it is different for the men on our ships. They have no esprit de corps with the enemy airman and a bomb from a Heinkel or a Dornier or a Junkers makes just as big a hole in their decks as one from a modern jet like a Skyhawk.”

While the Hermes Battle Group was fending off air attacks there had been six V-Bomber strikes by aircraft based in England and Scotland, against targets in the hills around Algeciras Bay and north and east of the Rock of Gibraltar, and against Spanish Air Force bases in Morocco. Shortly after the first of these raids the sporadic artillery barrage on the Rock had ceased.

After darkness had fallen destroyers and frigates had shelled Cadiz, Tarifa and Algeciras, engaging and probably, disabling or sinking, two Spanish destroyers sheltering in Cadiz Roads.

"I was so relieved to hear that your son suffered only minor injuries in the attack on HMS Talavera," Margaret Thatcher said suddenly. "It must be a great weight off your mind?"

"Yes," he replied flatly. "In a funny sort of way coming back to Malta after so many years has reminded me of, shall we say, unfinished business. Not to mention serving to remind one of one's own mortality."

"I'd have thought our recent mutual experience at Balmoral Castle would have been quite sufficient in that respect!"

Julian Christopher suspected the woman had strayed a very long way off message, and that she had not planned to let the conversation become so *personal* so soon. His suspicion was quickly justified. She caught herself instantly; business first, pleasure later.

"You will have heard that HMS Dreadnought is missing?"

"Yes."

"And that the United States navy is claiming she was destroyed by two of their anti-submarine aircraft after she had sunk the USS Scorpion?"

"Nonsense, of course," he declared.

"What do you think really happened, Julian?"

"I don't know but I'm not about to accept anything the Yanks say until I've seen some proof. The onus isn't on us to prove anything." Realising the anger was rising like bile in his throat; Julian Christopher paused to regain a more level equilibrium. "I shall be attending funerals for many of the poor souls murdered by Curtis LeMay's B-52s for over the next few days."

"It is a terrible business," Margaret Thatcher said simply.

"The last time I spoke to the First Sea Lord he wouldn't be drawn on the situation in Washington, Margaret?" Julian Christopher prompted.

There was a pause in which the line sang with soft static.

"The Prime Minister went to Washington with the authority of the War Cabinet to do whatever needs to be done to avoid a war." As if this statement was not sufficiently definitive she reiterated the essence of the matter. "Whatever needed to be done."

"Good."

They had finished talking about *business*.

Oddly, neither of them really felt confident moving onto the *pleasure* part of the conversation. He knew that her call had been superfluous, that neither of them had learned anything new, or gained valuable fresh insights into the state of the World. But they had needed to talk, to build upon the bond they had formed in their recent brief acquaintance. Such things were infinitely precious in the brave new World in which they now lived.

"Forgive me, Julian," the Angry Widow prefaced uncomfortably, "I'm not very good at this sort of thing. And things are, well, awkward. My position in the Government, and so forth..."

The man waited patiently. He asked himself how much it was costing her to open herself up to him this way; to show him her vulnerability.

"I cannot allow myself to be in any way compromised," Margaret Thatcher explained in a rush, "or to become the object of gossip. It would reflect badly on me and inevitably, sooner or later detract from my work, you see..."

"I agree," he said immediately. "If we were to have an affair it would be irresponsible."

"Oh..."

Never had a murmur, or a gasp communicated so much.

Julian Christopher was quite taken aback by it.

Oh, my God!

"You are right, of course," the woman said, unable to conceal that she was utterly crestfallen.

"Margaret!" The man blurted in quiet panic. "That's not at all what I mean. Of course it would be irresponsible for us to act in a way that was unbecoming to our roles and our responsibilities, especially at a time like this. Of course it would be, but that's not what I meant."

"Oh!" The Angry Widow was a little vexed with him now.

"I only meant to say that whatever we do must be irreproachably above board, that's all," the man retorted, trying not to mirror her vexation and failing dismally. They were both a little angry with each other.

"Well, it is very difficult to know what one is supposed to think when the *other* party to the conversation is being so *opaque*," the woman complained. Her voice was decidedly unmelodic and peeved in that moment.

Julian Christopher stifled a chuckle of amusement.

God, what a woman!

“Margaret, there is a very simple remedy for our *situation*.”

“There is?” Margaret Thatcher asked, clearly not convinced he was being serious and wondering if this was the point at which she hung up.

Since there was nothing quite like striking while the iron was hot and his blood was well and truly up, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations struck before he thought better of it.

“Yes, there is! Dammit, Margaret! Just marry me and be done with it!”

Chapter 44

Wednesday 11th December 1963

The Situation Room, The White House, Washington DC

Jack Kennedy had loved his time in the United States Navy. Or rather, he had loved most of his time in the Navy. Not the parts when he had been in excruciating pain, obviously; just the rest of the time. It was during his service in the Pacific that he had discovered his own leadership qualities, and begun to believe that there was more to life than, well, ‘fooling around’ basically. The Navy had made him the man he was and given him the kind of unimpeachable back story no politician could buy for love or money. Rightly or wrongly, the Navy had made him a hero and after one or two missteps along the way he had ended up President.

Now he was afraid the Navy had already started World War IV.

Back in October 1962 CINCLANT had been a NATO command denoting the C-in-C of all Allied Forces in the Atlantic Theatre of Operations, now it simply described the US Navy Admiral in command of the US Atlantic Fleet. Back in October 1962 he had given the then CINCLANT – Admiral Robert L. Dennison - the benefit of the doubt, not least because a narrative that traced a causal link for Armageddon back to a madman in a Soviet submarine had suited the Administration. In fact, if the maniac in the Foxtrot class submarine B-59 had not existed, somebody in Washington would have invented him by now. CINCLANT’s contemporaneous *narrative* might even have been materially accurate but that was less important than the context it supplied for subsequent events: the Soviets fired the first shot; the Cubans fired the second, third and fourth. Tens of thousands of innocent Americans died before he - John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America – had ordered a massive and annihilating first strike against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

Nobody had seriously questioned that chronology because most of the people qualified to question it were, sadly but conveniently, dead by the early hours of the morning of Sunday 28th October 1962. This was all fine and

dandy so far as it went until history threatened to repeat itself. Whatever happened now in this new crisis people would be forced to re-examine the original timeline of the October War and remark upon the obvious similarities and unfortunate coincidences between the choreography of last year's and this year's, dance towards disaster.

Admiral Robert L Dennison's services had been dispensed with that spring. The World was far too dangerous to risk him dropping the nuclear football a second time. Unfortunately, it was self-evident that his replacement had not drawn the appropriate lessons from his predecessor's sudden fall from grace.

Inadvertently goading one 'enemy' submariner into starting a global nuclear war might be deemed – if not by the survivors, then by future generations of historians – an unfortunate concatenation of circumstances, an accident. Repeating the exercise a second time a little more than a year later would seem, to an informed observer at best careless, at worst criminal. When the fires of Washington DC had been extinguished and the dust and smoke of recent disasters had settled, Jack Kennedy had already resolved to find another Commander-in-Chief Atlantic. The one cruel redeeming factor in the whole sorry farrago was that both the Scorpion and the Dreadnought were missing and almost certainly lost with all hands. Had one or the other survived the fallout would have rolled over the Administration like a tsunami and possibly washed the whole Kennedy clan down to toilet pan of history.

Notwithstanding, no man would have been happier than former Navy man Jack Kennedy if one or other, ideally, both the Scorpion and the Dreadnought had miraculously survived. Looking into Captain Walter Brenckmann's eyes he had glimpsed a window into the soul of a broken man; a broken man who rightly blamed *him* for the death of his first born on the Scorpion...

Bizarrely, when eventually Admiral Vincent Lincoln Gray, CINCLANT, took his President's call it was immediately apparent that he did not actually see what the problem was. From where he sat in his Headquarters at Norfolk, Virginia, everything was – apparently - hunky dory. Nobody had stormed his command station, there were no vigilantes or terrorists on the streets outside and *his boys* had just expunged the memory of the ignominious way HMS Dreadnought had run rings around the Enterprise Battle Group for most of the last month.

“Admiral Gray,” Jack Kennedy drawled wearily, “even by your own account of the incident the only units we know for sure put torpedoes in the water were the two S-2 Trackers off the Enterprise. Again, even from your own account whatever happened to the USS Scorpion, happened to her when she was in close contact – very close contact, it seems – with HMS Dreadnought. There is nothing in your report to me that discounts the possibility that the two submarines might have actually collided.” He almost choked on the next possibility: “Likewise, there is nothing to discount the possibility that the Scorpion was ‘downed’ by the first pair of torpedoes launched by the S-2s.”

“I don’t think we need to seriously consider *that* possibility, Mister President,” the other man replied complacently. The President had only been a jumped up Lieutenant, a PT boat commander twenty years ago; what did he know? The Admiral could barely keep the condescension out of his voice. “We are analysing recordings from several sonar buoys at this time, Mr President,” CINCLANT insisted in a stentorian monotone. “In a few hours we expect to have definitive evidence that our boat was attacked without warning...”

Jack Kennedy tried not to lose his temper.

“We don’t have ‘a few hours’, Admiral Gray.” This was uncannily like when that crazy Soviet sub skipper nuked the USS Beale last year. The Navy still had not come clean about *all* the circumstances leading up to *that* incident. They had had carrier and land-based air in the area, three destroyers slowly cruising above the grounded Soviet boat; they could have stood off, waited for the B-59 to surface but no, the Navy had bombed the submarine with practice depth charges!

Admiral Gray had been on the Board of Inquiry that exonerated the flag officer in command of the USS Randolph ‘hunting group’ of any blame for the loss of the Beale. The ‘enemy’s action was not predictable in advance’ and in any case, neither *he* nor anybody else in the Navy Department, or the Pentagon had known that Soviet submarines were equipped with nuclear-tipped torpedoes.

“There is a lot of data to be analysed, sir.”

The President of the United States of America had been driven to nuclear war once by the Navy and it was *not* going to happen again. Leastways, he hoped it was not going to happen again. Once bitten, twice shy was the

maxim that applied.

“Admiral Gray, please listen very carefully,” Jack Kennedy said slowly. As he said it he looked up at the circle of men gathered around the table in the Situation Room. Curtis LeMay, Robert McNamara and his younger brother, Bobby’s expressions were stony. LeMay wanted to have CINCLANT arrested, the Secretary of Defence was, yet again, appalled by the imbecilic machismo of the Navy at a time of impossibly high international tension, and the Attorney General did not actually believe *this*, any of *this* was happening. Outside the city was burning, the nation’s heart was bleeding and the fucking Navy had decided to start World War IV *early*! “General LeMay, Acting Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary for Defence, and the Attorney General are witnesses to this call and the orders I am about to give you which are to be executed *without* delay...”

Admiral Gray began to say something.

“I’m still talking, Admiral Gray,” Jack Kennedy snapped. “You will kindly do *your* Commander-in-Chief the courtesy of listening to *him*. You will *immediately* order, and personally ensure, that the following officers are placed under close confinement. These officers may not be interrogated by, nor have any personal unrecorded interactions with any officer of an equivalent or senior rank without the direct written authorization of the Attorney General, and or, General LeMay or Mr McNamara. Please repeat what I have just mandated, Admiral.”

CINCLANT had not been listening that closely so there was a delay while his staffers primed him to call back a vaguely verbatim version of his Commander-in-Chief’s peremptory edict.

“You will *immediately* relieve from duty and confine the following officers,” Jack Kennedy went on, consulting the scrawled list on his desk before him, “the Officer Commanding the Enterprise Task Force, his Operations Officer and his Senior Intelligence Officer, the Enterprise’s CAG and his deputy, and the pilots and crew of both S-2 Trackers involved in the Scorpion incident. All records pertaining to that incident are to be impounded by the Captain of the Enterprise who will take command of the Task Force and withdraw it at its best speed out of the area of the Atlantic Ocean designated as a ‘Total Exclusion Zone’ by the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration...”

“That may not be possible to expedite immediately, Mister President...”

“Furthermore,” Jack Kennedy snarled, “as previously ordered you will ensure that *all* air, surface and undersea assets under your command *immediately* disengage from contact with any Royal Navy aircraft or vessel. If necessary, they will communicate that intention to the British in plain text or by unscrambled TBS voice communication, prior to disengagement just to make sure that there is no scope for misunderstanding by either party.”

“That won’t be easy...”

“Admiral Gray,” Jack Kennedy rasped, “if you are unable to *immediately* execute my orders I will find somebody who will. If there is any delay in executing my orders by you or by anybody else at Norfolk I will deploy elements of the 101st Airborne Division to *expedite* matters. Do I make myself clear, Admiral?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. General LeMay’s people are already in transit to your headquarters to report to me on the *completeness* with which *my* orders have been executed, Admiral.”

Jack Kennedy put down the handset.

He looked at Curtis Lemay.

“I want the 101st Airborne on the ground in Norfolk Virginia ASAP,” he said with deadly intent. “If that arsehole Gray doesn’t call off his boys I want his arse on stick.”

The Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff nodded grimly.

“Yes, Mister President.”

Chapter 45

Wednesday 11th December 1963

HMS Dreadnought, 402 miles WNW of Cape Trafalgar

“SURFACE! SURFACE! SURFACE!”

The submarine trembled and juddered as her ballast tanks were explosively emptied with blasting compressed air. In the thick, slowly fouling air of the control room exhausted men felt the boat rising, faster and faster.

“Sea duty men to harbour stations!”

Men began to clamber up towards the hatch, each man shrouded in cold weather gear and waterproofs.

“One-six-zero feet!”

The depths reeled off hurriedly as HMS Dreadnought rushed to the surface like a three-and-a-half thousand ton cork.

“One-three-zero!”

“One hundred...”

All depths were keel depths so sixty-five feet equalled periscope – just barely submerged - depth.

“Seven-zero!”

“Five-zero! Breaching!”

The boat porpoised like a giant whale and settled leadenly for a moment in the trough of a long Atlantic swell. Dreadnought rolled, pitched into the next wave catching men not clinging onto something solid by surprise.

“Break the control room hatch!”

Men were scampering up the ladder.”

Commander Simon Collingwood held his breath for the first report from the cockpit at the top of Dreadnought’s tall fin-like sail. He had been conning the boat blind ever since the attack. The first of the homing torpedoes had reached the end of its run and detonated about three hundred yards astern of the boat. The second had gone off practically alongside the port stern planes. Running at maximum revolutions the packing around the propeller drive shaft had started letting in water, worse – by far – the shock of

the nearby explosion had cracked machinery mounts, caused short circuits across the whole vessel and completely disabled Dreadnought's sonar suite. Several men had sustained minor injuries stopping the flooding, or from being too close to electrical motors and boards when they shorted out. With no way of knowing if the hunters were still in the vicinity he had opted to stay as deep as possible and to creep, very slowly away to the north west. Half-an-hour ago he had reluctantly accepted that he would have to surface. So many systems were failing or just broken that surfacing was a thing best done while the boat was, nominally, still under control.

"NO SURFACE CONTACTS IN SIGHT!"

The Captain of HMS Dreadnought breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Reaching into his breast pocket he withdrew the signal he had composed in the minutes after he had concluded that surfacing was the only realistic way of making sure that at least some of his crew survived.

He handed the signal sheet to the communications yeoman who had been waiting by his shoulder.

Dreadnought was wallowing horribly in the seas, her low, bulbous mass rolling and starting to pitch sickeningly.

"Increase to six-zero revs please!"

Simon Collingwood staggered across to the plot table.

"It feels like the seas are coming from a point or two south of west," he observed, grabbing a hand hold.

Max Forton, his bearded Executive Officer nodded.

"The old girl will ride a lot easier if she's taking the seas from abaft, sir."

"Helm!" Collingwood called softly. "Make your course one-four-zero degrees!"

"Engineering report we're taking on water again, sir!"

"Reduce revs to three zero!" Collingwood had felt the unnatural vibration through the soles of his feet so the report from the machine spaces had not come as a surprise. He would row back on the revs. If that did not do the trick the boat could stay afloat indefinitely without steerage way providing nothing else broke.

Marvellously clean, cold salty air was being sucked down the sail into the control room.

"Surfacing signal has been acknowledged by friendly forces, sir."

"What about Fleet HQ?"

“Not yet, sir.”

Collingwood had ordered his abbreviated after action report to be transmitted in the clear the moment Dreadnought’s sail broke the surface. The transmission would be repeated at ten minute intervals until further notice.

He glanced thoughtfully at the radiation monitor on the rear control room bulkhead.

Mercifully, it read ‘negative’.

“Ventilate the boat, Number One,” he declared. “I’ll be in my cabin for a few minutes.”

Simon Collingwood slumped onto his bunk, resisting the urge to bury his head in his hands. Dreadnought had been idling when the first two homing fish destroyed the Scorpion. The lightweight Mark 44 13-inch torpedo had a maximum speed of up to thirty-five knots but a relatively short range of just over three miles. The second S-2 Tracker had had to manoeuvre so as to clear the disturbance area caused by the Scorpion’s death before she could drop her torpedoes. In this short respite Dreadnought had accelerated to almost fifteen knots. He had poured on the power knowing that Dreadnought would still be working up to flank speed when the fish arrived.

Dreadnought’s maximum speed was several knots slower than the homing fish.

The mathematics of the situation – well, more correctly, the trigonometry – were against Dreadnought and there was nothing he could do about it. There were no miraculous angles to be bisected, no escape. He had thought he was going to die. He had fought the urge to attempt to turn to one side or the other, knowing he could not shake off the racing acoustic harbingers of doom. He had done the only thing he could do, guessed the collision angle of the incoming Mark 44s, steered a directly reciprocal course and ordered his engineering officer to red-line *everything*. He had sat unmoving in his command chair, worn a confident mask and held Dreadnought arrow straight. Any deviation meant a loss of speed, and feet and inches might make all the difference between life and death. There had been the momentary hope and relief of the first fish detonating astern; and then the last fish had kept on coming, and coming...

There was a knock at the door.

“Fleet HQ have acknowledged our transmission, sir.”

Simon Collingwood puffed out his chest, smiled.
“Thank you.”

Chapter 46

*Wednesday 11th December 1963
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Joanne Brenckmann was a little bit unnerved and then hugely relieved to hear her husband's voice on the other end of the line. It was nearly two months since they had spoken – over a dreadfully noisy line from England for barely two minutes before the connection went down – and she had not expected to speak to him again for at least another two months, when he was due to be rotated home for a month's leave. She hated the separation but accepted it as part of the exigencies of the Service. If the Navy wanted Walter in England he had to go and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

In her husband's long absence she had got on with putting the house in order. It was only a month since the final repairs had been carried out to the roof and the last of the windows had been repaired. Walter had said they ought to have taken advantage of the Government's interest-free reconstruction loans; she had hated the idea of being in debt to Uncle Sam and besides, some people had already been waiting six months for the paperwork to go through the system, so they had dug into their dwindling savings. If they had waited for the Government to sort out its own bureaucratic muddle they would have had to spend another winter with a tarpaulin over the roof in a house that was liable to blow away in a stiff breeze. While Walter might be a shrewd litigator and a safe pair of hands commanding one of the Navy's destroyers, she had always been the one who balanced the family's accounts and managed the home. Oddly, for a lawyer Walter had never been very focused on money or particularly practical around it unless he was fighting a case in court. At home he had always left that sort of thing to Joanne. They had one of those marriages where each partner had well-established and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. They had kept things simple and it had worked out just fine. Walter was the breadwinner; Joanne was the mother of their children and the homemaker. They had had a huge fight about something once, although it was so long ago neither of them could remember what. They had never done that again

because they had both felt ashamed of themselves afterwards, as if they had let each other and the kids down in some terrible, unfathomably way. Early on they had become true soul mates without whom neither could be the person they aspired to be, and so when Joanne heard the timbre of her husband's voice she knew something was wrong. Horribly wrong.

Sweetheart," she gasped, her thoughts scattered, "I didn't expect to speak to you for..."

"I'm in DC," Walter Brenckmann told his wife.

"Oh, my God!" She had stopped watching NBC's grainy coverage of the abomination going on four hundred miles away in the nation's capital earlier that afternoon. It was too...monstrous. Then one of the kids - she still thought about her grown up sons as 'kids' - had turned on the radiogram in the lounge and she had caught more snippets of the horror. If she had not had two of her 'boys' at home she would have got nervous, started watching people on the street, bolted her doors. Notwithstanding the anarchy that seemed to have taken over capital, Boston was calm, eerily normal.

Joanne had imagined that the next time she talked to her husband of over twenty-nine years she would tell him about the house and how the three 'boys' were getting on. She and her eldest two 'boys' had painted all the upstairs rooms and she had trawled the local marts for throws and quilts for the beds, and rugs and carpets for the floors. The boys had cleared the yard, cut back the trees and removed all the branches cracked and bent by last year's the blast wave...

She still shuddered to think about that night thirteen-and-a-half months ago. Although the house was finally back to the way it was before the war she was saddened by the patchwork of ruined and empty buildings disfiguring the surrounding blocks, soon those lots would be overgrown. She despised the way some people had just given up, even in a community like Cambridge so close to the revitalised, thriving Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus. But there was no accounting for people and she could understand that some of her old neighbours would never again feel safe living in a big city or close to a so-called 'strategically important target'; like MIT.

"I'm okay," her husband reassured Joanne. "I came back from England yesterday with a British delegation. It is a long story, but I'm okay. I'm at the White House."

"The White House?"

“Like I said, it’s a long story.”

Joanne Brenckmann shivered. There was something awful in her husband’s tone. Fear mingling with loss and a thing she had never heard in his voice in all their years together, despair. Her husband had lost his hope.

“Walter, you sound...”

“Sorry, honey, it’s just that...”

Joanne was disturbed by a sound at her shoulder.

“You okay, Mom?” Checked the lean, grey-eyed man – he was the spitting image of his father at his age - wearing the uniform of a Lieutenant (Senior Grade) in the United States Navy. He had been packing his kit upstairs in his old bedroom when the phone had rung down in the lounge. He had wondered if it was a call from Norfolk notifying him of some last minute change in his movement orders. Given what was going on in Washington he had been a little surprised not to be called back to Norfolk earlier. He had reported to the Navy Office in downtown Boston yesterday; explained that he was not due to report for duty again for another few days and put himself at the disposal of the local Naval District ‘for service in the current emergency’. The men in the Navy Office had eyed his gleaming submariner’s dolphin badge thoughtfully before refusing his offer. However, he had left his contact number and address at the Navy Office, just in case.

Joanne put her hand over the handset.

“It’s your father.”

“Look,” Walter Brenckmann said, his voice faltering. “Look, the thing is...”

“What is it, sweetheart?” Joanne was terrified now. Sensing his mother’s near panic her eldest son put his arm around her shoulders. “You’re frightening me, Walter.”

“It is...”

“What is it? What has happened?”

“The Scorpion is,” a moment’s dreadful hesitation, “down...”

“Oh, God!” Joanne was a Navy wife and mother and knew that when a submarine went missing it, and every man onboard, was gone.

“It happened a few hours ago. The circumstances are still, confused...”

Joanne knew her husband was crying. Not so anybody watching would know but inwardly, he was sobbing like a baby. She ached to hold him.

“That’s, bad,” she stuttered.

“What is it, Mom?” Her son asked again.

She’s missing.”

“Jo,” Walter Brenckmann asked, “is somebody with you?”

“Yes.” The mother sniffed a proud sniff and glanced up at her worried son’s face. He was so like his father at his age... Except unlike his father Walter Junior could have been born to wear the crisp Lieutenant’s uniform with the submariner’s dolphin badge. His father wore his uniform like the Boston lawyer he would always be. “Junior’s with me. He’ll be real cut up about this,” she went on, grimacing tight-lipped to her eldest son. “Your father says the Scorpion’s *down*, Junior.”

Walter Brenckmann did not believe his ears for a moment.

“Junior’s with you in Boston?” He blurted loudly.

Joanne joined up the dots in a mad rush.

“Oh, God! You wouldn’t have heard! I’m so sorry, sweetheart! I should have guessed! Junior transferred off the Scorpion before her last cruise. He’s been posted to Groton, Connecticut ahead of his joining his new boat... Hey, he can tell you better than me...”

Joanne pressed the handset into her son’s hands and ran into the kitchen fumbling for her handkerchief. Her husband had thought his son was dead and she could not begin to imagine how dreadful that must have been.

“Pa,” Walter Brenckmann, junior, murmured into the handset. “Pa, are you okay?”

The younger man was shocked to realise that his father was sobbing uncontrollably at the other end of the line.

Chapter 47

Wednesday 11th December 1963

Communications Room 2a, The White House, Washington DC

Bobby Kennedy's jacket was crumpled and a little dusty. He had washed his face and combed his hair, his complexion was less ashen, his gaze was steady and in that curious way of his, convincingly empathetic. Even in the bunker twenty feet beneath the shrapnel-strewn grounds of the White House the stink of burning tainted the atmosphere and lay upon them all like a curse.

"My boy wasn't on the Scorpion," the older man said dully. "He was standing right beside my wife in Cambridge just now."

The Attorney General had come into the room carrying a half-empty bottle of Kentucky bourbon and two cut glass tumblers. He chuckled wearily, popped the cork from the bottle and poured two generous slugs of amber fluid into the glasses.

"That," he decided, "is a Helluva thing!"

"Isn't it just," the older man agreed as he accepted one of the glasses. "I don't usually drink on duty, but..."

Both men drank deep.

"Walter Junior was called off the Scorpion twenty-four hours before she sailed. He's pulled instructor duty at Groton pending joining his next boat in April. He was on furlough in Cambridge. He was helping his mother and his younger brother, Dan, paint the goddammed house!" He sighed long and hard. "Dan's just finished law school. Yale," he added. And then, unable to stop talking went on: "he's doing a six-month internship with the DA's office in Boston. I always hoped he would pick up my old practice when Joanne and me kicked over the traces and headed down to the Florida Keys..."

"Now, that's a thing," the younger brother of the President of the United States agreed, in the aimless way of a man who did not quite know what to say. "Captain Brenckmann," he began, thought better of it. Gathered his courage, tried again: "Captain Brenckmann, I owe you an apology."

The bourbon burned Walter Brenckmann's throat.

“What for?” He asked. The country was trying to tear itself apart and was still on the brink of war with its one surviving former ally from the now distant World of the pre-Cuban Missiles Crisis disaster. It was too late for heart-searching, for apologies, for atonement. The World was what they had made it and somebody, somewhere had to start looking to the future.

Bobby Kennedy grimaced.

“There will be no war,” he said simply. “Premier Heath and the President have signed a unilateral ‘non-aggression’ agreement. The British Foreign Secretary will remain in the US when the Premier flies home to discuss the full re-establishment of diplomatic, trade and humanitarian aid links; once things have settled down Jack and the Premier have agreed in principle, to exchange full military missions to explore plans to rebuild our old alliance. All questions relating to spheres of interest in Europe and the Mediterranean will be dealt with in due course at a summit to be convened in England in the spring. All British and American naval forces have been ordered to discontinue surveillance and to avoid contact with each other for a period of seventy-two hours to permit new and robust contact protocols to be established between the parties.” The President’s younger brother shook his head. “I don’t know what you and Le May said to Jack but whatever it was it worked!”

The older man shrugged.

His head was still in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His son’s voice rang in his ears and the joy of recognition still suffused the relieved father. His son had been lost to him and suddenly he had got him back. A more religious man than Walter Brenckmann would have regarded the moment when he discovered his son was alive as one of revelation and apotheosis. In truth, religious or not, it had been a sublime, and perhaps, a defining moment in his life. There might not be a God but there was reason to have faith.

He had known that there was a chance of peace when he had put through the call to Cambridge, having come straight from the Situation Room where he and Curtis LeMay had confronted the President.

‘Mister President,’ General Curtis LeMay, the bulldog Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had told Jack Kennedy, ‘you have a decision to make, sir. If we’re going to go to war with the Brits we’re going to get hurt real bad unless we hit them now with everything we’ve got.’

The thirty-fifth President of the United States of America had looked at

Curtis LeMay with cool, contemplative eyes.

‘You know I’m not going to do that, General LeMay.’

‘I’ll know it when you tell me, sir.’

Jack Kennedy had looked to Walter Brenckmann.

‘I’m sorry about your son, Captain,’ he had said. Shaking his head, he had straightened and turned to Curtis LeMay. ‘Stand down Strategic Air Command and order all Polaris submarines to surface and to squawk their names and positions in the clear. All SAC aircraft are to be grounded forthwith. All SSBNs are to return to their home ports. Do you have any questions, General?’

Curtis LeMay had had no questions.

The President had spoken for peace.

That short meeting now seemed like a dream.

“I’m sorry,” Walter Brenckmann told the Attorney General, grimacing ruefully, “I’m not at liberty to divulge that information.”

Bobby Kennedy did not take offence.

He clunked down his glass.

“I came down to invite you to the ‘hand of peace’ ceremony in the Oval Office. It is a mess up there but Jack wanted the Press and the TV people in to witness the show.”

Chapter 48

Wednesday 11th December 1963

The Oval Office, The White House, Washington DC

It was chaos. The Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack hung side by side on a hastily rigged frame behind the President's desk while photographers ducked and dived and flash guns exploded. The floor was a treacherous snake pit of cables for NBC's live network broadcast. Everybody was exhausted, a lot of people in the room had been drinking all evening and Jack Kennedy and Edward Heath were ad-libbing to the increasingly fierce barrage of questions being hurled at them from the crowded body of the half-wrecked Oval Office. There were bullet holes in the wall, concussions from a rocket propelled grenade strikes had brought down plaster from the ceiling and NBC's lights threw deep, sinister shadows across most of the people in the room.

Walter Brenckmann was feeling as light-headed as the others. His son was alive and there would be no war. The United States of America and her old ally, Great Britain, had been reunited by the travails of recent days; each publicly agreeing that they had been afflicted and tormented by the same mutual conspiracy. Henceforward they would combat the cancer of Red Dawn together, hunt it down and exterminate it like the parasitic plague-carrier it was wherever it manifested itself, and at whatever the cost. It made for a good narrative, a readily available metaphorical lick of paint to cover over the yawning cracks in the old alliance. But it was a beginning, a turning of the tide. Maybe, just maybe, the World's remaining nuclear superpowers had signalled a willingness to dream of a better future. Only time would tell; because in every trial reconciliation the Devil was always in the detail.

Walter Brenckmann the man and the officer, the servant of his President, wanted to see the positive, the career lawyer part of him recognised that the road ahead was going to be exceptionally rocky.

However, today he would thank God – even though he did not believe in the existence of a merciful, all-loving God: where was the evidence? – for the life of his son and the preservation of what was left of the country he had

sworn to defend that long-ago day in 1940 when he had been inducted into the United States Navy.

“What happens now that HMS Dreadnought has reappeared?”

That was going to be a problem.

Pragmatically, the survival of the British nuclear boat kissed goodbye to any lingering hope the Administration retained that the ‘Scorpion Incident’ might be quietly buried. Inevitably, there would be boards of inquiry, inquests, savage recriminations and a raft of questions nobody really wanted to hear answered.

Edward Heath looked the man who had shouted the question in the eye.

“For the moment we rejoice that over a hundred brave men feared dead have survived...”

“What assurance can you give the American people that the murderers of the ‘brave’ Americans on the Scorpion will not be forgotten, Mister President?”

Jack Kennedy made a pacifying gesture with his hands.

“This is not the time to pre-empt the official boards of inquiry that both our navies will convene to discover the truth.”

The President’s calm gravitas briefly quietened the room.

Walter Brenckmann sensed it was the quiet before the storm. Washington was a seething cauldron of shocked, traumatised humanity and everybody in the Oval Office – every man from the Secret Service agents fingering their guns to the blank-eyed White House junior staffers and secretaries – was operating in an unreal daze.

Allowing so many pressmen into the inner sanctum of the Presidency was a fundamentally dumb idea. If the President’s closest advisers had been thinking clearly – which under the circumstances it was not very easy to do – they would not have touched this three-ring circus with a long stick.

“What about the murderers of the 100th Bomb Group?” It was the voice of one of the Reuters correspondent, a young Englishman with a bloody bandage on his brow and disbelief in his eyes. *“Hundreds of innocent Maltese civilians were murdered on Malta? Don’t they count because they’re not Americans?”*

Walter Brenckmann froze.

The ink was not dry on the ceasefire and already the fault lines in the patched up ‘special relationship’ were tearing apart at the seams. In the crush

he was jostled. He flicked an irritated glance to his left at the middle aged, plump brunette in a creased twin set with a tired and somewhat dishevelled perm who was glaring at the English Premier. He thought he recognised the woman as one of the President's secretaries. He could not recollect her name; in fact he did not think he had actually heard it.

The woman had jammed her handbag, an ugly scuffed blue leather thing, against his hip and was attempting to retrieve something from inside it.

Walter Brenckmann thought he saw metal glinting.

He thought nothing of it.

But then he thought again.

The glaring arcs illuminating the two leaders cast hard shadows and a backlight that reflected off every surface, dimly.

He realised had seen a reflection off a bright, shiny metallic edge where there ought to have been none.

He half-turned just as the barrel of the gun, a lumpy old-style Pattern 1911 Navy Colt was raised slowly, shakily.

The Navy man did not actually believe what he was seeing.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a blond Secret Service man begin to move. The eyes of his President and those of the British Premier widened.

The gun levelled.

Everything happened at once with incredible speed.

And yet in that blink of an eye everything seemed to be moving in ultra slow motion.

The blond Secret Service man bowled over Jack Kennedy like he was a linebacker sacking quarterback.

For a split second Edward Heath looked into the eyes of his assassin as another Secret Service agent moved towards him, probably knowing it was a million years too late.

The first shot barked deafeningly and there was instant pandemonium.

Bodies were diving for cover.

Everybody, that was, except Walter Brenckmann.

He wrestled with the woman with the gun, clawing for the Colt. There was a second shot as the Navy man and the woman fell hard on the ground. The third shot was so close to Walter Brenckmann's head that the concussion of the discharge seemed to be inside his skull.

That was when his World went black.

Chapter 49

Friday 13th December 1963

Headquarters of the C-in-C Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, Mdina, Malta

Lieutenant Jim Siddall took Marija's arm and helped her out of the Land Rover. The big former Redcap looked less fierce, less hard-bitten in his crisp new uniform and strangely, more relaxed. He had collected her from the Pembroke Barracks and at her request, taken her home so she could change into a fresh dress.

He had explained that the 'C-in-C would welcome the opportunity to speak with the leader of the Women of Malta movement', so she had decided she would look her best for the interview. A little over a week ago she would have half-suspected such an invitation would result in her arrest but *everything* had changed in the last week.

"The *Women of Malta* is not a 'movement'," she scolded her driver as the Land Rover negotiated the narrow, twisting roads out of the town. "I'm not even sure if it has any reason to exist now that our men folk have been released from detention."

This seemed to amuse the big man.

"What?" She demanded, smiling.

"You have no idea the way other people see you," he retorted quietly.

It was one of those mild winter days on Malta when the rain occasionally fell heavily but not for long and in between the showers the sun was strong enough to raise the dust. The prickly pear bushes beside the road were almost but not quite out of season, and in the middle distance the ancient fortress city of Mdina overlooked a faded patchwork landscape of dry stone walls and small fields, villages and lonely farmsteads that sprawled across the rugged landscape of the interior of the island. Beyond Hamrun there were signs pointing to the RAF airfields of Luqa and Ta'Qali, as if the roaring of jet engines could hide the existence of the great concrete scars of their runways. Marija knew that from the ramparts of Mdina she would be able to look down on Ta'Qali, and watch the big transports and fighters landing and

taking off there and from more distant Luqa. She and Joe had often watched the comings and goings from the two fields and the other small air strips for endless summer hours in those years after the war when the British presence had seemed so benign.

It was not a long drive.

Nowhere on Malta was a long drive from anywhere else. Marija had read somewhere that the whole Maltese Archipelago was smaller than the Isle of Wight. She had looked at maps, compared scales and discovered that although Malta was smaller than the faraway island in the English Channel, roughly three times as many people lived on the islands of the Archipelago. Contemplating these facts she had concluded that the Isle of Wight must be a lonely and a very quiet place and she had felt a little bit sorry for the people who lived there.

“I cannot do anything about how other people see me,” she complained. “That is their problem, not mine!”

Soon the Land Rover was climbing up the slope to the ramparts of Mdina, negotiating the last switchback and driving up to the old city gate. The guards waved the vehicle through into the citadel where the narrow cobbled roads wound between great canyons of limestone and granite buildings.

The large sign above the double doors said: C-IN-C MALTA. Next to it a smaller board said: ALL VISITORS REPORT TO THE DUTY DESK.

“My office is three doors down the road,” Jim Siddall explained, waving.

Marija looked up at the spires and domes of the Cathedral on her right. St Catherine’s Hospital for Women, where Margo Seiffert had trained her and dozens of other local women to be auxiliary nurses and midwives was just the other side of the Cathedral. Hardly anywhere inside the citadel was more than five minutes from anywhere. Mdina was like Malta itself in microcosm.

The big man escorted his charge inside.

“Miss Calleja has an appointment with the C-in-C,” he explained to the Royal Navy sub-lieutenant behind the desk inside the double doors. The other man made a call.

Alan Hannay trotted down the stairs half-a-minute later.

“Thanks, Jim,” he nodded affably to Marija’s guardian angel. “I’ll take it from here.”

The big ex-Redcap hesitated.

“Never fear, I’ll make sure Miss Calleja gets home safely,” the Commander-in-Chief’s flag lieutenant promised.

Marija climbed stairs with a patient, unhurried gait, almost but not quite one step at a time. If Alan Hannay was impatient with her slow pace he was far too well brought up to show it.

“I hear you almost had a nasty fall the other day?” The boy inquired, belatedly wondering if his attempt at polite conversation was possibly a mistake.

“I fainted,” Marija explained, feeling foolish. “One of the American fliers, Captain Zabriski, caught me.” She shrugged. “He kept apologising for ‘manhandling me’ afterwards as if it was his fault I’d fainted. You know that most of those boys at Fort Pembroke feel physically sick about what they did, don’t you?”

“Yes. I imagine I’d feel the same if I was them.”

Vice-Admiral Sir Julian Christopher’s flag lieutenant swiftly absented himself as soon as he had delivered Marija to the great man’s room. His guest looked to the Commander-in-Chief and then around the mostly bare limestone walls; the room was more of a cell than an office with a single three feet square window with a view down towards the east coast. Other than two hard-backed chairs the only furniture was a big, rather gnarled desk, and a single three drawer gun metal filing cabinet.

Her host had risen to his feet on her arrival but stayed behind his desk.

He said nothing when the young woman moved to the side of his desk and viewed the three small framed photographs on its uncluttered top.

Marija remembered Peter’s mother, a slim, clever woman whose laugh was often forced. The second picture was of a woman in her twenties with her mother’s chin and her father’s eyes; Peter’s older sister, Elspeth, who had married an engineer and gone to live in Australia before the October War. Finally, there was a picture of Peter looking very young and self-conscious, on parade in front of a big building with tall colonnades brandishing of all things, a ceremonial sword...

The Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operation chuckled lowly, paternally.

“I have several more recent photographs of Peter. I make it known to his commanding officers, confidentially you understand, that I like to keep a record of his progress, you see. But that’s the picture I carry with me

always.”

Marija remained silent but gave the man a quizzical, unafraid look.

“It was the day,” the great man explained wanly, “that I was most proud of him and yet, like a fool, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. I’ve never forgiven myself. He’s never forgiven me. It was the worst day of my life; I hope to live long enough to atone.”

“Oh.” The young woman was confused. She would ponder what she had just been told at her leisure. It was a thing that deserved long and careful consideration; possibly the most important thing he would ever say to her. “Lieutenant Siddall said you wanted to talk to me about the Women of Malta?”

“Another day, perhaps.”

Julian Christopher resumed his seat, he watched with wry eyes as Marija continued to roam the room. There was something about her calm, her fearlessness that threatened to mesmerise the man whose word was law on the Maltese Archipelago.

Marija picked up the picture of Peter wielding the sword.

He gazed at it seraphically, a smile touching her lips.

“Dartmouth,” she was informed. “The Britannia Naval College. Peter’s somewhat belated passing out parade.”

“Oh.” Marija looked up and met the older man’s gaze. Subconsciously, her hand stroked the frame.

“I have made a point of not interfering in Peter’s career,” Julian Christopher said flatly. “Yes, I keep in touch with his commanding officers but always on the clearly stated basis that I am only interested in hearing realistic appraisals of his progress. Peter has achieved everything that he has achieved in the Service off his own bat. Absolutely everything. However...”

Marija frowned, unsure where this was going.

“However, in attaching Peter to the fleet staff on board HMS Hermes I have broken the rule of a lifetime. A rule that, with hindsight; I should have broken long ago. There’s no fool like an old fool, as they say.”

“I don’t understand, Admiral Christopher,” Marija confessed, wondering why her heart was suddenly beating impossibly fast.

“Under the forthcoming reorganisation of my command area, from January, HMS Hermes’s new home port will be Valletta.”

Chapter 50

Saturday 14th December 1963

Cheltenham Town Hall, Gloucestershire, England

With the collaboration of GCHQ technicians it was going to be the BBC's first nationwide live outside broadcast since the October War. The Director General of the British Broadcasting Company had protested that his reconstructed, relocated and still ramshackle organisation - a pale imitation of its old majesty - was not ready for such a momentous step. He had also objected to the 'technical input by MI6' on 'ethical grounds' but Margaret Thatcher had over-ruled him. Basically, if the BBC was not up to the job then 'what was it good for?'

This question had stumped the Director General who had been sulking ever since about the iniquities of a 'totalitarian state' and 'Soviet methods'. The Angry Widow had never had much time for wishy washy artistic types with fragile egos; she had made a mental note to talk to Iain Macleod, the Minister of Information about finding somebody capable of rebuilding the BBC 'a little faster' than its current chief.

The BBC had taken over Cheltenham Town Hall, a marvellous Gothic Victorian structure in the heart of the nearest town to the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration compound three days ago to prepare for another kind of broadcast. Edward Heath had planned to speak to the nation on his return from America. Nobody had known three days ago if he was to return with tidings of peace or war; and two scripts had been drafted.

What had happened in Washington forty-eight hours ago had altered the shape of politics forever on both sides of the North Atlantic. In America and in England the Governments of the old allies had crossed their respective Rubicons. There could be no going back.

Margaret Thatcher had been working on departmental papers in her room two nights ago when the call had come through from Washington. Iain Macleod's tone had been a little odd, stoic in a way that was totally alien to him. It was not until he had recounted what had happened in the Oval Office less than an hour before that she had understood. The Chairman of the

Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland was the Prime Minister's oldest surviving friend in Government; possibly the one man in whom – despite their recent differences – he had trusted most.

It had been a relatively brief, cruelly pragmatic conversation because Iain Macleod, the brilliantly shrewd political tactician and strategist at the heart of one nation conservatism, recognised that his country simply could not survive further divisions within its leadership. His analysis had been brutally incisive.

‘Whilst Jim Callaghan is the nominated Deputy Prime Minister, he is *not* the heir apparent. He won't like being passed over but he knows that he doesn't have an unimpeachable *right* to govern and his personal integrity won't allow him to seek external backing for a bid for the premiership.’

Margaret Thatcher knew her colleague was talking about the leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party's respect for and friendship with Sir David Luce, the First Sea Lord. Iain Macleod might be the political kingmaker; the First Sea Lord and the other Chiefs of Staff were the men who held – if they wanted to wield it - the real power in the land.

‘Within the Party,’ the Minister of Information went on, ‘both I and Peter Thorneycroft would normally have precedence in the matter of the succession; as would a score of others in their *own* estimation.’ Peter Thorneycroft, Jim Callaghan's deputy at the Ministry of Defence and Edward Heath's trusted bellwether of the mood of the Party in the country, had been Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1950s. ‘But whoever takes over has to be able to command Jim Callaghan's support and the whole-hearted support of the Chiefs of Staff. There is also the small matter of the Royal Assent...’

Margaret Thatcher honestly had not known what her colleague with whom she had had a somewhat troubled relationship over the years, was going with this line of thinking. She was still reeling from the terrible news from America. First there had been the rapprochement; and now this...

‘Iain,’ she had asked, ‘what is to be done and how can I help?’

The man had guffawed sadly.

‘I have asked Sir Henry Tomlinson to put a call through to the Queen's Private Secretary, Margaret. When I put the phone down *you* must explain to Her Majesty that *you* are in a position to form a new Administration.’

‘*Me!*’ She had yelped in horror.

That was a sleepless night and two long, draining days ago.

The Queen had been severely charming and supportive. Not so several senior and currently disinherited and estranged minor Grandees in her own Party. No matter. Sufficient of her own people supported her elevation to the premiership that with the support of the Labour and Co-operative Party, the formation of a new National Unity Administration was a self-evidently viable project. Opposition to this plan had evaporated when Sir David Luce had visited her yesterday morning to inform her that 'I and the other Chiefs of Staff stand foursquare behind you, ma'am'.

Ironically, in a peculiar sort of way she was beginning her tenure as the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom with a more solid powerbase than, on reflection, poor Ted Heath had ever had.

It was a funny old World.

As she stood at the lectern on the stage of Cheltenham Town Hall awaiting the countdown signal from the BBC floor manager her thoughts slowly clarified. She was nervous. That was natural, she had never been an orator of the ilk of Iain Macleod, and her objectives had never been as coherently mapped, nor as cogently catalogued as those of her predecessor. She had a tendency to hector and she did not have the natural comedic timing to deliver memorable one-liners. But she had other strengths and hopefully, tonight they would come to her rescue.

Behind her on the platform sat James Callaghan, the First Sea Lord, Peter Thorneycroft, Airey Neave and a slew of junior ministers drawn almost equally from the two major parties in the uneasy coalition that was the new Unity Administration (of the) United Kingdom. It was a rag tag, shell-shocked cast of characters who desperately wanted to hear a message of hope. Ted Heath had understood as much and the Angry Widow liked to think that was why he had advanced her so quickly to such a prominent post in his last Cabinet. She owed it to his memory and to the memories of all the other unnamed millions who had been consumed by the nightmare of war and the daily struggle for survival in its aftermath, to honour the lost lives not with words but with deeds.

Five! Four! Three! Two! One!

"Good evening. It is my sad first duty as Prime Minister of our great country to confirm the tragic death of the Right Honourable Edward Heath, the man who guided us out of the slough of despond after the October War.

Ted Heath died by the hand of a deranged assassin at the very moment he had secured a new peace,” her voice quivered with emotion and for a horrible moment she was afraid she would gag on the words, “and opened up the possibility of a new World order in which famine and pestilence might soon be banished from our sorely pressed land.”

She was gripping the lectern so tightly that her hands were trembling with cramp. She forced herself to relax.

“The woman who shot the Prime Minister was a Mrs Edna Maria Zabriski, the mother of one of the American airman taken prisoner after the terror raid on Malta last week. The woman was employed by the White House as a secretary. It seems her former husband was killed in the October War and when she heard that her only son was ‘missing in action’, and that his aircraft was presumed to have been shot down by RAF fighters, she snapped. We have no reason whatsoever to question President Kennedy’s assertion that this woman was acting alone.”

Margaret Thatcher heard the tenor of her soprano voice strengthen and begin to ring with assurance the longer she talked. Before her in the body of the hall, packed with workers bussed in from the Government compound and local people who had apparently, queued for several hours in the cold, the silence was neutral without being hostile.

It was a listening silence.

This was *her* moment.

The make or break *moment* of her life.

“Ted Heath,” she 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 what has been lost and 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.”

There was a supportive muttering in the hall.

“I solemnly promise you that with every fibre of my being that I will never stop fighting for a better world for all our children!”

[The End]

Author's End Note

Personal notes to my readers: firstly, thank you for reading this book; and secondly, please remember that this is a work of fiction. I made it up in my own head. None of the characters in '*The Pillars of Hercules - Book 3 of the 'Timeline 10/27/62 Series'*' - is based on real people I know of, or have ever met. Nor do the specific events described in '*The Pillars of Hercules - Book 3 of the 'Timeline 10/27/62 Series'*' - have, to my knowledge, any basis in real events I know to have taken place. Any resemblance to real life people or events is, therefore, unintended and entirely coincidental.

The '*Timeline 10/27/62 Series*' is an alternative history of the modern world and because of this real historical characters are referenced and in some cases their words and actions form significant parts of the narrative. I have no way of knowing for sure if these real, historical figures would have spoken thus, or acted in the ways I depict them acting. Any word I place in the mouth of a real historical figure, and any action which I attribute to them after 27th October 1962 *never* actually happened. As I always say in my Author's Notes to my readers, *I made it up in my own head*.

As with real historical characters, real historical ships and other military units are treated in a documentary - where they were and as they were deployed - fashion up to and including 27th October 1962. Thereafter, all bets are off because in this post cataclysm timeline, *everything changes*.

The books of the Timeline 10/27/62 series are written as episodes; they are instalments in a contiguous narrative arc. The individual 'episodes' each explore a number of plot branches, and develop themes continuously from book to book. Inevitably, in any series some exposition and extemporization is unavoidable but I try – honestly, I do – to keep this to a minimum as it tends to slow down the flow of the stories I am telling.

In writing each successive addition to the Timeline 10/27/62 'verse' it is my implicit assumption that my readers will have read the previous books in the

series in sequence, and that my readers do not want their reading experience to be overly impacted by excessive re-hashing of the events in previous books.

Humbly, I suggest that if you are ‘hooked’ by the Timeline 10/27/62 series that reading the books in sequence will – most likely - enhance your enjoyment of the experience.

As a rule I let my books speak for themselves. I hope it does not sound fuddy-duddy or old-fashioned, but broadly speaking I tend towards the view that a book *should* speak for itself.

However, with your indulgence I would like briefly – well, as briefly as is possible without being overly terse – to share a few personal thoughts with you, the reader about the *Timeline 10/27/62 World*.

I was not yet seven-and-a-half years old in October 1962 when I realised my parents were paying an awful lot of attention to the radio, devouring every line of print in their daily newspaper and were not quite themselves, a little distracted in fact, now that I think about it. I heard the word ‘Cuba’ bandied about but did not know until much later that the most dangerous moment of my life had come and gone without my ever, as a child, knowing it.

I was not yet eight-and-a-half years old when one day in November 1963 the World around me came, momentarily, to a juddering halt. I had heard the name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and I even knew that he was the President of something called the United States of America. I did not know then that he was a womanising, drug dependent and deeply conflicted man who had lied to the American people about his chronic, periodically disabling illness which in any rational age ought to have disqualified him from the Presidency; *but I did know that he was a charismatic, talismanic figure in whom even I, as a child more interested in soccer, model trains and riding my new bicycle, had invested a nameless hope for the future.* And then one day he was gone and I shared my parents’ shock and horror. It was not as if a mortal man had

been murdered; JFK had become a mythic figure long before then. It was as if the modern day analogue of King Menelaus of Sparta - hero of the Trojan Wars and the husband of Helen, she of the legendary face that launched a thousand ships - had been gunned down that day in Dallas.

The Cuban Missiles crisis and the death of a President taught a young boy in England in 1962 and 1963 that the World is a very dangerous place.

Many years later we learned how close we all came to the abyss in late October 1962. Often we look back on how deeply Jack Kennedy's death scarred hearts and minds in the years after his assassination.

There is no certainty, no one profound insight into what 'might have happened' had the Cold War turned *Hot* in the fall of 1962, or if JFK had survived that day in Dallas. History is not a systematic, explicable march from one event to another that inevitably reaches some readily predictable outcome. History only works that way in hindsight; very little is *obvious* either to the major or the minor players *at the time* history is actually being made. Nor does one have to be a fully paid up chaos theoretician to know that apparently inconsequential events can have massive unforeseen and unforeseeable impacts in subsequent historical developments.

I do not pretend to *know* what would have happened if the USA and the USSR had gone to war over Cuba in October 1962. One imagines this scenario has been the object of countless staff college war games in America and elsewhere in the intervening fifty-three years; I suspect – with a high level of confidence - that few of those war games would have played out the way the participants expected, and that no two *games* would have resolved themselves in exactly the same way as any other. That is the beauty and the fascination of historical counterfactuals, or as those of us who make no pretence at being emeritus professors of history say, *alternative history*.

Nobody can claim 'this is the way it would have been' after the Cuban Missiles Crisis 'went wrong'. This author only *speculates* that the Timeline 10/27/62 Series reflects one of the many ways 'things might have gone' in the aftermath of Armageddon.

The only thing one can be reasonably confident about is that if the Cuban Missiles Crisis had turned into a shooting war the World in which we live today would, *probably*, not be the one with which we are familiar.

A work of fiction is a journey of imagination. I hope it does not sound corny but I am genuinely a little humbled by the number of people who have already bought into what I am trying to do with *Timeline 10/27/62*.

Thank you again for reading *Timeline 10/27/62 – Book 3: The Pillars of Hercules*. 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, civilisation depends on people like *you*.

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