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Bad News Bible

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CHAPTER ONE

The man next to me was scared. White-knuckle all the way. I told him my joke, but he didn't laugh: the plane is going down, cabin fills with smoke, people running around screaming, trampling over each other, when someone says to a stewardess: 'Where are the exits? Where are the life jackets?' The stewardess looks at him condescendingly and says, 'Oh, so *now* you're interested.' Nothing. Not even a smile. So I put my headphones on and leaned back to watch the clouds. Miles and miles of them. A candyfloss blanket around the world. When I was little I used to want to leap into them, softer than cotton wool.

I ordered another vodka and the steward raised a conspiratorial eyebrow and slipped me two. Trevor, his name was.

'Thanks, Trevor,' I said and winked at him.

We were being shown a film about how beautiful Jerusalem is. The sun setting over the Mount of Olives. Look how you can go to these nice restaurants and swim in this idyllic pool, the soothing voice-over was saying. If a car bomb doesn't blow your arm off, I thought. That's the thing about flying El Al. They have this insane security which means you have to get to Heathrow about a year before you fly, and they open your toothpaste and smell your socks. A little girl in front of me was in tears because they were body-searching her teddy bear. Then, when you're on board, they do this patriotic 'Israel the wonderful' thing as though the plane weren't about to be blasted to smithereens.

'Hey. My favourite grace,' said Don McCaughrean, slapping me on the shoulder.

I winced in pain. Oh, he was OK really. The judge had given him the absolute minimum visiting rights and his heart had just broken. Perhaps as some sort of substitute McCaughrean was famous for never letting his cameras out of his sight. He booked them their own seat on the plane. He had them with him now in their battered canvas bag on the floor at his feet, blocking the aisle. He knocked someone unconscious with them once.

I was surprised to see him. I hadn't noticed him get on. He looked as though he had been tipping it back since take-off three hours ago.

'Hey, Don. How are you?' I said, taking my headphones off. 'I'm a virtue, actually.'

'Whatever,' he laughed, perching his bulk on the arm of my seat. It looked painful. 'So, Faithy, what's a nice girl like you going to a shit hole like this for? Hot as a fucking A-rab's armpit out there at the moment, let me tell you.'

'I'll stay in the shade,' I told him, offering him one of my miniatures.

'Ta,' he said, slavering at the sight of it, twisting off the little red lid with fat sausage fingers and sucking the vodka down in one through wet lips.

'Thought Edmonds was still out there for you boys,' he said. He wiped a last lank lock of hair back off a damp forehead.

'He's gone to Rome. Not a short straw,' I said, smiling at the thought of Edmonds sitting at a pavement café with his espresso, watching the pigeons. I liked Edmonds.

'Noooooooooo!?' McCaughrean sputtered. 'Buggered off to Roma without so much as an *arrivederci* and left a pretty young thing like you to get shot at on the West fucking Bank?!'

'There was sort of an emergency reshuffle,' I tried to explain, but Trevor was hustling McCaughrean back to his seat for landing and had picked up the obstructing camera bag. I was glad. He slightly repulses me, heart of gold or not.

'Don't you fucking touch that, you woofter,' McCaughrean shouted, rolling back up the aisle in a dribbling rage.

Actually, it had been more of an emergency frenzy of sackings. Edmonds, not exactly known for his sanity, had finally gone off

the rails in a bar in Bethlehem and had been put out to pasture as a matter of urgency. Mary Polanski (no relation to Roman, though she pretended sorority to get into restaurants) had been doing Italy for years, claiming she couldn't leave because her girlfriend was Italian and their adopted daughter was at school there. She had finally been fired for refusing to come back from holiday in Sardinia when that porn star got murdered. So I got Jerusalem. I'm not complaining, that's for sure. I'm half mad with elation. And relief.

After Salvador, I thought they might put me on a features beat. They have this spiel where they pretend that writing for the new tabloid-sized drivel section is actually prestigious because you can do long in-depth stuff and everyone reads it. 'Everyone' being the kind of loony members of the public who write you letters in green ink and get their upper- and lower-case letters mixed up. So, that is, no one. Your actual peer group and anyone you give the slightest toss about only reads the main section and, let's face it, not much of that. 'In-depth' is rubbish too. That just means padded to ridiculous length so they can fill the endless space. They mean 'in-depth' stuff about soap stars who've decided to give up cocaine (why bother? Some people need to come to terms with the fact that they really are just too boring without it), or the agony of mothers trying to juggle a career with childcare. Oh, I don't mean these things aren't hard and all that, but you don't want to read about it every single day. Or maybe you do. God knows.

The whole thing in Salvador was my fault as well. I was hot and

tired and we'd been hanging around waiting for these people for days. I think my judgement was skewed by insomnia and I just trusted the wrong person. He said he was taking me to the heads of the Miami-based Mara. We walked about two hundred yards before they started firing. He was killed. I got shot in the shoulder. I still dream about it.

It's strange because, when it happened, I felt acutely practical. By the time I was back in England, it was already well in the past. When people asked me what it was like, I didn't know what to say. They wanted a horror story, but really it wasn't that bad. Not for me, at least. It was bad for the boy who died. It took ages and I was talking to him, trying to comfort him. I held his hand. He must have wanted his mum, not some Westerner he hardly knew.

But in the dream, I can feel the searing heat of the bullet going through me and I can taste the sand on my lips as I hit the floor. The boy bleeding and moaning, people shouting in Spanish all around me, me slipping in and out of consciousness in the back of this Toyota pick-up, a metallic taste in my mouth, wondering if I would die. And the sky so blue.

I wrote the story in my head as we drove: 'British reporter Faith Zanetti was killed in El Salvador today, shot by warring gang members in the hills outside the capital San Salvador.' But she wasn't, of course.

I did win an award, though. Norman Tebbit gave it to me at the Foreign Press Association, God knows why. I still had my arm in a sling, which the photographers loved, so I was in lots of magazines. I was supposed to be brave and intrepid because

I'd been shot, but actually I was just stupid. Still, I shouldn't be whingeing about it. I got Jerusalem. I can't believe I got Jerusalem.

'Well, Zanetti,' Martin Glover said to me. I use the word 'said' in the loosest possible sense, since really he was just dribbling claret down his chin when some words came out. He is my friend Shiv's boyfriend. No, honestly, he is. They've been together for years. Not that they see each other much. She's always abroad, sleeping with younger, better looking men (and who can blame her). He can hardly be capable of much action when they are occasionally together. She's half his age. Then again, she's always been like that. She was sleeping with the teachers at school by the time she was fifteen.

We decided together that we were going to be journalists after we saw that film with Katharine Hepburn in it – the one where she smokes decadently and slams the door to the editor's office a lot. Great suits.

Shiv actually did it properly. English degree (basically a lot of punting and vomiting), journalism school, and clambering up through the ranks showing off her shorthand. I ended up filing stuff from Russia in the early 1990s after I'd met a correspondent in a bar who spoke only English and Finnish and was looking for an assistant. I never meant to do this really. I'd rather have been a pop star.

So Martin and I were in El Vino's on Fleet Street and this was the second bottle. It's all banks on Fleet Street now, of course, but they miss it, the old ones. They get taxis all the way from Wapping

and Canary Wharf just to be there, pretending Goldman Sachs is still the *Express*.

It was midday. He ordered a round of tongue sandwiches (I don't think these are served anywhere except El Vino's) but he didn't touch them. It was more as a sort of gesture to convention, it being lunchtime and all. They say he has a vitamin pill with his whisky at supper.

'Well, Zanetti,' he burbled. He has been promoted. He used to be the foreign editor but now his position is nameless. Lofty but nameless. Senior roving drunk. 'What about Jerusalem, then? Fancy Arabs much?'

This was a job offer. You have to be alert to them, because they can be very cryptic and you might not notice that you've just been made editor-in-chief. At my first job, on a more left-wing paper, my boss came up to me and said this: 'Fucking Portillo, eh? What a cunt.' Then he wandered off. It was only later I realized that he wanted me to write a three-thousand-word profile of Michael Portillo for the tabloid section front by four o'clock. You have to be alert.

I put my glass down and nodded energetically.

'Love them,' I said, my head spinning from the wine. I was trying to give up smoking, but I had some in my jacket just in case. I lit one now, leaning forward to take the book of matches out of the glass ashtray.

'What about those Yids?' he wondered. It was a test. Would I be offended? Was I prim and prissy, or was I one of the lads?

'Oh, them too. Them too.' I beamed. 'You know me and dark men.' That was me accepting the job.

There was a little scrap of me that would like to have kissed him, to have told him how grateful I was. But it wasn't the form. Instead, I held my glass up to chink with his, the thick wine slopping against the sides.

'Shivvy's out there. You can keep a bit of an eye on her for me,' he said sadly. I suppose he knew.

Trevor shook me awake. I was sweating and my face was wet with tears. 'Ready to disembark?' he asked me. Ready to drink myself into a stupor. I was shaking with fear. I had my dream again. I am lying in bed – not quite asleep, but unable to move. I can hear someone coming towards me and can smell the alcohol on her breath, but I daren't scream. When she puts the pillow over my face, I writhe and twitch, I try to shout and to push her off, but my mouth is stuffed full of cotton and I am passing out. The woman is my mother and I know it isn't a dream.

'Thanks. Yeah. Just give me a sec,' I said, smiling.

And here I am. I went through immigration at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, got my bag from a decrepit carousel, and went outside to find a cab. It was hot and chaotic. The air was thick with dust and exhaust fumes. A tired soldier with his M16 cocked against his chest rested in the unreliable shade of a palm tree, his head slumped forward over his gun. Cars honked and screeched, music blared out of an old Mercedes window as it passed me, sending up a wave of heat from its tired metal and choking exhaust. The strap of my bag dug into my skin and I was already soaked with sweat.

'Get in, Zanetti,' Don shouted, his face livid red, a fag hanging from his lips. I threw my stuff into the boot and did as I was told. There were prayer beads swinging from the rear-view mirror. McCaughrean gasped in the heat like an asthmatic, handing me an open pack of Marlboro.

'Thanks,' I said, and fell back into the sticky black plastic behind me. The driver turned his radio up.

'Colony, right?' McCaughrean breathed.

'Mmmm,' I confirmed, blowing my smoke out in a stream that seemed to cut through the dense heat. 'Got to get a flat.'

'What about Edmonds's place?' McCaughrean wanted to know.

'Dunno. Too weird,' I said, looking out of the window at the mountains of watermelons being sold in the dirt at the side of the road. Anyway, I love the Colony. I fell in love with it the second I saw it. Years ago. I was doing some feature about cross-cultural marriages. I think it's the lizards.

There was one scuttering across the stone floor of the lobby when we crashed in, bags and voices in the echoing gloom. The entrance seems like a hole in the wall from the outside. The sandy streets were deserted apart from a few small boys with donkeys, and the air was singing with crickets and scented with lemons. An avenue of trees leading up to the lion mosaics near the doors, the fruit big and bright and unrealistic on the branches. There was a boy I'd never seen before on the desk, crouching under a ceiling that hung with brass lamps.

'Ahlan. Salaam. Good evening, sir, madam,' he said, inclining his head towards me as though I were wearing a taffeta ball gown,

and not old jeans and battered cowboy boots. He had black, flashing eyes and skin the colour of toffee.

'Hey, Zahir. How's the sex life?' McCaughrean asked, slapping his passport down on the old brass counter.

The boy laughed. 'Nice to see you again, sir,' he said, and tapped a key on his computer. 'Number nine.'

McCaughrean slung his bag over his shoulder and shuffled off down the narrow stone corridor, slits of windows to either side, the ceiling arched Islamically high.

I leant my elbows on the desk and smiled at Zahir. 'Oh, courtyard, courtyard, pleeeeease,' I begged. He dealt with this request every day of his life. Anxiety flickered briefly across Zahir's face as he peered into his screen. Who wouldn't want this room? I couldn't believe Don was so blasé about it, taking any old thing he was given. When you had the courtyard room, you felt as though you were the pasha himself, striding manfully across the cobbles, past the fountain, the light filtering through the citrus trees, to the cool, spacious gloom of your boudoir. Or whatever.

Tap. Tap. Then Zahir lit up, a smile spreading from ear to ear. He dangled the key tantalizingly before my fingers. I grabbed at it.

'Courtyard, Miss Zanetti. Number six,' he told me, almost as delighted as I was.

I shooed two lizards out of the bath and ran it burning hot. BBC World was showing a piece from Iraq by that idiot Pip Deakin. He's short and he dyes the grey out with an awful

Paul McCartney orangey-brown. He's had his teeth bleached too, and he does pieces to camera with his shirt open halfway to his waist as though he's just in too much danger to be bothered with doing it up. This is on the rare occasions that he actually takes his flak jacket off. He always does stories about himself and the hardship he's enduring on the mountainside or in the trench or whatever. He was wearing full combat gear outside the Intercontinental Hotel in Baghdad once. A crowd of locals going about their business, shopping, hustling, stopped to laugh. They had to be carefully edited out later. Pip Deakin hates me. It's not my bloody fault he faked being sniped at in Kosovo. Basically, he said his bit and then ducked and ran as though someone was firing at him. The trouble was that he messed it up the first time so the tape that was sent round to the pool had his frankly pretty pathetic piece of acting on it – twice. It was no secret. In fact, it is a story as famous as the one about the cameraman (I know who it is as well) who set his equipment up on a tripod to pirate himself a video of the hotel's porn channel. He didn't bank on the reflection in the television screen. Then he accidentally sent the wrong tape back to New York.

Anyway, the thing with Pip was that I was at some drunken dinner in London one night (at his ex-wife's house, to be honest) and I told this story about the fake Kosovo sniping. Unfortunately, I was sitting next to a newspaper diarist who was a bit short on material. It took Pip about thirty-two seconds to find out whose fault it was. Relations have been a bit chilly between us since then. I was sorry really. Embarrassed anyway. But I think I aggravated things last time I saw him. We were in the Mille Colines in

Rwanda and by the time he arrived in the bar I was already a bit pissed and tired. I asked him how come he wasn't wearing his flak-jacket because you never knew when the barman might turn on us. Everyone laughed. It was meant to be flirtatious. Me trying to make up.

'Fuck yourself, Zanetti,' was what he said though.

I considered saying something awful back, like: 'Rather that than fuck you, Deakin', but it didn't seem worthwhile. Plus which he can't complain: he's easily the highest-paid British television correspondent on the planet. Supports two families.

I switched over to CNN, but it was *Style* with Elsa Klench, so I got in the bath. I shut my eyes and let the water burn the journey out of me. A muezzin was calling evening prayer.

I shouldn't even have been here yet. I'd like to have just gone straight up to see if Shiv was around, but there is a kind of protocol about getting straight off the plane and straight to work. We have a conspiracy of silence about the fact that we're all on holiday. During the Yugoslav conflict, people were fighting each other for the assignment because everyone spent the whole time on the beach in Split. Came back with all-over tans, rested and happy. Genocide notwithstanding.

The foreign desk, having spent weeks hassling me about living at Edmonds's place because they were paying rent on it for decades to come (no way), had booked me in here for a month's time. Then Glover said he'd got some tip-off from a bloke who'd been his fives partner at school (now foreign office) about an Israeli army mole who was masterminding Palestinian

suicide-bomb attacks. This is the kind of story nobody ever manages to prove, but also the kind of story it would be so fantastic to break that everyone gets their best people on it. Usually it's not even true, of course. I was once forced to work on a story about Mark Thatcher for a lurid Sunday that makes the headlines up on a Tuesday and has the journalists write the stories to match them by Saturday night, truth or no truth. They'd decided Mark was probably tax dodging and they wanted to run a piece saying: 'IRS Investigates Thatcher'. So we called the IRS in America and told them we thought he might be dodging his taxes and they said they'd investigate. The story ran on the front page.

Anyway, Glover insisted I come out now and had prodded me in the ribs about arranging an immediate meeting with General Meier. A mole meeting. Not, of course, that the General was likely to tell me anything. Not without seeing my tits, at any rate. Glover actually set it up himself in the end. Ooooh. What a treat.

The General said he'd pick me up at the hotel an hour and a half after my plane got in. I was surprised he was willing to drive into this area in his big black assassinate-me car, but when I said as much, not quite in those words, he told me he'd survived two car bombs – God wanted him to live. In that case, God was pretty much alone in this desire. This guy was 'rumoured' (i.e. it was true, but nobody dared do anything about it) to have presided over so many massacres of Palestinians that even right-wing Israelis found him to be a bit on the extreme side.

I rubbed my hair dry with a big white towel and shook it loose. I gave up on my spirals years ago. A blonde Afro. The General seemed to warrant a skirt, I thought. I do own one skirt – it is tight, black and short for exactly these occasions. Someone once told me I had good legs. 'Fuck off,' I said, but I bought a short skirt anyway, just in case. I also travel with a pair of black stilettos for the same reason. I find it hard to believe that anyone would actually choose to wear these things for anything other than strict professionalism. Maybe they don't. And never mind make-up.

The first time I met Colonel Gadaffi in Tripoli I was so nervous I went as far as borrowing someone's lipstick, but I felt like a clown and I haven't tried it since. Not least because Gadaffi sent his aides outside, locked the door and tried to get me to wear an apricot silk negligée that he seems to keep under his desk. I want them to feel relaxed, superior, complicit. I'm not trying to get raped.

I assumed the knock on my door was a beautiful boy with a chocolate for my pillow and a carafe of iced water for my bedside table. I opened it wide on to the courtyard, a towel in my hand. In fact, it was the General – early, and holding a bottle of champagne. He was followed by Zahir, the brass buttons on his green uniform glinting in the evening light. Zahir carried a pewter ice bucket, two glasses and a vase of roses on a tray.

'The delectable Miss Zanetti,' said the General, his eye smiling lewdly.

I say 'eye' advisedly. He's only got the one. What may or may not remain of the other is hidden under a patch. He took my hand in his and turned it over to kiss my palm. I tried not to

flinch. The combination of his dry lips and his blown-off fingers was enough to bring bile up in my throat.

'General,' I said, looking admiringly from his face to the champagne. 'You read my mind.'

Zahir arranged the flowers on a blue mosaic table. I half expected him to spin round and cut the General's throat. Instead, he poured the drinks and took his tip from the mutilated hand with a perfectly deferential bow. There was something about the way the General licked his lips as he lowered his immense weight on to the edge of the bed that made me want to get him out of my room. He wore shiny black loafers with a gold tag. I threw my champagne back in one gulp, eyes watering from the sharp bubbles.

'I'm starving,' I said, standing up and slouching my leather jacket on. My Dad's leather jacket, in fact. He was wearing it when he was killed in Belfast. They sent it back to our house in a plastic bag. I remember Evie whimpering over it.

The General stood aside to let me out of the door, holding my elbow as we walked across the cobbled courtyard. Chivalry so often tips over into sliminess when overdone. The lemon trees rustled above our heads and the sky was turning orange. A waiter crossed our path, starched linen cloths piled high in his arms. He looked at my dinner date and bristled with visible venom. The General was no doubt responsible for the murder of half his relatives. This, after all, was the man who, when I interviewed him about a Palestinian prisoner who had been tortured with sleep deprivation, said: 'It must have been his conscience keeping him awake.' It was basically my friendship, if that's the word for

it, with Meier that got me sent over to do all these big Saturday foreign stories, even when I was based in London. Pissed the then correspondent off no end. This was before Edmonds, and I won't name him, but he once sent me an email calling me a bitch. Not my fucking fault they were sending me to big foot. If he could have made the contacts he'd have got the story.

An armoured car was parked outside the hotel gate, its engine running. I could see the driver's silhouette behind the blackened glass and a uniformed soldier stood by the passenger door, his M16 cocked at his shoulder. A group of ragged children had gathered to stare, their bare feet kicking up the dust. I waved at them and they giggled and pointed at my hair so I patted it for them and got a squeal of delight in return. The long knife of a watermelon man caught the light a few yards down the road and the soldier flinched.

Inside, the car was extravagantly air-conditioned and I immediately got goose pimples all over. No danger of my legs sticking to the beige leather seats.

The General sat too close to me and I watched the city glide by outside. A strange mirage of first and third worlds like a newsflash watched from the safety of our silent capsule. Palm trees are so familiar to everyone now – Marbella, Florida, the neat manicured boulevard palm trees of Los Angeles. But these ones are not peaceful or controlled. These ones are random – taller, and planted in red dust. Even the affluent shopping streets with tourist shops selling silly T-shirts and Beanie toys of comical, head-dressed Arabs and Hasidic Jews are illusory – not really

peaceful at all. The young mother's perfect smile is strained – she is used to glancing over her shoulder.

'You have become even more beautiful than the last time I saw you,' the General told me. What did he honestly expect me to do? Giggle coquettishly and bat my eyelashes? I tried it. Apparently it was exactly what he had expected me to do, since he leant back, satisfied, one hand draped across the seat behind my shoulders, his fingers just brushing the collar of my shirt. What was left of them.

We went to a depressingly flashy restaurant in downtown West Jerusalem with spectacular security, Russian prostitutes in high heels, and a casino on the second floor. The menu was foie gras, caviare and pheasant. The staff oppressively obsequious. The ladies' loo, mausoleum-like in black and white marble, was stocked with hairspray, major brands of perfume and spare pairs of tights and stockings. I took a few packets of tights and the woman who handed out the towels scowled at me. She was in a kind of French maid's uniform with a frilly white apron and a preposterous bonnet.

'N*a vsyakii sluchai*,' I said to her in Russian, and she grinned and passed me a couple more.

My first husband was Russian. OK, my only husband. I was eighteen, and it seemed a good way of getting out of London. We lived with his mum and granny on the twenty-seventh floor of a suburban apartment block in Ryazan where the lift broke down a lot. Before the wedding, he told me he lived in Moscow where I'd met him. I got followed around by the KGB all the

time. In fact, the local KGBeshnik was a boy my husband had been at school with so it was all a bit of a joke. Not a very funny one, though.

'Everyone's Russian,' I said to the General when I sat back down on my gilt chair.

He leant forward to light my cigarette with a delicate gold slip of a lighter.

'Ten per cent of our population now,' he told me, with a disappointed nod of his huge head. Not only had he lost an eye but his face was sprayed black with shrapnel. A violinist approached our table playing 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina' and the General waved him away with a gesture which made the candle flicker and die. He served his purpose though. General Meier *is* the scoop. And he's mine. On the other hand, I would have to file something tonight for tomorrow. It's all very well having long-term investigations and God knows what to be working on, but I was also going to have to be doing daily news. I wasn't at all sure I'd get enough out of him for that. Time to plunge in.

So, basically, I thought I'd probably better touch his hand when I asked him about the mole. One of his soldiers butchering his comrades and all that. Brothers-in-arms.

Before he started wildly denying any possibility of army infiltration, he looked surprised. I couldn't tell if it was because I'd been so physically forward or if it was because I seemed to know about a huge military secret. Could have gone either way.

Once he had calmed down about what he had apparently taken

as an accusation of personal ineptitude (which I suppose, if true, it was), he started droning on with the predictable tediousness of a politician about how he had nothing against the Palestinians as a people. 'They wish to annihilate Jews, but as an Israeli I can assure you that we have no intention . . .' Blah blah blah. Also a lie. He'd done plenty of annihilation in his time. Was famous for it, for God's sake. Might be tried for it one day. As part of his spiel, he promised to introduce me to an English Jesuit Priest who took in Palestinian orphans – a project very close to his heart. When he said 'heart' he touched his wallet.

He claimed to be very interested in child welfare. Personally, I couldn't imagine children being anything but terrified of him. Was he naïve enough to seriously believe I had been diverted by this?

'You are obviously a very kind man,' I said, lowering my eyes and smiling at my food. OK, so I brushed my foot against his. I can't deny it. I did.

'But, the mole?'

He sighed deeply and leant towards me.

'If I have not made myself clear enough on this issue, forgive me,' he hissed into my ear. 'There is no traitor in my army.' I felt the spray of his saliva and my throat constricted in that pre-vomit way. I nodded what I hoped might come across as appreciation of his devastating sexuality.

'If you are looking for a demonstration, my best men are out near Ramallah at the moment. Getting ready for a raid. I'll talk to the captain. Arrange a press visit.' He pulled back, smug, as though he'd just actually given me a story. A nice feature, sure.

But not exactly Watergate. It would do, though. I could probably manage to drag a few hundred words out of it for tomorrow – talking about a planned raid. You see, then you can pad it out with a history of the Israeli special forces and how hard they are and stuff.

When we got back to the American Colony he leant over and kissed my neck, his hand wedged between my thighs. I pushed him away as non-violently as possible and said: 'Oooh, General! You move too fast for me!'

He said something like: 'You little minx, you!'

Then I leapt out of the car and ran into the hotel to the extent that I could in my stupid shoes. I wish he wasn't so useful. I would like to punch him in his good eye.

By the time I'd changed back into something normal and made it down to the bar, McCaughrean had already pretty much had it. He was cheek-down on the zinc, his fingers still wrapped round a shot of tequila, his eyes half open.

'Faith! Faith! You're here!' Lovely Siobhan Boucherat shouted from over in the corner. My Shiv. I beamed and went to join her. We stood and hugged for ages and she even started crying. More the drink than the emotion, I should think. I haven't seen her since Salvador. I love Shiv. She has a phobia of unattached buttons (seriously) and a thing about men under twenty-five, though Martin's got to be fifty-five. It was a bafflement to everyone, but presumably they both got some kind of comfort out of their theoretical union. It would take a good

shrink to find out what kind, though, if you asked me. Which she didn't.

'This is Misha,' she told me, winking. 'He's over from St Petersburg to do a piece about the Russian underworld.' She said 'underworld' as though it was something unspeakably exciting and delicious. She was being ironic. I shook hands with Misha and he blinked nervously from behind his glasses. He was one of those pale types who had devoted himself to post-Soviet journalism; thin, married to the truth, though unable to uncover it. He had dust-coloured hair and grey eyes, nervous fingers.

'Everyone is Russian in this country. I just had dinner with old sleazoid Cyclops in Hippodromica and the whole staff was Russian,' I said.

'Ugh. I hate that place,' Shiv groaned, lighting a cigarette. 'Anyway, how come that creep's still alive?'

'Dunno. Nearly killed him myself,' I said.

Misha shuffled in his seat. He was not comfortable here, and I felt a bit sorry for him. Shiv was always pouncing on innocents.

'Pleased to meet you,' he eventually managed. 'Siobhan has told me all about you.'

I laughed and went to get myself a vodka. There was a group of tabloid hacks at the bar talking about going to Ramallah the next day.

'Fancy a bit of action, Zanetti?' one of them asked me. I certainly did. Couldn't have been more convenient, though probably someone or other went out there from the Colony every morning, it being where things were happening, militarily

speaking. I suppose I could file an edgy sort of battleground piece while I was there, as well as having a look at the mole thing.

I said I'd see in the morning. I needed to call the desk first. Didn't want to give anything away by seeming too keen. I think though that I was the only one on the mole story, but you never can tell. We shared most stories, but I wanted this one to myself, thanks.

'Planning to take time off from your busy poolside schedule, then?' I wondered.

They usually just listen to the BBC World Service and file their copy by sat-phone from the sun loungers.

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Your paper's bigger than ours!' Grant Bradford sneered, offering me a cigarette. Grant Bradford is everywhere. He's the kind of tabloid hack who used to be described as a brothel creeper. He liked to pretend he'd never done exposés of soap stars' love lives. His hair is short, spiky and bright orange.

'A2,' I boasted taking it, and went back to Shiv.

I had barely sat down when McCaughrean roused himself and started picking a fight with the gutter press.

'Don't know your tits from your arses, you lot,' he began, cutting straight to the chase. Bradford stared at him, waiting to see what tack he would take.

'I'd have thought that was the one thing they do know, Don,' somebody else chipped in and everyone roared with laughter.

McCaughrean ignored the comment.

'I have won awards, fucking awards, for my work,' he shouted. 'I show the fucking world what's going on, and what do you

lot do? Crop my picture down to a fucking two-inch, fucking photo-booth—' He paused, losing his train of thought. The point he was trying to make was, however, clear. Bradford slapped him on the back.

'You're a genius, man,' he told him. 'You're a fucking genius.'

At this, McCaughrean burst into tears.

'Thanks, man,' he said, his head in his hands.

Misha was telling me about Jerusalem's Russian crime wave when he stopped dead and looked up, eyes large. Terrifyingly, McCaughrean had begun to stagger towards us, recovered now from his crying. He knocked a table over on the way and glasses smashed to the floor, the little plastic stirrers bouncing on the terracotta. His approach silenced us and we watched in bewildered awe as he attempted to aim for the seat next to me. He missed and crashed to his knees, clinging to the table edge for support.

'Bollocks,' he murmured, his face swollen and sweating.

Misha helped him up, losing his glasses in the process. McCaughrean trod on them with a crunch that made the rest of us wince.

'I've got to fucking screw you, Zanetti,' he dribbled. Shiv and I looked at each other.

'Hello?' I said, peering into his face.

'Gonna fucking split you in half,' he told me, making a lunge for my arm. 'Fuck you. I'm gonna fuck you,' he said, clinging to me now. Peeling his fat fingers from my skin I pushed him

off his chair. He slid easily to the floor, his blubber quivering. I felt guilty as soon as I'd done it.

'I love you,' he burbled, eyes closed. 'Zanetti.'

It occurred to me that perhaps he did.

By now a pair of waiters was dragging the lifeless McCaughrean out of the bar and up the stairs and conversation had resumed.

'Oh, gross,' Shiv concluded, laughing and reaching out to take Misha's hand. Misha was practically shaking with fear at what would now be expected of him. Sexual intercourse with Siobhan Boucherat, or, as she liked to put it, 'full penetrative sex'.

'You gonna take Don up on the offer?' she asked.

'Tempting,' I said and stood up to go to bed. It must have been 2 a.m. already. 'See you tomorrow.' I kissed Shiv and left.

I skipped upstairs and left the noise and the boozy fumes behind me, emerging suddenly into the thick dark and heavy silence of the deserted courtyard. I heard something rustle as I crossed and my throat closed up slightly in response. What if McCaughrean had sobered up a bit? I didn't much like the thought of him lurching at me from behind a tree. A lizard darted out in front of me. Far away in the gardens the crickets were screaming.

The heavy clunk of my key in the door echoed off the white walls and when I flicked the light on I found myself quickly scouring the room for danger. Stupid, I thought, giving myself a disapproving tut like a school teacher spotting some graffiti on a desk. It must be something to do with being drooled over all evening. Always makes me feel like someone's out to get me, trying to paw me when I'm not expecting it. I've had it since

I was a teenager. The hour or so after the end of the date that hasn't ended in sex makes me nervous. Like someone's going to come after me in the night.

What I did see, though not spectacularly dangerous in itself, was a cream envelope on my pillow, 'Miss Faith Zanetti' written with an expensive fountain pen, the colour seeping slightly into the coarse grain of the paper. It was a note from the General.

'I will not give up so easily,' it said, and a signature. Why couldn't he have left it at reception? Who let him in here? I drank the dregs of the champagne we had abandoned. For the briefest sliver of a second, but long enough for butterflies to creep into my stomach, I considered ringing Eden Jones. Eden Jones, with whom I am absolutely not in love. Not and never will be.

I set my lap-top up on the desk, moving the stationery wallet out of the way and flicking on the big green globe of a lamp. Write the mole story with absolutely no evidence whatsoever but break it myself, or wait a while and let everyone else get started on it as well? I decided that Glover's foreign office friend would have to do as the main source. It was enough for the paper to splash on. Then I could go straight into Meier's denial. I lit a cigarette and started tapping. My Internet connection didn't work so I had to talk it over to copy: new sentence, If Israel – capital 'I' for Israel – is going to find the traitor in its midst – m-i-d-s-t – comma . . .

I was just finishing when Shiv barged in. I hadn't locked the door. She was carrying a bottle of beer.

'Asleep. He just went to sleep. One blow-job and out like a

light,' she whined, stealing a cigarette off me and lying down on the bed. 'What is the point of that?'

I shut my computer and smiled at her, wandering over to get a swig of beer.

What is the point? I wondered. None, as far as I could see. But I could have told her that before she went to bed with him. She humphed dramatically.

'Where did you find him?' I asked her.

'He found me. You know that piece I did about the children's mental hospital in Haifa?'

'No.'

'Well, I did. Fuck. Don't you read the papers?'

'No.'

'Anyway, he wanted some of the numbers from it. He read it on the Internet while he was researching his story, apparently. Sounds really grim,' she said, wincing at the thought of it.

'You said he was doing Russian underworld crap?' I said, leaning my elbows on my knees and peering at her. It was starting to get light outside. Or, at least, less dark.

'He is. Sort of. Russian underworld and child trafficking,' she sighed.

'Oh God.'

'Yeah.'

We sat in silence for a bit, being tired and trying not to think about Misha's story. Eventually Shiv hauled herself up.

'Might try and rouse him now,' she said. ''Night, sweetie.'

When she got to the door she looked back at me, her face somehow different. Pinched. Or perhaps she'd just stumbled into

some bad light and the fact that we weren't sixteen any more had shocked me more than it should have done.

'Listen,' she said, and bit her lip.

'Listening.' I nodded, bouncing my curls.

'I know one oughtn't to be too pathetic about this sort of thing, but Misha's story is getting a bit sort of . . .' she paused. 'Someone phoned my room and threatened to kill me. Arab.'

She sat back down on the bed and I put my cigarette out.

'Why?'

'I don't know. It's definitely Misha's thing, though. He asked me not to tell anyone, but if you . . . if anything happens to me . . . to Misha or me . . . will you?'

'Don't be so fucking ridiculous,' I laughed. 'People are always phoning up threatening you.' In her case usually someone she's slept with and not called. I reminded her of this but she didn't even smile.

'No. It's not that,' she said and then she laughed – all fake and irritating.

She kissed me on the cheek and slapped me on the back. It was a sort of acknowledgement that we'd made it. Abroad. In danger. Well-paid. We couldn't say it out loud, but here we both were. Goal achieved.

I cleaned my teeth and spat my evening's disgust at the General and McCaughrean down the sink. I hate it when someone like Shiv gets scared. It's a breach of protocol. Other people are scared. Not us. Taking comfort in my old grey T-shirt, I climbed into the enormous white sea of a bed. But I couldn't sleep. I heard

footsteps in the courtyard. There was scuttering in the bathroom. The phone startled me with a deafeningly sudden ring, but it was a wrong number in Hebrew. When finally I put my head under the duvet and curled myself into a protective ball, I swear I heard someone tiptoeing across the tiles.

'Who the fuck is that?' I shouted, sitting up. But then I felt silly. I hated myself in this edgy mood. First-night nerves. I went into the bathroom and took a diazepam with a glass of water. I suppose I must have fallen asleep some time after the call to dawn prayer because when I came round everyone was already having breakfast outside my window, McCaughrean included. Seeing him there I was surprised at myself for having worried about a nocturnal assault. He was benign enough, picking the raisins out of a sugared bun.

The white-painted iron tables had crisp cloths thrown over them and the little peak of a starched napkin stabbed the air under McCaughrean's chin. Grant Bradford's fork flashed and his *International Herald Tribune* crackled. He and the other tabloids had obviously stayed up drinking all night. Red-eyed and hungover, bravado was necessary. His laughter was forced.

A waiter buzzed about with a tall silver pot of bitter coffee, a fat jug of milk, and a tray of pastries and steaming rolls, mountains of bright fruit. Blinding light glared through the shade of the citrus trees. The French RTF correspondent had put her sunglasses on. It was already hot.

I pulled on a pair of scrumpled pants and went into the bathroom. While I was asleep, someone had drawn a big question mark on my mirror in black felt tip. What the hell was that

supposed to mean? I was reminded of something my mum used to say: 'Someone walked over my grave.' Then, to completely knock the lovely calm of the diazepam out of me, I dropped the sodding tooth glass, stupidly perched on the edge of the sink. 'Shit!' I shouted, as it smashed to the floor. A tiny shard lodged itself in my calf and a trickle of blood ran down to my ankle. I tweezed the sliver of glass out and washed it down the sink, picking up the bigger pieces from the floor with my fingers. When I finished I noticed I'd made a bloody footprint on the tiles.

'Fucking hell,' I sighed and left it for the chambermaid. I'd have to tip her properly when I checked out. I pulled my hair back, put on a shirt, jeans and boots and stomped outside for some breakfast.

'Hey, Don,' I said, sitting down next to him.

'Hey, Zanetti. Sleep well?' he asked. 'Hot as an A-rab's armpit already.'

I laughed. 'You always say that, McCaughrean.'