Harriet Crawley has been a journalist, writer, and art dealer, worked in television and radio, and stood for the Westminster and European Parliaments. For almost twenty years Harriet had one foot in Moscow where she launched a technical publishing business for a Russian oil and gas company. She speaks five languages and this is her fifth book.

THE TRANSLATOR

Harriet Crawley

BITTER LEMON PRESS
LONDON

BITTER LEMON PRESS

First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by
Bitter Lemon Press, 47 Wilmington Square, London WC1X 0ET

www.bitterlemonpress.com

© Harriet Crawley, 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

The moral right of Harriet Crawley has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

HB ISBN 978–1–913394–80-6
EBook 978–1–913394–82-0

Typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

To my beloved son, Spencer,
who believed from the start and saw me over the line.

In memory of Julian, who lit up my life.

Ищи ветра в поле, а правду на дне морском.

Seek the wind in the field and the truth at the bottom of the sea.

A TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN PROVERB

1

Clive was panting heavily as he reached the top of a peak in the Scottish Highlands. Sweat streamed from his forehead to his upper lip where he tasted its saltiness. The heart monitor was tight and damp around his chest. He slipped the backpack from his shoulder and pulled out his phone to check his performance. In case he had forgotten, the phone reminded him it was Saturday, 9 September 2017, and on that morning his running time had been 2 hours 42 minutes. Average heart rate: 152 bpm. Calories burnt: 2,100. Not bad for a man of forty-one, and every bit as good as last year.

For Clive Franklin, hiking up a Scottish Munro in September had become an addiction, something he did every year when the craving for stillness and solitude became overwhelming. And here he was on the summit of Na Gruagaichean, surrounded on all sides by jagged Highland peaks, triumphant, king of the castle, holding his ground, wind blasting in his face. There were fierce white clouds scudding above his head, so close he could almost touch them, and an eagle wheeling high above the purple heather, which seemed on fire in the morning sunlight. His legs were scratched to ribbons. Far below, he could see Loch Leven and the village of Kinlochleven, where, with a bit of luck, he would spend his Saturday evening in The Green Man, watching Mollie Finch play her cello.

Clive had plucked a broad leaf and was mopping the trickle of blood from his calf when he heard a high-pitched tinkle coming from the pocket of his backpack. The sound filled him with dread and had no place on Na Gruagaichean. He ignored the ringtone for as long as he could until there was no mistaking the frantic whirring of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" in all its dizzy gaiety. On his phone he saw the words: No caller ID. I don't *have* to take this call, he told himself. I can choose *not to pick up*. Then, with a deep sigh, he pressed "accept", and, as he did so, the wind dropped; the reception was good.

"Where in God's name have you been, Franklin? I've been calling you for the past two hours and forty minutes!"

"Who is this?" Clive said, knowing right away that it had to be some nerd at the FCO who had tracked him down and was about to spoil his day.

"Martin Hyde. Prime Minister's Office."

"I'm afraid there must be some mistake," said Clive. "I work for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office."

Clive knew he was being pompous by calling the department by its full name, but he was irritated.

"No mistake, I assure you."

"Then why the 'No caller ID'?"

"Fair point. Stay where you are. I'll ring you right back."

Clive stood facing the wind, noticing a bank of dark clouds on the horizon. His phone rang again.

"There!" said the peremptory voice. "Now you have my number. Right, let's get on with it. You've been seconded to the Prime Minister's Office. It says here you're one of the best interpreters in the country."

Clive winced at the word "interpreter". He thought of himself as a translator, for arcane reasons of his own, but it hardly seemed the right moment, standing on the side of a mountain

in the Highlands, the wind ripping across his face, to go into detail.

"Russian into English," shouted Hyde.

"And vice versa," Clive shouted back, thinking of Mollie and her flaming red hair.

"Yes, vice versa. That's what it says here."

"With all due respect, Mr Hyde. I'm on a sabbatical. With three months to go."

"You *were* on a sabbatical," said Hyde, spitting out words in bursts. "We need you. Important meeting. Tomorrow. In Moscow. With President Serov. We're flying out tonight. Not using embassy interpreters. Taking our own team."

So that's it, thought Clive. My day is ruined. And my evening with Mollie Finch, watching her play Brahms as if her life depended on it. Or is it?

"Mr Hyde," said Clive. "With all due respect you really *don't* need me. You've got Martin Sterndale. He's first-class."

"He may be first-class," Hyde snapped, "but he's lying in a coma in St Mary's, Paddington. He was knocked off his bicycle at seven o'clock this morning in Hyde Park. Franklin, your country needs you! Leg it down that Scottish Munro of yours and be on the Kinlochleven quayside at two o'clock this afternoon. A helicopter will pick you up."

Clive scowled as he heard these instructions.

"I'm sorry but… how… how… how do you know where I am?"

The wind dropped suddenly, and so did Hyde's voice.

"Don't be a bloody fool, Franklin. We always know where you are."

Whatever they say, going down is much easier. Clive fairly skipped through the heather. Now and then he would reach out to touch the purple flowers. They were part of his childhood,

part of him. He thought of his father who had first brought him to the Highlands when he was six years old. And then he thought of Hyde and what lay ahead: an end to his peaceful, productive existence in the company of his favourite Russian writer, Anton Chekhov; an end to the solitude he loved. He would step out of the shadows and into the limelight, and the chaos, and the bad temper of international affairs. He knew exactly what he was going back to. Clive had served God knows how many Foreign Secretaries, attended dozens of top-level meetings, from Helsinki to Hangzhou. He was a Russian specialist: English into Russian or vice versa, whatever the occasion demanded. At a pinch he could do the same in French, but French specialists were two a penny, and, in any case, Russian was his thing. He loved the Cyrillic alphabet, the byzantine grammar, the soporific, sensuous sound of the Russian language. And once, he had loved a Russian woman.

By one o'clock Clive was back in Kinlochleven, a village of twenty cottages with a pub and the B&B on the waterfront where he was staying. He stopped for a moment and listened to the soft sound of water lapping against the quay and looked at the glittering reflection of boats on the choppy surface. This place had been kind to him. He'd found inspiration everywhere – in the Highlands, in the sky, in the heather. He was working better than ever, long hours, sometimes late into the night. And now this slow, pensive life was being snatched away. He felt like shouting out, "Leave me alone! Let me be!"

Back in his lodgings Clive caught sight of himself in the hall mirror. He was a tall, long-limbed man with a mop of black curly hair, melancholy dark eyes and a face bright red from the hike. He was staring at his crumpled T-shirt and the glistening skin on his face and arms, when a thought occurred to him which just might keep him right here in Kinlochleven. He

had nothing to wear! Just hiking boots and shorts and an old T-shirt, one pair of jeans and a sweater. How could he meet the Russian president looking like this? Clive picked up his phone and called the last number.

"Mr Hyde?"

"Franklin?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else. I only have hiking clothes. Nothing smart."

"We have everything you need, Franklin. Shirts, ties, suits: the lot."

"But… I can't just wear any old clothes. I mean… How do I know they're the right size?"

"They are, Franklin," Hyde said wearily. "The clothes will fit you perfectly. Trust me."

"And my insulin? I can't go without my insulin. I'm a diabetic, you know."

"I know everything about you, Franklin. We've got your insulin. A month's supply, but of course you won't be away that long. A week at most."

Only a week! Clive's mood lifted. His cottage was rented until the end of the month, so he could give the owner of the B&B a quick call, explain he would be away for a few days, leave his belongings behind and send a WhatsApp to Mollie.

"A week," said Clive. "After which I can go back to my sabbatical. Is that agreed?"

"Agreed. Everything's settled then. Oh, and thank you for coming on board at such short notice."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Let's not get existential," said Hyde, in a new, lighter voice. "There is just one other thing… *Why* are you on a sabbatical? I mean, what on earth *for*?"

Clive bridled. The question was an intrusion into his most private world. Still, it deserved an answer.

"I took a sabbatical," Clive intoned solemnly, as if he were saying a prayer, "to translate twenty-seven short stories by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov."

"Good grief," Hyde said under his breath. "The ultimate student of the human soul. Is that also you, Franklin? Mankind in all its complexity. Et cetera. Well, perhaps your insights will come in handy at the negotiating table… We shall see."

The quayside at Kinlochleven was crowded with locals and holidaymakers with children, all curious to see what the noise was about, pointing up at the whirling blades of the AgustaWestland 109S as it landed nervily on the end of the jetty. As the rotor blades came to a stop, an FCO staff officer unbuckled himself from the co-pilot's seat and jumped to the ground. He was a jovial, stocky man, and he introduced himself as John, before taking Clive's holdall and canvas book bag and putting them into the side hold.

"Seems a pity to drag you away," said John, glancing down the quay at the neat row of white houses, and then the sunlight dancing on the loch. "Just a formality, but I need to see some ID. Security is super tight these days."

"My passport's in London. In my flat. 18 Gilbert Place. Behind the British Museum. How do we pick it up?"

"We don't," said John. "Driving licence?"

"I don't drive."

"Not a problem." John took a close-up of Clive's face on his phone, then turned away. While John whispered urgently into his phone, Clive took a moment to admire the flying machine: snow white with a red stripe banded in dark blue running along the side. Suddenly John spun round.

"All good. You're clear," he said with a broad grin. "Not everyone gets to fly in this little bird, I can tell you. It's reserved for VVIPs. In case you don't know, that's Very Very Important

People." As he spoke, John looked dubiously at Clive, at his tousled hair and crumpled clothes. "For whatever reason, you're getting the red-carpet treatment, my friend."

John pushed back the small crowd of curious holidaymakers and locals who were standing too close to the helicopter, then he showed Clive into the passenger seat at the back and told him to buckle up and put on his headset with its built-in microphone. Finally, John jumped into the cockpit alongside the pilot, and, against the roar of the rotor blades, he issued one last instruction.

"Enjoy the ride."

2

Would it really be just a week? Clive wondered, as they refuelled in Carlisle and then flew up into a soft September sky, the sun low on the horizon. At a certain point you have to stop worrying, he told himself. Let events take their course. Think of something else.

Before he knew it, there it was, right below, York Minster, rising up like an imperious sea monster above the low buildings of the city; no central spire, instead a massive tower proclaiming power and faith to the medieval world.

"I grew up in York," Clive said into his microphone, against the deafening shudder of the helicopter.

"Lucky you," said John.

Not really, thought Clive.

He could still hear it: the sound of his own ten-year-old treble voice soaring up effortlessly into the highest reaches of the Minster's nave as he sang solo, his eyes fixed on the floating hands of his father, Barry Franklin, choirmaster and conductor, who now and then nodded with approval. Those were the happy years. Later, it was all downhill. His mother developed Parkinson's, and it was agony to watch her decline, inch by inch. She was gentle and patient to the last, but unable to move and almost without a voice. The letter from Cambridge offering him a place at Trinity arrived the day of his mother's funeral. "I know you'll get in," she had whispered, the day before she died. "I believe in you."

As the helicopter left York Minster far behind, Clive stared down at the land he loved, his England, at the patchwork landscape of harvested fields and yellow straw stubble; at the villages with their country churches and narrow spires pointing like needles into the balmy late-summer air; and here and there, on a village green, he spotted tiny white figures playing a last game of cricket before the end of the season.

Time to shift gear, get your head into the right place, Clive told himself, as he leant back in his seat and shut his eyes. So long, Kinlochleven. Hello, Moscow. How long had it been since he had set foot in the place? Two years? Really? Two whole years?

In Moscow, Clive had been a diplomat, a member of Her Majesty's FCO. On paper, he was married; in practice, he was getting a divorce and lived alone in a bachelor flat. At the British Embassy, Clive had held the rank of second secretary, then political councillor. And then nothing. After Moscow, he announced that he no longer wanted a career in the diplomatic service, but would be happy to keep working for the FCO as a Russian interpreter and translator. The FCO gave him work around the clock: a G20 here, a G8 there, a meeting of foreign ministers, the Olympic Committee, the Winter Olympic Committee, the UN climate-change conferences, until he thought he was going mad and demanded a sabbatical.

Of course, the job had its perks. At the last G20 in Hangzhou a year ago, Clive remembered how exhilarating it felt to be sitting in a room with the most powerful men and women in the world. President Serov had shaken his hand and congratulated him on his Russian. Clive was flattered, just as he was flattered that morning when Hyde told him he'd been seconded to the Prime Minister's Office. This was a first. He'd never been seconded before. Sharpen up, he told himself.

As the helicopter came into land at RAF Northolt, the sun hit the horizon and turned the sky blood red. On the tarmac,

Clive was met by a young man in a bow tie and a three-piece suit who introduced himself as "George Lynton, from the Prime Minister's Office", and who insisted on taking Clive's holdall as he led the way to the VIP terminal. Passing through various checkpoints, he brandished a special pass with an air of self-importance, while Clive was searched and searched again.

"All very tedious," said George, who was no more than twenty-five years old and yet seemed to belong to another century, with his exaggerated self-confidence, languid gestures and upper-class accent which didn't seem quite real. Clive decided within minutes, in fact, that George's posh drawl had been learnt as you learn a foreign language, laboriously and with intent.

The VIP terminal was almost empty, except for two separate groups of people huddled together in different corners of the lounge. In one group, Clive spotted several people of Chinese origin.

"Changing room number one is all yours," said George. "You'll find a new set of clothes on the hangers. Everything else is in the suitcase, including a washbag with toothpaste, razor, the lot. And a four-week supply of insulin. Humalog."

"*Four* weeks?"

"That was my idea. They said two weeks, and I thought: Why not four? Better safe than sorry," George said breezily. "Have a shower. Oh, and anything you leave behind will be washed and cleaned. All part of the service. And no hurry. We'll be here for a couple of hours."

Clive knew better than to ask who was on the flight, so instead he said:

"When do we take off? And in what?"

"In the RAF Voyager. There's a special cabin up front for the big cheese, whoever that may be. The front twenty rows are all pretty luxurious, and the rest is fairly normal. We're at the

back, of course. As soon as I get a departure time, I'll let you know. Newspapers are over there by the bar. Oh, and before I forget, you'll need this."

George handed Clive his brand-new passport, issued that same day with last year's photograph, which was kept on file at the Foreign Office.

Clive opened the stiff pages of the burgundy passport and was relieved to see that he'd kept his diplomatic status.

"Diplomatic passport," George confirmed. "Could come in handy, especially in Russia."

George tried a tired smile, then gave up and handed over a neat little stack of business cards. "These are for you. Sir Martin said they might come in handy."

"*Sir* Martin?"

"Yes… You didn't know? How odd… You didn't google him?"

"No time," said Clive, staring at the business card.

CLIVE FRANKLIN
Translator
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

"I was told it had to be 'translator' and not 'interpreter'," said George. "Any reason?"

"Yes," Clive said, looking at George, at his Adam's apple straining against the white shirt and cobalt-blue tie. "The accepted wisdom is that you're either an interpreter who interprets speech, or a translator who translates text. But in Russian there's only one word for this skill: *perevodchik*. Translator. You're either an audio translator, *ustny perevodchik*, or a written translator, *pismenny perevodchik*. I'm both. So 'translator' suits me best. Does that make sense?"

"Sort of," said George, who was staring at Clive as if he were a rare specimen of butterfly.

In the changing room, Clive opened the small suitcase and found three neatly folded white shirts, an assortment of socks and boxers, a pair of jeans, three T-shirts, a couple of casual shirts and two sweaters in sober colours, dark blue and dark grey. He liked them both. On a hanger was a Marks and Spencer suit, which fitted perfectly. He took a shower, put on the jeans, a shirt and a sweater and emerged, feeling fresh and thirsty. He was helping himself to a glass of Rioja when George reappeared and asked if everything was all right. "Perfect," said Clive, and he held up his glass, inviting the young man to join him for a drink. George muttered he was on duty, then glanced around the lounge to see that he was not needed elsewhere before pouring himself half a glass of red wine and letting slip that he'd never been to Russia and was, well, quite excited. Meanwhile, Clive pulled out his laptop and googled Martin Hyde.

"He spent twenty years in MI6," said Clive, looking straight at George.

"Yes. And?"

"You know what they say…"

"No, what do they say?"

"Once in MI6, always in MI6."

"Really? Well, these days Sir Martin is special adviser to the PM on Russian affairs."

There was a blankness on George's face which told Clive everything he needed to know: this man was one hundred per cent loyal. Any leaks from the Prime Minister's Office were not coming from George Lynton.

"Tell me about yourself," said Clive, trying another tack. "Where are you from?"

"Meaning?"

"Born. Where were you born?"

"Wales. Anglesey. Famous for sheep."

"And once upon a time you had a strong Welsh accent?"

"I did… I had a very strong Welsh accent… How did you know?"

"It's still there, buried under your very proper English vowels."

"Really?" said George, suddenly flustered. "I thought I'd covered my tracks. I dumped the Welsh when I was at Oxford, that first summer… That's when I decided to try for the Civil Service and this friend of mine, Rose, well, she's sharp, and she told me I sounded like a provincial Welsh git, and to ignore all the stuff about diversity and inclusion, because if I was to have even the faintest chance of passing the exams, then I needed to get my tongue round those cut-glass English vowels. So, I did."

"How?"

"From the telly. Tom Bradby and a few others."

George got to his feet, twisting his neck as if his collar were too tight. Clive could sense the young man was embarrassed at having divulged so much.

"For Russia, we take no personal devices," George said, once again his cool self. "So, before you board, you'll be asked to hand over your mobile and laptop. MI6 insists. It's a bore, I know, but everything will be waiting for you when you get back. The embassy will give you a new mobile, nothing fancy. Pay as you go. But it'll do the job, and if you need a laptop, just ask the embassy for one. Anything else I can do for you? No? Well, if you'll excuse me…"

Clive watched as George drifted off to another part of the lounge, to make himself useful to another set of people. He opened the contacts app on his phone and scribbled down a few numbers, then typed "Meduza" into Google. It was time to get up to speed with the latest news in Russia and find out what was left of the political opposition. Clive had moved onto the Yandex news bulletins to get the Kremlin take on the world,

when something made him look up, and he saw a nervous George Lynton holding open the door into the lounge for Mrs Maitland, the third female prime minister of the United Kingdom. Everyone stood up, including Clive.

Clive had never seen Martha Maitland in real life and was surprised how small she was, and how smart, in a well-cut burgundy suit. He watched with admiration as this petite woman in her fifties worked the room, exuding energy and optimism, her chief of staff by her side, while minions fussed about, introducing the prime minister to various people in the lounge. One man stood apart, tall, broad shouldered, with a strong jaw line and thick reddish-brown hair with white tufts at the temples. He came in with the prime minister but distanced himself at once and headed straight for the bar, where he poured himself a neat whisky. Clive knew at once: this had to be Martin Hyde.

It was Clive's turn to shake hands with the prime minister, who had a very direct stare.

"Mr Franklin, can I say how grateful I am that you interrupted your sabbatical to come on this trip? Sir Martin will brief you on the flight."

"I am delighted to be of service, Prime Minister," said Clive, and he meant it. As he stood face to face with his prime minister, he felt a solemn sense of duty. What had Hyde said? Your country needs you. Well, thought Clive, here I am.

Sir Martin Hyde stepped forward, hand out. Clive noticed that he wore cufflinks, and that his eyes were the palest blue and as hard as pack ice.

"Good to meet you, Franklin. I like to put a face to a voice. Franklin likes Chekhov," Hyde added, looking at the faces around him.

"Doesn't everyone?" said the prime minister, with that easy charm which, according to the press, had contributed greatly to her unexpected victory.

Clive had followed the election in the first month of his sabbatical. At the time, journalists across the board had agreed that Martha Maitland was more than the sum of her parts: a widow with centre-left leanings, she believed in God (she was an Anglican) and had a rebellious teenage son who had been expelled from school for taking drugs. That was her trump card, Clive recalled. The moment the scandal broke, Mrs Maitland's ratings went up by twenty per cent. Every parent in the country was sympathetic, and millions voted for her. So did Clive, but for a different reason. He was tired of men destroying the planet and murdering their fellow human beings. He voted for Martha Maitland because she was a woman.

It was almost midnight when the RAF Voyager took to the air, heading due east. The prime minister and her team sat in the forward section of the aeroplane, shielded by a beige curtain. Clive and George sat at the back, but, as soon as the seat belt signs were switched off, George got up and left, only to return moments later.

"Sir Martin invites you to join him. Won't take long. Quick briefing."

Martin Hyde was sitting in a business class seat in front of a table, his hand holding a glass of neat malt whisky. The surface of the table was cluttered with papers and files.

"Sit down," he said, pointing to the empty seat in front of him. "Drink?"

"Water's fine, thank you," said Clive, who'd already had a couple of glasses of Rioja and needed to keep a clear head.

"Suit yourself," said Hyde. "I want to apologize for being rather brusque on the telephone this afternoon. We needed to get hold of you in a hurry." He took a gulp of his whisky and leant back against the headrest of his seat.

"This trip is… how shall I put it? Unexpected. A whim of our dear prime minister. She wants to deliver her message to President Serov face to face, eyeball to eyeball. And why not? Things between our two countries could hardly be worse, except when it comes to the arts. In matters cultural, we are still the best of friends. By the way, this meeting is hardly costing the taxpayer a penny. It's a stop-over on the way to China. After the meeting tomorrow, the PM gets back on this plane and heads for Beijing. As for you, well, I'd be most grateful if you could stay in Moscow for the rest of the week and join our trade negotiations at the Foreign Ministry, which are going nowhere. Perhaps our people are losing the plot? Or just missing something? I think it's time we got a new slant on these talks, and you seem to be just the man for the job. You probably know this already, but Monday's a holiday when Moscow celebrates its eight hundred and seventieth birthday, so you'll have the day off. The trade talks resume on Tuesday." Hyde let out a deep sigh and leant back in his seat. "I'm not asking for the moon… Or perhaps I am?" Hyde was now bolt upright and staring at Clive. "As an interpreter —"

"Translator," Clive cut in. "If you don't mind. I know it's not the usual terminology but I —"

Hyde waved a hand, to indicate that he could not care less about the explanation.

"As a translator," Hyde resumed, "you're in an exceptional position, because… how to put this? You're invisible. No one notices you. No one remembers you. You melt into the background and stay there. From where you can watch and listen. And who knows what you might hear?"

"I'm not a spy, Sir Martin. I'm a translator."

"Yes, but you *are* ready to help, are you not?" Hyde said, urgently. "We need help, Franklin. We need it badly. It's all hands on deck."

"Of course, I'm ready to help, but, with all due respect, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm about to tell you. For the past few months, the Russians have been putting up dozens of new micro communications satellites. Each one is less than a thousand kilos in weight and about two metres in diameter. We don't have a precise number, but we think they've put up at least eighty. It could be more. Why? Our Ambassador – good man, Luke Marden – has put out feelers. Oh, say the Russians – and this is all over the Russian press by the way – we need new communications satellites, because we're such a big country. Must get fast broadband to Siberia, or some such rubbish. As far as I can see, even the *FT* has swallowed the propaganda." Hyde leant forward and tapped the pink paper on the table in front of him. "There's an article in here that goes on and on about the *size* of Russia. Six-point-eight million square miles, seventy times the size of the United Kingdom. Russia, the biggest country in the world even *after* the break-up of the Soviet Union, et cetera, et cetera. So, what are these eighty-odd micro communications satellites supposed to *do*?"

"Spy on *us*?"

"But why put up eighty then? It's too many."

"Spy on everybody?"

Hyde shook his head.

"As you know, Serov is ex-KGB, so we can assume that he's methodical and does everything for a reason. He's got something up his sleeve."

Hyde paused and pulled up the window blind. Clive found himself on a level with a crescent moon so close he could almost touch it.

"If we take a step back," Hyde continued, "Russia is struggling economically. The Western sanctions we imposed after it took Crimea are biting, and my feeling has always been that when

the bear is cornered, he'll attack. Not in any conventional way, of course. Warfare today is *asymmetric*. Undercover. Difficult to detect. Cyber and all that. The Russian digital footprint was all over the last election. You know that as well as I do. The Russians bombarded our social media with fake news, bot attacks and God knows what else. They did everything they could to sow doubt and confusion, with one aim: that we would begin to doubt ourselves. And once that happens, our social and political cohesion falls apart. Suddenly we're at each other's throats, and divided we fall."

Clive ran his fingers through his thick hair.

"This isn't really my world."

"It *is* your world, Franklin. There's no escape. Not for you, not for anyone," Hyde said curtly. "I've read your file. You met Serov a year ago at the G20 in Hangzhou. That's good! He might even remember you."

"I doubt it," Clive murmured, shaking his head.

"Look, Franklin," Hyde said, leaning forward and staring straight at Clive. "All I'm asking you to do is to keep your eyes and ears open. You never know: you might hear something helpful. As I said earlier, it's remarkable how people relax in the company of interpreters, let their guard down, say things they shouldn't…"

Hyde smiled and finished his whisky.

"I'm staying with the ambassador," he said. "You're at the Metropol Hotel. If you need to reach me, here's my card. My brand-new mobile will be bugged of course, and so will yours, so just mention trade talks. If it's urgent, give a brand name like Range Rover or Tiptree jam. No, skip Range Rover. It's now owned by Tata. Just say Tiptree. Or JCB. Or Dyson. You get the idea. You must remember all this from your days at the embassy…"

"I do remember."

Hyde was looking sharply at Clive.

"There's something I'd like to ask you, Franklin. After your stint in Moscow, which, by the way, you did extremely well, you packed it in, left the diplomatic service and became a full-time interpreter… All right, all right… translator. Why?"

"The job was too political. As I just said, not my world. And I missed Chekhov."

Hyde seem satisfied with the answer and leant back in his seat.

"You know, I read Russian and French at Cambridge, just like you. My French is still pretty good, but my Russian… Well, it's vanished into thin air! Can't remember a thing. Still, now you're here, we can all relax. It's good to have you on board, Franklin. Is there anything you want to ask *me*?"

"Am I doing English into Russian?"

"Yes, yes, that's what it says in the briefing book," said Hyde, tapping a file on the table in front of him.

"Good," said Clive. "That's how I like it."

Clive waited for the inevitable question: But why? Surely it's easier to translate from Russian into your native tongue? He had his answer ready: No, because it's all about controlling what the other side hears. This answer was on the tip of Clive's tongue, but it stayed there, because Hyde merely yawned and said, "Anything else?"

"Do we know the name of my opposite number? The Russian translator?"

"Not a clue. Does it matter?"

"Not really. Just curious."

"Let's get some sleep," said Hyde. "Tomorrow… sorry, make that today, you need to be on top form. The briefing book is right here." Hyde tapped the file on the table. "Are you up to speed on the current jargon? Post-truth and alternative facts and all of that? What's fake news in Russian?"

"*Feykoviye novosti*," Clive said without missing a beat. "But the purists are up in arms. *Feykoviye* is not a Russian word. It's an anglicization. They think it should be *lozhniye novosti*. Lying news."

"Either way, the Russians are very good at it."

Clive was getting up to leave when Hyde put a hand on his arm; his grip was iron.

"The FSB will be watching you, morning, noon and especially night, so no high jinks. Is that understood?"

Before Clive could say anything, Hyde thrust the weekend *FT* and the briefing book into his hand and murmured, "Bedtime reading."

At the back of the aeroplane, Clive found George sitting upright in his seat, looking unusually glum. "Bad news," he said. "While you're at the meeting with the PM and Serov, I'm stuck in the airport all day with the Chinese team. I don't even get to set foot in Moscow."

George's voice trailed off. His urbane mask had fallen away, and he looked like a disappointed little boy.

"This *is* a pity," said Clive, with genuine sympathy.

"Can I ask you a favour?" said George. "Will you take this? Leave it with reception at the Metropol?"

George handed Clive a nicely wrapped parcel; it felt like a book.

"What is it?"

"*Under Milk Wood*. Dylan Thomas. It's a birthday present for my friend Rose. The same Rose who told me I was a Welsh git. She's in Moscow, working for the British Council."

"Rose what?"

"Friedman. Rose Friedman. Sir Martin can't stand her. No idea why. Will you take it? Thanks. Thanks a lot. I'll send her a text when we land. She's a great friend. Don't get me wrong…" he added, suddenly flustered. "There's nothing between us."

George decided not to finish the sentence. Instead, he handed over the parcel, cursed his luck once more and went to sleep.

Clive stared through the window into a forever expanding black universe. He was back where he didn't want to be, in a world of ringtones and deadlines and WhatsApp and political intrigue. In other words, he was back in the game.

Pressing his face to the aeroplane window, Clive watched dawn breaking over the vast megalopolis of greater Moscow, home to sixteen million people. Flashes of early-morning light bounced off the opaque surfaces of the lakes surrounding the capital; now and then the same dawn light exploded with a blinding flash on the aluminium roofs of the spanking-new, red-brick, three-storey houses built in their thousands, hidden from view by high walls, electric gates and the dense black woods of greater Moscow. Here and there Clive spotted an old, surviving village with those hand-carved wooden dachas, and he could almost hear the creak of faded blue shutters, feel the crunch of fallen apples in the orchard, smell the roses and lopsided lupins by the broken porch and hear the cocks crowing. But, even from ten thousand feet, he could see that these old villages were few and far between. Wood had given way to brick, mud tracks to asphalt, and satellite dishes sprouted like mushrooms on every aluminium roof. Clive pictured, somewhere far below, the armed security guards and their guard dogs patrolling the high wire perimeters of the mansions of Russian oligarchs and fat-cat bureaucrats. Now, at first light, they would be glancing at their watches, counting down the minutes to the end of their night shift.

They were coming in to land. Clive glanced at George, who was sleeping soundly, then leant back against the seat and closed his eyes. Due north was the old capital, Saint Petersburg. Four hours on the fast train. Only four hours. Did she ever give him a thought?

Don't be a fool, he told himself. What makes you think she's even there? She's probably remarried and lives in Berlin or Paris, or even Istanbul. How many languages does she speak?

So many. Forget about it. Forget about *her*.