Dead Line

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Extract

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ONE

In his flat near the British Embassy in Nicosia, Peter Templeton woke early. For a few minutes he lay staring at the ladder pattern on the wall of his bedroom made by the sun shining through the Venetian blinds. Then, with an anticipatory jolt, he remembered the message he'd received yesterday: the codeword from Jaghir that called him to an urgent meeting. Templeton was MI6's head of station in Cyprus, and Jaghir was one of his most important agents.

There was little traffic in Nicosia this early, so when Templeton's black saloon pulled out of the car park beneath his block of flats it had the street to itself. But within thirty seconds a small, battered hatchback swung round a corner and began to follow closely behind the saloon.

The two cars went south through the old walled city, a cautious convoy, avoiding the UN Green Line and the Turkish sector in the north. They took the narrow side streets, past old stone houses with ornate balconies, their tall wooden shutters still firmly closed, and shops that were not yet open for business. Driving through an opening in the old Venetian wall, former boundary of a once much smaller city, they crossed the Pedieos River. The two cars proceeded carefully, their drivers alert and tense; another

vehicle could have followed their labyrinthine progress, but not without being detected.

As they emerged from the outskirts of the city, a hinterland of white concrete apartment blocks, the cars accelerated and drove on towards the Troodos mountains. Slowly the road began to climb, and at the base of the range it split, its main artery moving north around the mountain, a smaller track heading in a tortuous zigzag up the mountain itself. In the crook of the junction sat a small cafe, just half a dozen tables in a dusty courtyard under an overhanging *tourathes* rigged to block the sun.

Templeton lifted his hand briefly from the wheel in a quick salute to his colleague, and drove on up the track. The hatchback pulled into the cafe's small parking lot and the driver got out to sit at a table, ordering a coffee when the proprietor emerged blinking in the bright light. But the driver's eyes watched the road he'd come along. It was barely seven o'clock and cooler here than in Nicosia, but already the temperature was over 30°C.

As Templeton made his way up the treacherous track that cut through the large stands of umbrella pines lining the mountainside, he kept an eye on his rear-view mirror, but all he could see was the cloud of dust his car was stirring up. It was just three miles to his destination, yet he knew it would take at least another fifteen minutes. He manoeuvred carefully up the incline with its seemingly infinite twists and curves, catching glimpses through the trees of an ancient monastery ahead of him, nestled neatly into a wide ledge halfway up the mountain. Its walls of white ashlar blocks seemed to grow out of the mountain,

enfolding a group of buildings, their tiled roofs aged over the years to a dark mocha brown.

After a final twist of the road, he reached the walls and, driving through an arch, he left his car parked at the base of a short, steep flight of steps. He climbed them slowly, allowing his eyes to adjust to the shade after the blinding sunlight of the hillside. At the top, on a long terrace tiled in white stone, he stopped and gazed down at the road he had come along. Beside him a roofed portico stretched to a large squat chapel with a cloister on one side, from which came the sound of the monks going to prayer. That would keep them occupied for the half-hour Templeton required for his meeting.

He sat down on the ledge that overlooked the mountainside and the valley below, picking a shady corner where the terrace joined the portico. The air was scented by the dry, dropped needles of the pines and by the thyme growing in cracks in the walls. Perched here, he could see the cafe, not much bigger than a speck. As he waited, the mobile phone in his jacket pocket vibrated.

'Yes,' he said quietly. He could hear the whirr of cicadas on the hillside below.

'On his way. Alone so far.'

'Okay. Keep me posted.'

He watched patiently, until far below him he saw dust kicking up in small clouds from the track, then a moving dot that gradually turned into a car, a Mercedes, grey with dust. The noise of its tyres grew louder as it came quickly up the track, and braked with a small squeal next to Templeton's car.

A moment later, an Arab in a smart light-grey suit appeared at the top of the stairs. He was in his forties, trim and thin, his hair short but expensively cut, and even in the heat his shirt was crisply pressed, the collar uncreased. Seeing Templeton, he came over to the corner, his eyes alert.

'Salam aleikum, Abboud,' said Templeton as he stood up to shake hands. He spoke classical Arabic, learned in six months' intensive tuition at the language school in the hills outside Beirut, then honed to fluency by twenty years of postings in the Middle East.

'Aleikum-as-salam,' the man named Abboud replied, then switched to English. 'We are alone, I take it.'

'Entirely,' said Templeton. He gave a small smile and nodded at the chapel. 'The brothers are all at prayer.'

They sat on the ledge, Abboud peering warily down the mountainside. Templeton said, 'You must have something important to tell me.' Their next meeting had not been due for a month, but the message from Abboud – Jaghir – had been unambiguously urgent.

'I do,' said Abboud. He took a cigarette case from his pocket, waving it towards Templeton, who shook his head. Lighting a Dunhill with a gold lighter, Abboud inhaled deeply, then blew smoke in a long snow-coloured stream over the ledge. A hundred yards out a hunting kestrel hovered high over the mountainside, its wings fluttering slightly to steady itself against the movement of the thermals. 'I was in Damascus last week. Tibshirani called me back.'

Templeton nodded. Tibshirani was the deputy director of Idarat al-Mukhabarat, one of Syria's dreaded secret services, and Abboud's direct superior. He was a man who

mixed intellectual sophistication (he had been a postgraduate student at Berkeley in California) and peasant brutality.

'What did he want?'

'We are having some problems with the Turks. They arrested one of our agents last month in Ankara. It could have consequences – especially here in Cyprus.' He took another drag on his cigarette. 'But that is not why I wanted to see you. I had dinner with Tibshirani on my second night. In the old quarter. No wives, though there was some other female entertainment.' He gave the briefest flicker of a smile. 'Afterwards Tibshirani started talking about another operation. I thought he was just drunk and being indiscreet – he's known me since I joined the service – but then the next morning in his office he briefed me formally about it.'

He paused for a moment, looking down the mountain, then stood up to gain a better view. Satisfied that nothing was coming up the track, he sat down again on the ledge, throwing down his cigarette and grinding it out with the heel of his tasselled loafer.

He said, 'You've heard about these talks between my country and the Americans.'

'Yes,' replied Templeton. It was a sore point in Whitehall, since the British had been excluded from the discussions.

'It's commonly thought they are going nowhere – without Israeli involvement, it's said, the Americans cannot agree to anything. If they do, the Jewish lobby will just block it in Congress. That's what the media says, at any rate.'

This was true. The original enthusiasm that the two hostile governments were actually talking to each other had

gradually given way to a widespread cynicism that nothing of consequence would emerge from the 'secret' meetings the whole world now knew about.

Abboud tugged at one of his cuffs and stared out at the arid valley towards Nicosia. The kestrel was lower in the sky now, moving patiently above the slope, like a gun dog working a field. He said, 'I tell you, my friend, this time the *on dit* is wrong. For once talks may lead to something – the administration in Washington seems determined to break the impasse in the Middle East at last, even if it means standing up to Israel. They want a legacy and they have chosen this to create it.'

Was this why Abboud had called an urgent meeting? wondered Templeton. It was all interesting stuff, but hardly worth the risk each man had taken coming here.

Sensing Templeton's impatience, Abboud held out a reassuring hand. 'Do not worry – I am coming to the point. I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to.' He looked at his watch, a sliver of gold that glinted in the harsh, still-rising sun. 'In two months' time there is going to be an international conference in Scotland. You may know about it. It has not attracted much interest so far because only the moderates have agreed to attend. But my government wants progress. We need a settlement for the stability of our country. So we have decided to attend. I am to be part of our delegation, which is why Tibshirani told me the story.' He raised his eyes to the sky.

'What story?'

'We have information that certain parties are working to disrupt the process. We know of two individuals acting

to prevent any peaceful solution to the current stalemate. They intend to blacken the good name of Syria and thus to destroy all trust at the conference.'

'How will they do that?'

'I don't know. But I can tell you my friend that if they succeed there will be a bloodbath in the region.'

'Do you know who they are, who is directing them?'

'I know they have connections to your country, and I know their names. But Tibshirani does not know who is controlling them. He does not think it is the British.' He smiled, a gleam of white teeth in the sunlight. Then he gave Templeton two names, reciting each one twice, quite slowly, to make sure there was no misunderstanding. Nothing was committed to paper by either man.

'Okay,' said Templeton, having memorised the two names. 'Where does this information come from?'

'That I cannot tell you.' Abboud laughed as he saw the irritation spreading across Templeton's face. 'But only because I do not know myself. Believe me, it's not worth my trying to find out; I already know more than I should. I believe it to be true, and so does Tibshirani. But listen to me; here is the most important thing. These people, these two parties who are working against us – my colleagues are going to move against them before they can do harm.'

'Move?'

Abboud merely nodded. They both knew full well what this meant.

'When will they "move"?'

'Soon, very soon. They will do it in the UK. Secretly. So it will not be known who has acted. My side does not want

anything to disrupt this conference. We see much for Syria to gain – we hope to get back our country from the Israeli invaders. So my superiors consider that action against these people is worth the risk if it keeps the conference alive. Personally, I fear that if they make a mistake it may have the opposite effect, which is why I am telling you. But now I must go,' said Abboud, standing up.

Templeton stood up too, looking out down the mountainside. The kestrel was no longer circling; it must have found its prey.

TWO

Liz Carlyle was not in the best of humours as her taxi came to a grinding halt in a traffic jam in Trafalgar Square. She had spent the morning at the Old Bailey giving evidence in the trial of Neil Armitage, a scientist who had been arrested in Cafe Rouge in St John's Wood, in the act of handing over a briefcase of top-secret documents to a Russian intelligence officer.

It was her first time as a witness in court, an experience that once had rarely come the way of MI5 officers, though now with frequent arrests of terrorists, it was more common. Liz had not enjoyed it. She was at her happiest when she was using her analytical and intuitive skills to make sense of complicated intelligence – working to put the case together that led to arrests. Court no. 1 at the Old Bailey was not her natural environment, and she had found it surprisingly stressful.

Knowing that her identity and appearance would be protected, she had expected to sit behind some sort of screen. Instead, the court had been cleared of the press and the public and she'd emerged from a rear door straight into the witness box, where she stood directly facing the defendant in the dock. Although he didn't know her name,

he knew he was there largely because of her work. She felt like an actress entering from the wings onto a stage, without a script, exposed and not in control. For one used to working in the shadows, it had been an unnerving experience.

So she was not best pleased when, just as she was recovering with a strong coffee and the *Guardian* crossword puzzle, her boss, Charles Wetherby, had rung to ask her to go and represent the service at a meeting in Whitehall.

'It's about that Middle East peace conference in Scotland,' he had said.

'But Charles,' she had protested, 'I hardly know anything about it. Aren't the protective security lot dealing with that?'

'Of course. They've been working on it for months and they're completely on top of it. But they've got no one available to send this afternoon. Don't worry. There's nothing to be decided at this meeting. The Home Office have called it at the last minute just so they can demonstrate they're in charge, before the Home Secretary goes to Cabinet tomorrow. I knew you'd have finished in court and you were close by, so I volunteered you.'

Thanks very much, Liz had thought ruefully, for dumping this on me after the morning I've had. But though she was irritated, she couldn't feel cross with Charles for long. She'd worked with him for a good part of her ten years in MI5, and he was everything she admired – calm, considered, professional and without vanity. He made people feel part of a committed team, working with him as much as for him. It was more than admiration, she had to admit to

herself. She was strongly attracted to him and she knew he cared about her too. But it was an unspoken affection, an invisible thread that neither acknowledged. Charles was an honourable man – one reason why she admired him – and he was married to Joanne. And Joanne was very ill, terminally ill perhaps. Charles, she knew, would never contemplate leaving her, and Liz couldn't have respected him if he had.

Meanwhile Liz, at thirty-five, was not getting younger and a series of unsatisfactory relationships was not what she wanted. Why had she allowed herself to fall for someone so unavailable?

So here she was, stuck in a cab, likely to be late for a meeting about something she wasn't briefed on and probably about to get soaked into the bargain, she reflected, as the lowering clouds began to deposit their first drops of rain on the taxi's windscreen. Typical, she thought; the summer had so far been unusually dry and she had not brought an umbrella.

But Liz was not one to be gloomy for long. There was too much in her job that she found genuinely fascinating. And when, as was the way with London traffic, the jam suddenly cleared and the cab moved on, her mood lightened; by the time she was dropped halfway down Whitehall, outside the door of the Cabinet Office, in good time for the meeting after all, she felt positively cheerful.

A vast square table dominated the first-floor meeting room, which would have had a fine view over the gardens of Downing Street had the windows not been obscured by yellowing net blast curtains. Good thing, thought Liz,

remembering the mortar shell that had landed on the back lawn, fired in the 1980s by the IRA through the roof of a van parked less than a quarter of a mile away.

'I suggest we begin now,' said the senior civil servant from the Home Office in a dry voice that made it clear he had chaired countless meetings like this before. Liz had missed his name when he introduced himself and now, gazing at his bland, unremarkable features, she mentally named him 'Mr Faceless'.

'As you all know, the Gleneagles conference will take place in two months' time. We have recently learned that, contrary to previous expectations, all the main players are likely to attend, which of course greatly raises the level of the security issues. I believe all the departments and agencies represented here are already in close touch with each other and with the allies.' And here Mr Faceless nodded towards two men, obviously Americans, sitting together on the opposite side of the table from Liz.

'The purpose of this meeting is to emphasise the importance the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister attach to the success of this conference. It is vital that nothing should occur to disrupt it. Ministers feel, and I believe their colleagues in Washington feel the same, that this conference, given the wide attendance, represents the first real possibility of a fundamental breakthrough in the region.'

As Mr Faceless continued his remarks Liz discreetly scanned the table. He had not troubled to begin with the normal chairman's courtesy of going round the table for everyone to introduce themselves, so she amused herself by

working out who everyone was. A deputy commissioner from the Metropolitan Police – she'd seen his photo in the newspapers though she'd never met him – was sitting next to a man she guessed was also a policeman, probably a Scot. Then there were the two Americans. They must be from the CIA London station; they didn't look like FBI and anyway she knew most of the FBI characters at the embassy. One of them wore horn-rimmed glasses, a khaki summer suit and a striped tie that shouted Ivy League. The other, older than his colleague, was a heavy-set, balding man, who seized on the opportunity of a pause in the chairman's remarks to say, 'I'm Andy Bokus, head of station at Grosvenor.' CIA, as she had suspected. He spoke in a flat, uninflected voice. Like a Midwestern car dealer in a film, thought Liz. 'And this is my colleague, Miles Brookhaven. To date we have received no specific negative information relative to the conference.'

Liz suppressed a groan. What was it with so many Americans? Met informally, they could be the friendliest, least pretentious people in the world, but put them on a stage and they turned into automatons.

Bokus went on. 'Liaisons with the Federal Bureau of Investigation are ongoing. So far, also negative. A representative of that agency will attend any future meeting.' He paused. 'The Secret Service may also attend.'

'Really?' asked a tall, sandy-haired man, leaning back languidly in his chair. *Oh God*! It was Bruno Mackay, an MI6 officer Liz had run up against before. She hadn't seen him for several years but he hadn't changed at all in that time. Still the deep tan, the sculpted nose and mouth, the

beautifully cut suit that spoke of Savile Row. Mackay was clever, smooth, charming and infuriating in equal measure – and also, in Liz's experience, deeply untrustworthy. Now he caught her looking at him, and he stared back into her eyes with cold, professional detachment, until suddenly he gave an unmistakable wink, and his face broke into a wide grin.

Ignoring him, Liz turned her attention back towards the rest of the table, and realised that Mackay's intervention seemed to have flustered Bokus, who was now silent and frowning at the chairman. Clearing his throat, Mr Faceless remarked in hushed tones, 'Although it is not widely known, even among departments and agencies – and I would ask you all to protect this information for the present – there is a strong possibility that the President will attend the conference.'

Well, perhaps there is a chance of a breakthrough after all, thought Liz. The President certainly wouldn't be attending if this was going to be just another pointless summit. As if to confirm that this was something different, the door to the room opened and a man came in, walking briskly towards the chairman's seat.

He looked familiar to Liz, and she was at a loss for a moment until realising why. It was Sir Nicholas Pomfret. She had never seen him in the flesh, but recognised him from his many appearances on television and in the press. A saturnine figure, bald and dark-skinned, with coal-coloured eyebrows, a hawk nose and sharp, intelligent eyes, he was a near-legendary political Mr Fixit. But he also had a solid core of government experience; for many years he'd been a civil servant at the Home Office, before

becoming senior political adviser to the last prime minister but one.

He'd left government for a while, becoming first CEO then chairman of a leading investment bank. Then, after the election of the new Prime Minister, he'd returned to number 10 Downing Street. The PM had sent him on several overseas missions as his personal ambassador – soothing ruffled Saudi feathers when an arms deal was threatened by a hostile UK press, helping various British firms with difficulties doing business in Hong Kong under mainland Chinese control.

Most recently, he had been named as the new security *major-domo*, reporting directly to the PM. His appointment had caused muttering when announced, since he was a political veteran rather than a security professional. But long tenure in the Home Office meant he knew the ins and outs of both the police and the intelligence services and his status as the PM's personal advisor meant that he had influence with foreign heads of government, so he was now generally accepted as a good thing among that most closed of worlds, the security community.

His presence at this meeting suggested an urgency. Liz found herself sitting slightly more upright as, after a nod to the chairman, Sir Nicholas began to speak.

'Sorry to miss some of your proceedings, but I've just come from the Prime Minister. One of the things we've been talking about is this conference, and I wanted to say a few words to you before you go.'

He paused dramatically, knowing he now had everyone's attention. 'A month ago one might have been forgiven for

thinking the prospect of another conference on the Middle East distinctly . . . unpromising. With only the usual participants lined up, it was hard to see how any progress could be made.

'Today, however, I'm very pleased to say that things have changed. It now seems increasingly likely, thanks to prolonged and intensive lobbying by Her Majesty's Government, in which I was privileged to play a part, that *all* the relevant parties to the conflict in the Middle East are likely to be at Gleneagles. Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and even Iran have indicated their intention to participate.'

He's revelling in this, thought Liz, though there wasn't any doubting the importance of what he was saying. 'Gleneagles could be the breakthrough that's so desperately needed. It's a great opportunity, but if it fails, there won't be another peace initiative any time soon. I'm sure the seriousness of what I'm saying is apparent to us all.

'That's why I'm here. I must tell you in the utmost confidence that we have very recently received intelligence – highly classified intelligence – that an attempt will be made to abort the conference, possibly before it even begins. I can't be more precise than that for the moment – the intelligence is vague, but highly reliable. Those agencies who have a need to know will be briefed in greater detail by our colleagues in MI6. I can assure you that the threat is real. *Nothing* must be allowed to derail the talks. Thank you for your time'. He stood up. 'Now I have to get back next door.'

Later, when the meeting broke up, Liz looked out of the corner of her eye at Bruno, who was lounging back in his

chair, looking immensely self-satisfied. It wasn't hard to guess why. How typical, she thought, feeding intelligence in at the top for maximum dramatic impact, rather than briefing colleagues in the normal way.

Making her way downstairs, through the familiar glass security doors and out into Whitehall, Liz found herself in the company of the younger of the two CIA men, the Ivy Leaguer with the horn-rimmed glasses and the striped tie. It had been raining and there were puddles on the ground. He was wearing a Burberry raincoat that looked absurdly new.

Smiling, he held his hand out. 'Miles Brookhaven,' he said in a soft voice, his accent mid-Atlantic. The afternoon traffic was light and they had the wide pavement to themselves. 'Going this way?' he said, indicating the gates of the Horse Guards building, twenty yards up Whitehall.

She hadn't intended to, but found herself reflecting that she could just as well get back to Thames House by walking across Horseguards Parade as by going down Whitehall and getting involved with the complicated crossings around Parliament. They turned into the gates together, passed the sentries in their boxes and emerged through the dark archway into the sunshine reflected off the red gravel of the parade ground.

'Your Sir Nicholas,' Brookhaven said appreciatively. 'Is that what they mean by a mandarin?'

Liz laughed. 'Strictly speaking, a mandarin is a civil servant. He was a mandarin once, but now he's got himself a profile – these days he's a politico.'

Brookhaven was walking quickly. A shade under six feet,

he was lean and athletic-looking. He seemed to glide effortlessly over the pavement and though Liz was hardly a dawdler, she found it hard to keep up. Out of the corner of her eye, as they crossed the gravel, she saw Bruno Mackay climbing into the driving seat of a flashy-looking car. How on earth had he got one of the special passes that entitled him to park there? In fact, how had he got out there so quickly?

'What do you make of what he said?'

'Sir Nicholas?' Liz shrugged. 'Oh, I think we have to take him at his word, for the time being anyway. No doubt Six will pass on the intelligence when it's been assessed. There's nothing we or anyone can do until we know more.'

She changed the subject. 'How long have you been stationed here?'

'Just two months,' he said, before adding quickly, 'but I know England well. My school had an exchange programme with a school here. I had a lovely time and I've often been back.'

Lovely – not usually a favourite word of the American male. Brookhaven was an Anglophile, thought Liz, and keen to show it. They were always quick to tell you that they knew the place.

'Which school?' she asked.

They had reached the corner of Birdcage Walk and Parliament Square. Brookhaven pointed almost directly ahead of them.

'Right here. Westminster,' he said. They stopped. 'I'm off that way,' he added, gesturing up Birdcage Walk.

'Right. I'll see more of you, no doubt.'

'I hope so.' He smiled quickly and walked off.

Liz had intended to skirt Queen Elizabeth Hall and then set off diagonally towards the far corner of the square, but on an impulse she continued straight ahead, passed the front of Westminster Abbey and walked through the arch into the great courtyard of Westminster School. On the green in front of her a group of uniformed fifteen-year-olds was casually throwing a ball around. To her mind there was something maddeningly upper-class about the scene, something that she knew she could never quite understand or like.

Feeling somehow out of place, out of time, she crossed the court, out through the tiny gate at the far end and into the sunlit maze of eighteenth-century houses that led her out opposite the House of Lords and the long, tapering wedge of a little park, convenient for peers of the realm and members of parliament to take the air. She remembered the fateful afternoon when she'd sat on one of its benches with Charles Wetherby, and tried calmly to relate to him her discovery that the thing he had feared most – a traitor working in their midst – was true. He'd taken the news with an outward show of calm, but she'd known how shaken he must have been.

She was thinking of that now when a car pulled up abruptly on the street right next to her. It was the Mercedes 450 cabriolet – a low-slung sports model, silver with an amazingly loud ketchup-coloured top – that she'd seen Bruno Mackay getting into on Horseguards Parade.

Her heart sank as she watched the front passenger window slide down. The driver leaned over.

'Want a lift?' he shouted out.

'No thanks,' she said, as cheerily as she could. The only way to deal with the man, she had learned before, was to make it clear that nothing he said mattered at all.

'Come on, Liz, lighten up. I'm going right by your building.'

'I'm going to walk, Bruno,' she said firmly, as a van started to hoot its horn in protest at the hold-up. 'You go on. If you stay there much longer you'll get arrested.'

He shrugged. 'Suit yourself. But don't think I didn't see you back there consorting with the enemy.' He said this with the mock-reproof of a headmaster.

'Nonsense,' said Liz, tempted to use a stronger word. 'Miles Brookhaven isn't the enemy. He and I have a "special relationship".' And she walked on, certain that for once she had left Bruno at a loss for words.

THREE

That morning the Reverend Thomas Willoughby hoped for rain. Earlier in the year, during the flooding in May, he had wanted never to see rain again. But now in late summer the grass had curled and died, yellowed from the heat and drought, and the gnarled old apple tree in the front of the churchyard looked pained, its carpet of wizened windfall fruit picked at by hovering wasps.

When he had first moved from his Norfolk village parish to St Barnabas, on the edge of the City of London, Willoughby had feared the worst – endless traffic and noise, vagrants, a secular culture that would have no time for his religion. Yet St Barnabas had been a surprise. It had turned out to be a refuge from the fast-paced urban world. Built by an anonymous student of Hawksmoor, the church had the baroque grace of the master, and a characteristic towering spire. It was just a stone's throw from the bustle of the old Smithfield meat market and the thrusting steel and glass of the world's greatest financial marketplace.

But the church figured on no tourist map and was visited only by the occasional *aficionados*, working their way through a weighty architectural guidebook. It was almost wilfully obscure, tucked away at the end of a small side

street of eighteenth-century terraced houses, not yet gentrified. 'Bit of a backwater, really,' the previous incumbent had said on Willoughby's first visit, then pointed at the small graveyard in one corner of the churchyard. 'It's been full up since Victorian times. That's one service you won't have to conduct.'

Like any city church, St Barnabas was locked overnight. Approaching the vestry door, the Reverend Willoughby was just reaching for his keys when he noticed that the door was already open. Not again, he thought, his heart sinking. The church had been burgled the autumn before – the collection box stolen, along with a silver jug that had been left in the vestry. Worse, though, had been the vandalism: two brass rubbings that hung on the chancel wall had been hurled to the floor, their frames smashed to smithereens; one of the ornate family memorial plaques had been badly chipped by a hammer blow; and – he shuddered at the indignity of it – human excrement deposited on a pew.

He entered the vestry apprehensively, confident the intruders would be long gone but worried about the destruction they might have left behind. So he was surprised to find the room untouched – the collection box (kept empty now) in its proper place, the cassocks hanging on their hooks; even the Communion articles sat on the dresser apparently unmolested.

Still anxious, he went cautiously through into the choir, dreading what he might find. But no, the altar stood unharmed, its white marble shining in a shaft of sunlight, and the delicately carved wooden pulpit seemed undamaged. He looked up and saw to his relief that the stained glass

window in the chancel still had all its panes. Willoughby looked around, mystified, searching for signs of an intruder. There were none.

Yet there was a smell in the air, faint at first, then stronger as he moved down the centre aisle to the front of the church. Something pungent. Fish? No, more like meat. But Smithfield's days as a meat market were over. It was being converted into smart apartments. And this was meat gone off. Ugh. The odour intensified as he examined the pews on either side of the aisle, all pristine, the kneelers neatly hanging on the backs of the wooden benches, hymnals in the low racks on every row.

Puzzled, he walked down to the front door of the church. Lifting the heavy iron bar that secured the massive oak door from inside, he swung it open, letting light flood into the nave. It was as he turned away, blinking from the sudden harsh sunlight, that he saw something odd. It was next to the large wooden box (a vestment chest originally, he'd always supposed) in which the extra hymn books were stored. Two or three times a year – at Christmas, or for the memorial service of a local dignitary – the church was filled to capacity, and then these spare books were pressed into service. But now they lay in a higgledy-piggledy heap on the ash-coloured paving stones.

He walked cautiously over to the pile, wrinkling his nose at the smell, which was almost overpowering now. In front of the box he hesitated; for the first time cold fingers of fear touched his spine. *Trust in the Lord* he told himself, as with both hands he slowly lifted the heavy oak lid.

He found himself looking at a young man's face – a white

face, an English face perhaps, in its twenties, with thinnish blond hair combed straight back. It would have been a conventional, perfectly usual sort of face, except that the eyes bulged like a gruesome parrot's, and the mouth was set in a rictus of agony, lips stretched wide and tight over the teeth. The tendons of the throat strained against the skin of the neck like tautened cords. There was no question: he was dead.

As Willoughby stepped back, horrified and frightened, he saw that the man's legs had been bent at the knee, presumably to cram him into the chest. The knees were pressed together, drawn up almost to the chin, held by a cat's cradle of rope that encircled his throat, then passed down his back and around his legs again. The man had been trussed like a chicken, though since both his hands were gripping one end of the rope, it looked as if he had trussed himself. If that were so, who had put him in the box?

FOUR

In her fourth-floor office at Thames House, in the counter espionage branch, Liz was telling Peggy Kinsolving about yesterday's experiences at the Old Bailey.

'Gosh, thank goodness it was you, not me,' said Peggy, shuddering. Peggy had also played a key role in the investigation that had brought Neil Armitage into court.

It had been over a year since the young desk officer had transferred from MI6 to MI5. After leaving Oxford with a good 2:1 in English and vague scholarly ambitions, Peggy had taken a job in a private library in Manchester. There, with few visitors using the library, she had been free to pursue her own researches, which was what she had thought she wanted to do. But the solitary days and evenings soon began to pall and when, quite by chance, she had learned of a job as a researcher in a specialised government department in London, she had applied. At the age of twenty-four, still with the round spectacles and freckles that had made her family call her Bobbity Bookworm, Peggy had found herself working for MI6.

Peggy was a girl who thought for herself. She had seen enough of life to take no one at face value. But for Liz she felt something like . . . she had to admit it to herself –

something like hero-worship. Or was it heroine-worship? No, that didn't sound quite right. Liz was something Peggy would have liked to be. Whatever happened, she always seemed to know what to do. Liz didn't have to keep pushing her spectacles back up her nose whenever she got excited; she didn't wear spectacles. Liz was cool. But Peggy knew that Liz needed her, relied on her – and that was enough.

Peggy had applied to transfer to MI5 after working with Liz on a particularly sensitive case – a mole in the intelligence services – and though MI6 were not best pleased, MI5 had welcomed her with open arms. Studying her junior's eager face, Liz realised that Peggy now felt completely at ease in Thames House. She's one of us, she thought.

'When will we hear the verdict?' asked Peggy.

Liz looked at her watch. 'Any moment now, I should think.'

As if on cue, Charles Wetherby poked his head through the open door. Smiling at Peggy, he said to Liz, 'Armitage has got twelve years.'

'Quite right, too,' said Peggy with conviction.

'I suppose he'll serve about half, won't he?' asked Liz.

'Yes. He'll be retirement age by the time he gets out. How did it go in the Cabinet Office yesterday?'

'I was just writing it up. We had a guest appearance by Sir Nicholas Pomfret. Apparently there's something hot off the press from Six.'

Wetherby nodded. 'So I gather. I've just had a call from Geoffrey Fane. He's coming across in half an hour. I'd like you there.'

Liz raised an eyebrow. Fane was one of Wetherby's

counterparts at MI6, a complicated, intelligent and tricky man, primarily a Middle East specialist, but with a wide-ranging brief covering MI6's operations in the UK. She'd worked with him before and had come to realise that it was safest either not to sup with Geoffrey Fane at all or to do so with a long spoon.

Now Liz said, 'Why's he talking to us about this? Shouldn't it go to protective security?'

'Let's wait and see what he has to say,' said Wetherby calmly. 'You know the PM's pinning a lot on this conference. God knows what happens if it fails. I think the Middle East is in what the Americans call the Last Chance Saloon.'

'There were two men from Grosvenor at the meeting.'

'Was Andy Bokus one of them?'

'That's right.'

'Head of station. They call him Bokus the Bruiser,' said Wetherby with a smile.

'He had a sidekick with him, a guy called Brookhaven. He seemed rather nice.'

'Don't know him. See you shortly.'

'I'll be there,' said Liz. She paused a beat before asking, 'Is Fane coming on his own?'

'Yes. Why do you ask?'

She shrugged. 'He sent Bruno Mackay to the Cabinet Office meeting.'

Wetherby grimaced, then gave a wry smile. 'No, it's just Fane, thank God. He's hard enough to pin down without Mackay muddying the waters. See you in a bit, then.'

He went off down the corridor and Peggy left to return to her desk in the open-plan office.

What a relief to have Charles back in charge, Liz thought. Charles Wetherby, formerly director of counter terrorism, had spent several months earlier in the year on compassionate leave, looking after his two boys when his wife was thought to be dying from an incurable blood disease. At the same time, Liz had been transferred to the counter espionage branch, working for the dreadful Brian Ackers, a long-time Cold War warrior who couldn't get it into his head that the relationship with Russia had changed. Liz had had to manage Brian Ackers and Geoffrey Fane as well. That Irish business! She still shuddered at the thought. If Charles hadn't come back at the last minute it could have been the end of her. It was bad enough as it was. Anyway, Charles had taken Ackers's place, since his wife seemed to have turned another corner. It wasn't clear how ill she was – Charles never spoke about it.

Liz looked again at the summary report she had started to prepare the day before for her weekly meeting with Charles. A lot was going on: yet another pass had been made by a Russian intelligence officer, this time to a low-level clerk in the Foreign Office who had reported the contact straight away; an Iranian posing as a Saudi was suspected of trying to buy anti-tank weapons from a UK manufacturer; the numbers in the Chinese Embassy continued to grow suspiciously. She'd finish it tomorrow, she thought, as Charles phoned to tell her Fane had arrived.

She stood up and locked the file in her cupboard, running a quick hand through her hair, pulling down her jacket.

FIVE

Many years of working with Geoffrey Fane of MI6 had taught Wetherby self-control. He knew that however annoying Fane might be, with his lean, elegant figure, his well-cut suits, his languid air and above all his habit of dumping embarrassing situations on Charles at a late stage, the worst thing to do was to show irritation. Managing Geoffrey Fane was a fine art and Charles rather prided himself that he was as good at it as anyone.

That said, however, he had hoped that his move to counter espionage would mean seeing less of Fane, most of whose time was spent on Middle East issues, particularly terrorism. But now, after only a few weeks back at work, he found himself again gazing across his desk at Fane, who was reclining comfortably in one of the two padded chairs in Charles's office as they waited for Liz Carlyle.

Avoiding his visitor's eye, Charles looked over Fane's shoulder, through his office window at the wide view of the Thames at low tide with a bright sun scattering diamond sparkles across the small, receding waves. At least he had one thing to thank Brian Ackers for. Traditionally the director of counter espionage had one of the best offices in Thames House.

Ackers, in his curious, obsessive way, had turned his desk so that his back was to the view, and one of Charles's first changes had been to turn it round. After that, he had removed Ackers's lifelong collection of Sovietology from the bookshelves and replaced it with his own eclectic library, assembled over his years in the service. The one extravagance he still allowed himself was buying books and he had long since filled up all the space in the house near Richmond, which now had to accommodate the assorted possessions of his teenage sons as well as his and Joanne's.

The door of his office opened and Liz Carlyle came in, bringing, for Charles at least, a breath of fresh air and a noticeable lightening of the spirit. Charles had by now admitted to himself that an important part of the pleasure he got from his work came from the proximity of Liz. He found her deeply attractive – not just her appearance, her level gaze, her slim figure and her smooth, brown hair, but her straightforward, down to earth personality, her honesty and her quick intuition.

He thought she felt for him too, but she gave little away. He knew that she expected nothing of him and, while Joanne was alive, he could not expect anything from her. But that did not prevent the tinge of jealousy he always felt when he saw another man's attraction to her.

The two men stood up. 'Elizabeth,' said Fane warmly, shaking her hand. 'You're looking well.'

Charles was aware that Liz hated to be called Elizabeth and he suspected that Fane knew it too. He waited to see how she would react. Fane, with his sophistication and his style, was an attractive man; he was also divorced. But

Charles knew he was ruthless in pursuit of operational success and probably in his pursuit of women too. Liz and Fane had worked closely together in his absence on a case without a happy outcome for either. Charles, coming in at the end, had seen how it had shattered the confidence of both of them and in doing so had drawn them together. He hoped that Liz would be careful. Fane was not the man for her.

'Thank you, Geoffrey,' Liz said frostily as Charles waved her to the second chair in front of his desk.

'Liz, I thought you should hear what Geoffrey's just been telling me. It strikes me as rather important.'

Liz looked levelly at Fane, her eyes narrowing slightly with concentration.

Fane said, 'We've had an intriguing report from Cyprus. Our head of station there is Peter Templeton – he's been in the Middle East for years, so I don't think you'll have met him.' She shook her head. 'He's been running a very sensitively placed source for some time. It's someone who's given us excellent intelligence in the past.'

Fane paused again, hesitant, and Charles could see that not all of his old arrogance had returned; once, he would have known exactly what he would or wouldn't say.

Settling himself in his chair, Fane went on. 'This source has high-level access. The day before yesterday he called an urgent meeting with Templeton. What he had to say was rather concerning.'

And Fane related in economical fashion what Templeton had learned from his source – that two people in the UK were working to blacken the name of Syria and so to destroy

trust and wreck the peace conference. And that Syrian intelligence was going to move against them.

'And that,' said Fane, ending his account with a dramatic flourish of one cuffed wrist, 'is the reason I came to see you.'

No one spoke for a moment. Then Liz asked, 'Is this the threat Sir Nicholas Pomfret was talking about at the Cabinet Office?'

Fane nodded. 'Yes. Bruno told me Pomfret had addressed you all.' He smiled knowingly.

Charles was tapping his pencil on his notepad. He looked thoughtfully at Liz, who said, 'If it's a matter of protecting two people, that sounds like a job for the police, not us.'

'This is delicate source material, Elizabeth. It can't possibly be handed to the police,' replied Fane. 'Anyway, I'm not sure whom we should be protecting.'

'You said these two lives are at risk,' she responded.

He ignored the implication. 'This is about the future of the Middle East. If there is some sort of plot to disrupt the conference, and the Syrians snuff it out, who are we to complain?'

Typical of Fane, thought Charles, and seeing Liz's hackles rising he spoke quickly to pre-empt her response.

'Did this source have any sense of what these two are planning to do? Are they working together? Who is controlling them? And above all, how did the Syrians find out about this plot?'

'I've told you everything we know, Charles, and I've given you the names.' Charles pushed a paper across his desk to

Liz, while Fane leaned back in his chair. Fane said, 'It's over to you now.' And as if the ensuing silence confirmed that the ball had been placed in MI5's court, a smile bordering on the smug settled on Fane's lips.

Charles ignored him and started tapping his pencil again, his eyes drifting over to the window and its view of the Thames. 'It could just be an old-fashioned set- up. God knows, we've seen them before, especially from the Middle East.'

Liz spoke up. 'But what would the point be, Charles? I mean, other than sending us on a wild-goose chase, why would anyone want to plant disinformation of this sort?' Unusually, Charles noted, she was arguing on Fane's side.

Fane snapped, 'They wouldn't.'

'Possibly,' Charles said. 'But whoever told them may have had their own motives – or some reason we can't imagine at present.'

'In my experience, Charles, fathoming motives in the Middle East is the equivalent of building sandcastles.' Fane was emphatic. 'You can erect the most impressive structure, and then one big wave can wash it all away.'

Charles suppressed a sharp reply and Liz broke in. 'These two names,' she said, looking at the paper, 'do we know anything about them?'

'Not a lot,' said Fane.

'Sami Veshara – well, I think we can say he's not Anglo-Saxon.'

'Lebanese perhaps,' said Charles. He added drily, 'Curiouser and curiouser.'

Fane shrugged again. He's being purposely irritating, thought Charles.

Liz went on, 'And Chris Marcham. That has a familiar ring to it – or is it just because it sounds English?'

Suddenly Fane looked slightly flustered. 'Actually, that's a name we do know something about. He's a journalist, specialises in the Middle East. Freelance now; used to be on the staff of the *Sunday Times*. We have talked to him in the past. Not often. Bit of an odd fish, frankly.'

'Why's that?' asked Liz.

'He made his name reporting first-hand on the Falangist massacres in the South Lebanese refugee camps. For a moment, the world was his oyster. He's extraordinarily knowledgeable about the Palestinians, and one of the few Western journalists all their factions seem to trust. He could have become another Robert Fisk, but something seemed to hold him back. He doesn't write that much nowadays.'

'Personal issues?'

'I don't know,' said Fane. 'He's a loner – no wife that we know of. He travels a lot – must be out there at least half the year.'

'We should be able to find him easily enough.'

'Yes, I'd suggest you start with him.'

'Start?'

Charles caught Liz's outraged gaze. But he had already made up his mind. 'Geoffrey and I have agreed this story needs looking into, if only to establish there's nothing to it. I want you to do the looking.' He shrugged and knew that when she calmed down Liz would realise that he had no choice. To be told that people, operating in the UK to disrupt a peace conference, were also targets for assassination

required some response – even if, as he suspected, it all proved to be absolute balls.

Fane's smug expression made it obvious that whether he was passing along a ticking bomb or a damp squib, he was in the clear now.

'When do you want me to begin on this?' asked Liz, knowing the answer.

'Right away,' Charles told her and added what he hoped would be a consolation. 'Have Peggy Kinsolving help you.'

Liz suppressed a laugh. She knew Fane had been irked when Peggy had switched allegiances from MI6 to Thames House.

But Fane seemed unfazed. 'Good idea,' he declared. 'She's a clever girl.' He stood up. 'In the meantime, I'll ask Templeton to try and get more out of this source of ours.' He grinned at Liz. 'It will be good to work with you again, Elizabeth.'

'It's Liz,' she said curtly.

'Of course it is.' Fane was still smiling. 'How could I forget?'

Honours even, I think, said Charles to himself as Fane left the room.