

University Of Strathclyde  
Graduate School of Humanities

*Call Her Slim: An Original Novel with Critical Commentary*

By

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A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "T.H. Baird". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'T' and 'B'.

15.8.11

## Abstract

The thesis consists of an original novel and a critical commentary on the novel.

### Original novel: *Call Her Slim*.

A contemporary espionage thriller set in multiple international locations, *Call Her Slim* depicts a hypothetical false flag operation co-ordinated by several Western intelligence agencies in order to discredit and undermine the current Libyan regime. The narrative focuses upon a female ‘sleeper’ agent, an unwitting suicide bomber, illustrating her systematic manipulation by the UK intelligence apparatus and the betrayal by those close to her in assisting this end. More generally, the novel depicts an act of covert State-Sponsored Terrorism and how a civilian might become entangled in the operations of intelligence services.

### Critical Commentary

The commentary discusses the submitted novel in the broader context of ‘the post-9/11 novel’. The commentary defines characteristics of the post-9/11 novel common to both thrillers and literary fiction with a thriller element. To date, studies on the American ‘9/11 novel’ or post-9/11 novels neither focus upon nor incorporate the post-9/11 thriller novel. This commentary extends the focus of the debate to thrillers, and also into the literary field of utopianism, in considering how the post-9/11 novel may be interpretable in terms of dystopian discourse.

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## Contents

Novel: Call Her Slim.....	1
Critical Commentary.....	242

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*Call Her Slim: An Original Novel*

I.



1.

27<sup>th</sup> October 2010. The largest forest on Kamchatchka Peninsula, South-East Russia. Fire had spread through the Eastern Section for four nights. In a copse three kilometres from the blaze, three men in thick winter suits and leather overcoats stood looking down on a corpse.

It was getting darker. The eldest and burliest coughed, hunkered down and freed the Velcro strip on the hood of the white plastic body bag. The face beneath was very peaceful with a pinched smile.

“Severed spinal cords often give them a serene quality,” said Dmitri Eskin. The stiffness between his shoulders made him grimace. “But four days ago he looked less Mediterranean.”

There was an explosion in the distance, followed by yelps and panic-growls from reindeer, brown bears and their cubs somewhere among the trees.

Eskin looked at his watch. “Our environmentalist has a scenic resting place, at least.”

His smaller colleague traced short arcs in the hard cold earth with his left heel. A small cloud billowed from the third man’s yawning mouth.

“What is the bastard smiling about, do you think?” The one with the busy heel always asked questions.

Eskin raised himself with a scowl. “The wind may have set his face that way for all I know. I doubt it’s due to any success in industrial reconnaissance. The trap played out too smoothly. He took no precautions. The man we want was traveling on his passport. He won’t in future.”

He drew out a white gold cigarette case and lit a black Sobranie. “We’ll see what turns up. You know, just standing here I can imagine myself leading Cossack riders in formation on training scourges through this forest in olden days.”

The cigarette smoke drifted between them. “Very well, if the art of conversation is beyond you. Let’s just call it collateral damage. No point delivering the corpse back to London as KGB used to during détente.”

One hour later, having taken off in a Gulfstream III from a secluded airstrip further south on the peninsula, Eskin sipped a demitasse of Turkish coffee, jerked back the headrest and closed his eyes tightly. The stiffness was bad tonight, and he’d need a real drink. At fifty-two, liver spots, graying temples, ageing mistresses and all, he hadn’t expected this boost to his long, uneven espionage career. Then again, he was the recently appointed Security Director of St. Petersburg’s Catalysis Institute. Due to his clown of a predecessor, he was bound for the West in pursuit of stolen prototype miniature vacuum bombs and the storage device with the operating codes.

He drained his coffee and upturned the cup on a plastic serving platter. Two security men sat facing him. One sat with right ankle lazing on left knee, lost in a Silver Surfer comic. The other had a pincushion nose and receding V-hairline, and wide, soft eyes like some dull boy trapped by stealth in a man’s body.

“You – bring me a sandwich. Any meat with some pickled cabbage. And a proper drink. Malt whisky. You can manage that?”

The non-reader headed to the plane’s rear. The Silver Surfer enthusiast put down his comic and stared into space. Minor turbulence rattled the fuselage and the interior arc lighting flickered.

The trapped boy brought Eskin’s whisky and sandwiches, before switching on the small screen TV above the cabin exit.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Eskin. We are meant to play this during the flight.”

It was an in-flight infomercial about Berlin, where Eskin was due his final briefing before London. “I’m not interested in holiday snaps!”

He gave the security man a hard stare, and the volume was turned down low. “Now bring me the supplement from a foreign newspaper. British.”

This time Silver Surfer headed up the short aisle and returned with a recent supplement from *The Independent*. “The only one, sir.”

Eskin flicked through to an article on the Chechnyan offensive of early 2000. He’d learned the ins and outs in preceding weeks. This fairytale was by twenty-one year-old Rumissa Bourkova, the youngest survivor of the Katyr Yurt massacre. He knew this girl’s story. Her entire family had been killed when she was eleven. A header photo showed the burns to her face and neck beneath accusing eyes. Eskin traced his knuckle around his lower lip as he read. The girl was visiting London for plastic surgery. Some unnamed philanthropist was paying the bills. A perfect propaganda trophy for the English.

He finished his sandwich, slipping the article from the paper and folding it away into his inside pocket. Back to the late Dr. Carter: thirty-eight, unmarried, UK citizen on his first visit east. Just a *zhopa*, a bloody academic. Fluent in Russian, though. Petrochemical Research and the Environment was his field. The St. Petersburg conference was all about Binary Motor Fuel Technology: clapped-out heaps souped up with cheap gas clogging former Soviet State highways.

The corpse had provided an old school orientation into this adventure, if nothing else. It was the assassin’s game of chance, the sniper’s doctrine that Eskin understood: one scoped sight, one compressed intake of breath, one squeeze of a trigger, one shot. Instinct was everything.

Carter had taken an oblivious evening stroll along the Neva Embankment, right into a two-man hit courtesy of FSB. He’d been stunned by a taser at close range, the second guy severing his spinal cord at the neck from behind. Textbook and functional, no SV-98 required this time. Mistaken identity – *that* was a good joke. Carter’s body would be reducing to wood pulp in Kamchatchka about now.

The Chechen’s scarred lips had stayed in his mind. He sipped his whisky, trying to ignore the gastric burn across his middle, thinking back to a fortnight earlier at the Moscow Institute with his main FSB contact Godovin. A high flyer in her early thirties

with an Internal Securities and Strategic Planning background at the Kremlin, Godovin was the perfect 'Putin Chick'; all regular work-outs, aromatherapy, and German fashions. She'd fixed him with eyes like Khabarovsk steel in one of the Institute's lab-clean hospitality suites. He'd been there for hour upon mysterious hour on Facility Wing Four, as she linked Carter with some bastards on file with foreign intelligence. Not one of the bastards' names had stayed with him, just Godovin and her steel eyes. He shut his own, imagining her crawling across the suite's glass-topped coffee table, pulling him underneath, *bouche à bouche* as they scrambled across the sofa.

Another dash of turbulence. The eyes opened narrowly, leering at a statue on the television screen. Eskin drained his whisky and thought about his targets: George Morgan, an MI6 agent linked with organising the route through Europe for the stolen bombs, and probably behind the theft of the operating codes as well; and Morgan's estranged wife, living under her maiden name as Isabel or 'Bel' Andreus. A sleeper on British soil, part of a cell of anarchists used by MI5. In Godovin's file she'd killed her fiancé, and believed her closest friend, Morgan's long dead sister, was alive. There was a history of narcotics, and evidence of violent tendencies and low-level psychic capability. Her early programming by MI5 was more interesting: she'd been implanted with a 'roving persona', that of a Sorceress from Ancient History who might overpower her at a given time. That recalled KGB sleeper programs from the seventies and eighties.

But the tight-rope walk of working with British Intelligence came first. London's hospitality stipulated no FSB or SVR. After the Berezovsky-Litvinenko fiasco several years earlier, conspiracy theorists had the ears of Whitehall. Only the oligarchs had some real juice to back them up, providing they'd stayed loyal to Moscow. Eskin's own KGB days were long over and he was no longer free to kill with impunity. Still, there were *some* contacts in London if he needed them.

The last of the sandwich wanted its revenge. Sauerkraut could turn a dyspeptic stomach into a tinderbox. He motioned to Silver Surfer again. "Bring me my attaché case."

The case in his lap, he punched in the code for the lock and took out a dossier. Bel Andreus hadn't shared her full story yet.

2.

Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010. 10am. The beating of bird wings woke her from the part of the dream where she'd been praying for rain. One of these scenes from the Ancient World: young painted goatherd warriors pinning her down on straw and sandstone. The light rain on the French windows merged with the hum of the ionizer on the chest of drawers. When would she be shot of these damn dreams? She shivered, alone in the double bed, and thought about the job Georgy had shoed her into before he disappeared: that clerk's post in Cultural & Leisure Services, in a back office not much bigger than a bird's cage and with fewer diversions. At least this was Saturday...

Struggling up, Bel put on her robe, slipped on her novelty faux-fur claw slippers and freshened up in the ensuite bathroom. Her gums hurt when she brushed her teeth and her eyes stared back puffy in the mirror. Her new hair was platinum blonde and spiky, like her nerves. They were always worse before a job. Georgy's little packets always helped out after these jaunts, but they never came with fake prescriptions.

A narrow winged staircase led into the hall. Georgy didn't even own the damn place; it was a former MI5 safehouse he rented from some retired big noise called Sir Haslam Bryant. She'd stumbled on the deeds one afternoon while she was sneaking through Georgy's papers, looking for a photocopy of their marriage certificate. The house had no photos, no portraits, and no oil paintings of Sir Haslam's blue-blooded descendents. A spy thing, maybe...

Georgy's housekeeper had left two weeks ago. The only sign of another life was the small dent her husband's head had made in the bottom of the banister when she'd accidentally tripped him after a drunken night out. Rubbing her forefinger round the spot, she could still see the light going out of his eyes.

The spare bedroom's full-length wardrobe mirror never got her lower half in proportion. Gear on: her old t-shirt proudly proclaiming 'The World Is My Ashtray';

then her black Tacchini tracksuit. She checked the top and bottoms for bugs. She'd dress for London after lunch.

Back in the hallway, she watched magpies flap and snoop at the porch's eaves, interrupting the sunbeams streaking the wall. Around this time she'd often use the scrambler. The Cabal 100 connected between the hall phone and the analog telephone line. Eve's last gift. Great for the occasional chat with friends. Today, though, was a 'why bother' day.

Back in ninety-four Eve was twenty-five, doing voluntary work in the Congo. The British Embassy in Kinshasa claimed she'd spent two weeks in some disused granary, after four boys held her for ransom and left her out cold with two shattered kneecaps. The woman at the embassy talked about "ethnic rebels" and "sexual battery". Hollow phrases. Bel had just experienced a tragedy of her own. She'd learned she couldn't have children days before she travelled with Georgy. A womb infection.

In the kitchen she fetched paracetamol and chocolate milk. The capsule split in her mouth, souring the chocolate. She thought of boiling an egg with some wheat toast and redbush green tea. Rian the caffeine-freak always laughed at the tea jenny. Was he *feeling* anything that night? All that ever came back was the biting cold on that stairwell as he ran out into the Amsterdam streets. She still felt the chill and missed the touches, looks, unplanned afternoons back in the flat and, sometimes, a hotel. Now she was stuck in a plushly furnished hole and numbed into near submission. As a teenager she'd lived in well furnished houses where people could sink into nothingness and become nothing. Her little cousin Meryl had a bent spine and spent hours in her bedroom hammock, rocking herself to sleep while her mother drowned in Martini downstairs. Bel was an angry ghost in that Gothic melodrama.

And disconnecting just gets easier as life gets faster and more complicated. Sometimes she'd walk through the village during the primary school's lunch hour, absorbing the energy from carefree little lives, just to understand what living here *could* have been like. She'd always notice the stragglers, the non-joiners, keeping to their own

side of the street. There were two girls, one a tousled blonde. She reminded Bel of the girl in *Alice in the Cities*, her favourite film; of Alice leading her mother's male acquaintance on an adventure, just because she could. Yes, it worked that way. Daughters grew up to grow apart from their mothers.

She scanned the kitchen with its Aga and round banquet table: no cooking or housework for Mata Hari, no babbling soundtrack of *Trisha* or *Loose Women*. No cornflakes for breakfast. Housewifery and honey traps didn't mix.

There were Ritz crackers in the bread-bin and German caviar in the fridge, with one pound-seventy on the tub. Pennywise since she was a girl, a trait of her mother's, her father said. A reassuring old-fashioned trait. Maybe homage, maybe inherited.

The tough little black beads on two crackers felt like stolen life mounted on display in her palm. She'd read of a conceptual artist on the Continent who harvested her own eggs, packaging them in Beluga jars. Whatever else it meant, having that type of trophy was nearer than she'd ever come to having any kids.

A plant was expiring on the sill. Its orange plastic pot still had the price tag on a string. The food was too salty and she spat it into the sink. She flushed it away and the tap sprayed a line of water across the hem of her top and her groin. She smudged herself dry with a paper towel. At the rear of the garden, there was some blue tarpaulin snagged on the lowest branch of the taller of the two oaks. The hedge between them had been trampled. A springing cat? No, too light...

Maybe it was a guy in a monkey suit spying on her this time...?

She went back to the fridge for yesterday's hard-boiled egg. She cracked and peeled the eggshell, then made her wheat toast, cutting the slices into four triangles on a plate. The egg's yolk was grey and hard, so she squeezed it into a strip of cellophane and binned it. Then she sliced off parts of the white, mashed it on the toast, sprinkled some paprika on top, took a bite and put the kettle on. At the side window, she looked out at the mossy embanked wall that broke into high woodland terrain some thirty feet above ground. Her secret trail: the cycle path just visible between missing and broken



brickwork. The path led to a small clearing, then a narrower walkway led to a brook forking left in parallel with the main road.

The walk was a regular one. Maybe the landmarks brought back some sparser woodland areas on the Ayrshire coast from childhood, a strong sense of a private place that could become the centre of a child's life. There were natural hiding places in trees, undergrowth, among stones, hiding places for trinkets, maybe secrets others ought never to know. Across the brook's stepping stones, you came to a short wall ending at a split-trunked tree. In the large cavity, wrapped in cellophane and concealed in a brown paper wrap, there was a matte black double-action Smith & Wesson revolver and a stash of loose bullets. More insurance from Georgy...

The phone rang in the hall. The microwave clock said 10.30 as she went through to pick up the living room extension.

*"Hello love. Just checking we're set for later?"*

She breathed in sharply.

§

London, later that afternoon. The couple in the corner booth of Minderbinders, an indie pub off the lower King's Road, sat awaiting their instructions.

Bel took out a purple starfish-shaped compact from the inner pocket of her overcoat. Her blue eyes wavered after a few seconds in the mirror. The silver liner on the rims made her blink. At least her cheekbones looked great. She sighed, snapping the starfish shut. Staying slim was overrated, she thought. At thirty-eight, she felt too old for the figure-hugging black lamé dress under the coat.

Saul Tunney sat opposite, sipping a Moscow Mule. "Allus adds a few years, a platinum blonde hairdo."

He was a wiry Yorkshireman, ex-forces. Zal to his friends. Bel had known him nearly twenty years. They'd stopped thinking themselves anarchists around the same time. He looked like a younger Robert Lindsay or maybe Robert Downey Jr.

"That combat gear and beanie you're sewed into keeps you young and virile, I suppose?"

Zal took another sip, spraying some down his front. "Gi' over – how long ago were it we did a one-nighter? Blokes don't like cockteases, flower."

"Never mentioned your cock once!" Bel snapped.

'Spoon' started playing on the jukebox mounted opposite the bar. She ran her hands across the lap of her coat in semi-circles, wishing she could start smoking again. She always felt everyone in Central London part of a crowd killing time until some big public execution.

There was a papier-mâché statue of a stripper taking pride of place on a raised stage. Hanging from the ceiling on a thick chain was a hearse crushed to a cube, and behind the bar an oil print of Buddy Holly flashed a megawatt grin.

"You could find us a place that plays Polly Harvey once in a while," she sighed. "Or maybe a visit to a Tussauds' dungeon would be nice."

"Used to be boxing ring last time," Zal said. "They were faffing about after a license for a sparring kangaroo an' all. Surprised one't Aussie bars didn't snap that up, least not any I've been."

The missing girl on the wall behind him was seven years old. She had happy brown eyes and a bottom lip that stuck out genially. Her name was Marina. There was a bush behind her head. Bel felt guilty for not noticing her earlier.

Zal's iPhone rang and he handed it to Bel. It was Georgy again. Twice in one day.

*"How are you bearing up?"*

"Just," Bel sighed. She was still surprised he was taking charge this way. Was he in London? She'd nearly asked that morning. "Where are you?"

*“Now, love. You know better. We wouldn’t encrypt our phones and scramble our messages if we wanted everyone to know where we were. Hand the phone to your friend a minute, would you Bel?”*

She did. Zal downloaded a program onto the iPhone and punched in some commands on the keypad, before handing it back to Bel. On the screen there was a photo of a stocky redheaded male with piggy eyes.

“He looks like a farmer or a butcher with that face like raw meat,” Bel said. She felt like she was talking to the air.

*“Well, farmer he isn’t, love. Diddled British Military Intelligence out of nearly six million worth of vacuum bombs and liquid explosives. That’s why we’ve called you in. One last favour. Read it for yourself.”*

“Okay – stop carrying on like a primary schoolteacher.”

*“Alright. Take your time.”*

Swain, an Ulsterman in his forties, had been in Iraq in 2002 providing the allies with illegal vacuum bombs. So-so results, and he needed the better Russian models. In the photo they looked like squat metal rugby balls. Still, tonight was worth a divorce settlement and a new life in Venice. Wherever he really was, she had an image of Georgy in a corner of a Berlin revue bar with his upturned raincoat collar and slouched Fedora, eyes idling over rainy day refugees and growing more lidded with each passing G&T.

“I take it from his photo, Tunney, that you *will* remember to pass me the cyanide capsule if Mr. Swain’s charm begins to weigh on me?”

Zal snorted. “Aye. Cigarillos?”

She shook her head and he went to the bar. The heavysset barman had a portwine stain on his lower right cheek tattooed over with bleach. It looked like a botched skin graft. Zal flipped the bird and blew her a smoke ring.

*“Swain’s bound to want you back at his flat in St. John’s Wood tonight,”* Georgy continued. *“He reckons himself a bit of a swinger, so he’ll invite Zal back to play as*

*well. The gun's just a little heat to get him into the boot of his car, that's all. From there we'll contact you on Zal's mobile. We've a secure drop-off destination arranged. I'd like to keep it a just-in-time operation – but don't forget the back-up recording. Obviously, we've wired Zal's flat. And there's a digital voice recorder with plenty of disk space all wired up in a secret wall compartment in his bedroom, and that will start up along with the transmission. We'll nail Swain with that. And you've been given good testimonials, so he won't suspect."*

Zal came back and pulled his laptop case out from under the table. His fingers fumbled over the zip and lock. He propped up the open case on the seat. The inside cover had two puffy nylon sachets for accessories. The outline of a handgun bulged in one of them. He slid out the gun, holding it at table height, grinning, weighing it up in his palm. "Walther PPK, Mish Moonypenny..."

Bel looked to the bar but Mr. Bleach Tattoo had slipped out through the staff exit.

"Ask him if we should play recording back, just to make sure it's class," Zal said, pocketing the Walther.

Georgy's ears were still sharp. "*Sure. If you've got Swain in hand, why not? Oh and Bel, one more thing. Remember what I told you this morning. If you have any trouble after tonight, before you swan off to Italy, it's okay to tell them what I sent to you. That should square things for us. Ciao, sweetheart.*"

Yes, what he'd sent – the book to their French holiday apartment. He'd mentioned this would happen months ago, and had sent a few cryptic emails to update her since. She didn't want to know what 'the book' really was, but it was a bad sign that he was too paranoid to refer to it directly in a scrambled phone conversation.

Zal was staring her out in a lazy, lopsided way. His moods hinged on what he had or hadn't taken. She was Ms. Clean in comparison.

"One big fuckin' *fake* Anarchist outrage comin' up. It's the 'fake' I can't stomach."

This was what Zal would sell to Swain: an explosion at Holborn Viaduct in Central London. He wanted to use Astrolite-G, a liquid explosive created by NASA. Powerful enough to make craters on the moon, he'd said. Swain was supposed to supply the ingredients and trust Zal to put a batch together. Marina on the wall wasn't impressed.

"Still can't imagine some ruthless arms trader ever *being* that trusting."

"Trustin'? Me dad were Swain's Sergeant in the Territorials. Don't mean he *trusts* me like, but I'll milk it all it's worth. The oddyshapes just want evidence of summat illegal, Bel. Straight police work is all."

The *oddyshapes* were MI5 and Special Branch in Zal's lexicon.

"I know all details, man. Fuckin' *crack* salesman. Fuckin' crack. You brew up explosives in container size of cider vat. Allus stay upwind of the mixing and mind keep lab well-ventilated. Like cooking acid tabs."

"You've said that twice before..."

"...Yeah, so's you'd remember." He pushed the empty case back under the table. "C'mon, let's roll. I could eat me backside!"

She mouthed goodbye to Marina. At the bar door Zal grabbed hold of her lapels. "The name tonight's 'Cyprus', by the way."

"Okay – stay calm! I think that's the *fifth* time you've told me!"

"Yeah, well – be careful 'bout playin' the exotic tart, like. There's some hired guns from Afghanistan and Iraq comin' over. Don't know how much white meat they've had sniff of last few years."

He let go and staggered back, head tilting upwards, eyeballs rolling up under the lids. She nudged him back to Earth. He looked down again, shaking his head. "Funny how sometime you feel yir noggin comin' to a point like that."

"Hmm...there's gotta be some point to all this rigmarole."

It was just past five and early evening commuters were backing up on the Kings Road. Some joggers under a cluster of balloons went past on the far pavement. After a

quick Chinese and a plotless Japanese film in an arthouse cinema (the Cineworld was nearer, but Zal said too many people in one dark place made him paranoid), they made for his flat at the Westway end of Ladbroke Grove. They arrived just before eight.

The flat was untidy but clean enough. She reckoned he must have a woman on the quiet or a long-suffering cleaner. The living room window was open and cracked and a gun-mic poked out capturing night sounds; a half-crescent moon peered in; a feng-shui lantern hung from the ceiling. The lantern just had to be a woman's touch. The woolly back garden with tyre swing, bird-feeding table, and the hand-painted shell of a VW was more like Zal.

He pushed her aside to pack away the gun-mic. "Your name the night's 'Cyprus', right?"

The seventh time. "So it is..."

They'd all arrived by twenty-to-nine. The meeting itself went ahead as the *oddyshapes* had planned. The two army boys were unattached but uninterested. Their hard eyes meant a different kind of business and she was happy to be ignored. Swain, though, was loose-lipped enough to sink his own empire. Still, he thought he was among friends with a nice bit of skirt to impress. And there was the chat-up, dirty jokes about bar brawls, gangbangs, farting fannies and Fenian whores who'd stand the Body of Christ on a man's tip before he could enter them. Guns, explosives and women were all one and the combustible same to him. How he'd managed to screw British Intelligence was anyone's guess.

However, she stuck to her brief and two-and-a half hours later they were in Swain's BMW en route to his frou-frou littered penthouse in St. John's Wood. Zal did the talking, working the family bond for the liquid explosives. He had far more information on Swain's business than this short con required. He was after some of the spoils, no question. Swain was merry enough to humour him, while shooting her the odd sly look. Zal's ringtone came as a relief.

"Yeah, right mate. Miss Cyprus?"

He brought her the phone, mouthing ‘Hubby’.

“*Bel? Just one last thing. I know you must be nervous. Remember that song I used to sing to myself to calm my nerves in situations like this? Always did the trick. Van the Man...?*”

...

She came to thinking that someone had been calling her by a different name; then that there must be some reason why her legs were sticky and wet. Reflected in a mirrored ceiling, lying on a bed in her underwear, her top and bottom halves seemed a puzzle that didn’t slot together. Zal was talking into the iPhone, seeking confirmation, scowling, confused. Georgy. It had to be. Zal finished the call, smirked and gave the thumbs-up.

“What’s this stuff all over me?”

“Oil, babe. Little accident. Bathroom’s back there.”

Raising herself, she saw Swain on the floor, slumped against the bottom of the bed in his boxer shorts.

She felt a sharp pain in her groin when she moved her legs. *Get clean...and wake up!* she thought.

Her foot squashed something as she grabbed her dress on the way to the shower. The water was lukewarm. The blood on her upper thigh washed away with the mineral oil. Little Sister was tender, with a slight swelling of the outer labia. *Swain* – what kind of pervert *was* he?! At least she hadn’t been raped. No pain inside. A woman knew, even without the pain.

And no drugs, because her head was too clear. The water washed over her in this other world behind frosted glass panels. Was she shaking or was it just the water rippling over her body? She had no idea what to do. Fragments of thoughts rushed in and she closed her eyes.

Minutes passed. Then minutes more. Then a fist pummelled the stall. Zal’s twisted face was a dirty smudge on the steamed glass.

If Zal wasn't sticking around to leer, there was a rush on. She towelled and dressed quickly. Back in the bedroom Swain's body was tied to a chair. Zal had the pants and shirt back on him and his wrists were tied in front, his head tilted back against his dresser of trophies, busts of Roman Emperors and dead statesmen. Alongside those was George W. Bush's head in a fishbowl, surrounded by plastic bubbles and with the words 'Atoms for Peace' written in spongy foam on the base.

A dildo in the shape of the middle finger of a red hand lay near some wrapping on the floor. Zal trod on it and kicked it under the bed on his way to look for valuables. Bel looked inside the closet: there were suits, some leather gear, lots of handmade Italian shoes and several pairs of cowboy boots, as well as more well-boxed suits on the upper shelf. Feeling clammy, her vision blurring, she smeared hot tears across her face.

Zal pocketed a chunky gold neck chain from Swain's bedside drawer, and rifled through Swain's suit jacket on the floor by his chair. A roll of notes and some plastic tumbled from a wallet. He scanned the cards, grinning. Then he walked over to pat Swain's cheeks. "Cock-a-doodle-doo *Ron Ron...*!"

"God, you're a fright Tunney! At least it's the last time Georgy'll have this much hold over me."

Zal took the recording from the flat from his jacket, sliding it into Swain's stereo. "Georgy this, Georgy that! Who you fuckin' these days anyhow, *lady*? Separation won't change owt for you."

"Don't dodge the fucking subject! What about Swain?"

"Not even done the nacker in!"

"He looks dead to me...I'll just check."

Zal squawked with laughter. "What the hell you kickin' 'im for? He's *unconcho*, daft twat! You know nowt happened?"

"What...? Oh, yes, I *know*! I just conked out and you bastards dragged me into the bedroom!"

Zal shrugged. "Yeah, *guess* – too much booze..."



“And the ape fucking *bit* me, didn’t he?”

“Li’l flesh wound, that’s all. Tanked into him right after...”

“Jeez, Tunney – what would *you* do if someone chewed through your tallywacker?! I suppose you ‘tanked into him’ with the hand you weren’t jerking off with?!” Another kick, in spite of herself this time. “And what was that name you were mumbling at me when I came round?”

“*Cyprus* – what the *fuck*?! An’ I don’t jerk off over half-dead wenches, mind!”

The lie about the name bothered her more than the blackout. She wasn’t sure why. How much could she read into *Zal* lying anyway? She poured herself some vodka from the mini-bar and slumped back against the headrest. Her black lamé dress was clinging and her joints felt heavy from all the mysterious rough and tumble. *Zal* jumped onto the bed beside her.

“Fuckin’ great! Oddyshapes do it up royal hi-tech, like, and gie us a crappy disk!”

“You could have rigged things up yourself then?”

The playback started. A dull murmur. The tinkle of glasses. An indistinct request. Then macho banter and parlour games.

Swain boasting about his jacket of one-hundred percent genuine unborn pony hide...

*Zal* lying about some investment he’d made in a cyber-cafe near the flat...

Swain handing round blaster caps as party gifts...

A mercenary called ‘Joe’ prising free a bottle top with his teeth, then using the same molars to ‘crimp’ one of the caps...

Swain boasting again about the swanky new night vision room at his rifle range in Northumbria...

Her voice saying “*Cyprus*”, the ‘u’ accented heavily...

A Canadian known as ‘Mexican Radio Vince’ asking about a Grenade Launcher...

More glasses rattling above the bugs hidden in chair and sofa wheels...

The mercenaries bragging about their recent hi-jinx in world weary voices, 'Mexican Radio' earning £10,000 a day just jamming cell-phone traffic in business districts in Baghdad. Now the cell-phone bombers could only blow up working-class suburbs or public buildings...

Swain predicting a future for the illicit arms trade. Explosives that didn't look like explosives, detonators that didn't look like detonators and triggers that didn't look like triggers...

Swain's 'Eyeball Sucker' having come through Europe thanks to some Secret Service chappie on the lash...

"That's fuckin' *vacuum* bomb," Zal interrupted, awe in the voice. "Thermofare's star line..."

"'Star line'? The discerning consumer these days, aren't we? What's your game, Tunney?"

Zal spat an arc of phlegm onto the floor. "Had enough Trots to last me lifetime is all."

*So – you are on the make*, she thought. She'd have pressed him, but the booze, the hour, and her boredom at the smoke being blown were taking their toll. All she could focus on was her insurance policy: Georgy's 'book', stashed in their holiday apartment in Honfleur. It was strange he'd brought it up twice today, and in a roundabout way. Maybe he knew she was in for a rough time from his old colleagues and this would keep them sweet. But what *was* it he'd sent to Normandy? She hoped Georgy knew what the hell he was doing. She didn't want to end up in jail. Why did she still believe in him...?

Zal switched the disc off suddenly. Swain was coming round, Zal's Walther at his throat at the Ulsterman's first wheeze.

"Hey Ron, *wakey-wakey!* How's the cock an' balls then?" Zal slapped him round the head twice. Swain's face was bright crimson and he began coughing. His upper body heaved against the restraints. Some blood came up.

“*Calm down!* Let’s get him downstairs before he flakes out –”

“– You can help if you quit mytherin’!”

Zal cut Swain’s ankles loose with a stiletto, hoisting him forward onto his feet. Swain was big-boned, but no more than five-nine and around Georgy’s weight. The wrists stayed taped together. The distilled hatred in the Ulsterman’s eyes shocked her.

“Who are you workin’ for?! Tell us – your lives are nothin’ now!”

“Gosh an’ *begorrah...*!” Zal laughed as he slammed the butt of the gun into Swain’s left kidney again. More spluttering and more blood.

Bel stepped forward, trying to edge Zal to one side but he pushed her back onto the bed.

“Don’t go all mumsy like, *Cyprus!* It don’t suit. Just gie us his fuckin’ jacket!”

“Fuck off! How do *you* know what suits me?”

She threw the unborn pony-hide jacket, its feel and its sheen making her squirm. Zal draped it over Swain’s shoulders in a mockery of a manservant.

“Right, *McFuck* – any more shite an’ it’s just one these bullets an’ *ta’ra* down lift shaft!”

Swain’s face was contorted. Wheezing, he shook his head.

“Get bag an’ check corridor, *Cyprus* – *ok?*”

She walked through the living room where tiny pools of orange light danced in the balcony window. She felt London looking in on her. Outside, the corridor was clear, but she caught a whiff of takeaway food. Someone had been by moments earlier. But this was a penthouse apartment? Or maybe there were two apartments.

“Arse in gear, *Cyprus!*” Zal hissed.

She hadn’t heard him creep up with Swain. In the hallway Zal hustled Swain past her to the elevator. She found herself taking deep breaths. This was the sixth floor, the top floor. Keep moving. Zal kept Swain close in front, the gun nudging his spine. She pressed ‘G’.

Swain was hunched over, clutching his bound wrists tight against his stomach. His face looked scalded. “After all your father an’ I’ve been through...”

“Shut it! And gie it some pasty wi’ that fuckin’ code!”

The ground floor was deserted. No night reception or caretaker, just a keypad and swipe lock at the door and a low humming sound.

There were bubbles of sweat on Swain’s face. “The code’s 1410 and the card’s on my car key. Inside left pocket. Swipe first.”

Zal raised the muzzle to Swain’s neck, his thumb brushing the trigger, back and forth. He was staring, fish-eyed, at the back of Swain’s head. He’d blow out the man’s brains, code or no code. What was the bastard *on*? He was rocking from side to side. There was white drool on his chin. She pulled out Swain’s keys. Zal clicked his fingers for the one to the BMW. The swipe card was attached to a fob on the ring and was easy to pull free. She handed Zal the car key and swiped. A blue light flashed on and off a couple of times and she punched in the code on the keypad. A buzzer sounded and she opened one door, and then the second to the residents’ parking area.

Swain’s BMW was straight ahead behind some privet hedges that blocked the apartments off from Elmtree Road. Zal deactivated the central locking. “Boot, Cyprus?”

She opened the boot and moved slowly to the passenger side. Looking back, she saw Zal whispering in Swain’s ear. No way was she crashing back in Ladbroke Grove tonight! So what did *that* leave...?

Swain’s face captured in the moonlight looked like one of a number of ice statues from her dreams. Sad, dying men: one had the face of her father, another Rian’s. Ralph Machin Swain would show up one night soon, she’d no doubt.

Suddenly, Swain toppled forward, his body crumpling into the boot. For a moment she thought he’d been shot. Zal laughed, shoveling up the man’s legs behind him and shutting him in. He was gloating again, knuckle dusters gleaming on his left hand; she’d missed the blow to Swain’s head. This man with the dirty jokes and the dirtier past *was* going to die.

They climbed into the car. She could barely feel her feet on the floor or her spine against the seat. She was thinking of Georgy's scam, and how many more bodies in boots or shallow graves might result from it?

Zal delved in his pocket for his iPhone. He gave Georgy an alert, then drove off south on Edgeware Road.

"Man, maybe we should've checked yon *dildo*? Fuckin' weird. Might've been concealment whasit? Dead drop spike thingy? Secret papers inside an' all?"

"God, how's this conversation even possible? Swain's not a spy anyway, *is* he?"

"Yeah, well, us neither. I meant industrial papers or summat? Thermofare's big biz."

She stayed silent and he took the hint. Again – *where* would she sleep tonight? She had two friends, ex of the Circle, two sisters called Mimsy and Misty who'd set up a communal pad in Camden, maybe five, six years ago. But she hadn't the exact address and they'd cut and run so fast from the group that just turning up and begging for a bunk out of the blue would be awkward.

They were headed south of the river. A minute or so later Zal's phone vibrated into life and Georgy's voice was back.

*"Good work. Now if you can make your way to London Bridge, across the river and down onto the Old Kent Road. Turn left after the Globe and get back to me. I'll tell you where to go from there and arrange back-up."*

Zal sniffed, giving his passenger a stoned look. "What's this *Globe* then? Some kind of kiddies' adventure playground?"

She forced a smile, settling upon an excuse for checking into a hotel for the night.

"Don't worry, Tunney. I'll recognise it. It's illustrated in my volumes of Shakespeare at home."

3.

Gerald Stiles sat at a folding table in the numbers station of MI5's Technology Assessment Centre at Bletchley Grange, his attention on the map of South London and the slider controls on his customised Voice Transformer Unit in front of him. The real-time adjustment problems of the past couple of weeks were giving him sleepless nights. Still, 'Georgy' had come through in fine style today.

Marclay and Avery, the satellite and shortwave radio technicians, stood by the main control desk operating a satellite tracking system. A Mercedes and Sierra were minutes away from converging on Swain's BMW at an industrial estate in Southwark.

Marclay pulled the pen from his work coat and adjusted his lapel-mic before shrugging at Avery. "I take it they'll want everything destroyed on this one after a fortnight? The usual routine for a multi-agency program?"

"Probably sooner, this time," Stiles said.

His phone and the one by Avery rang three times. Stiles picked up. There was a long pause. Marclay and Avery took their seats at their L-shaped and vinyl-topped desk with its built-in shelving stuffed with paperwork, satellite equipment and radio spares.

Stiles brushed his moustache with his thumb. "Okay, as soon as she's on her own, you're set to go. Over."

He gave the Voice Changer a dirty look, then Marclay the thumbs-up. Yes, Andreus had really bought his star-turn as Georgy Boy. It wasn't such a leap to mimic one of Six's finest, just pot luck that he'd stored her husband's dulcet tones in a memory channel with a well-behaved slider control. Channel 4. He couldn't switch voices instantly between those stored in the fourth and third channels or the fourth and second. Switching between Channels 1 and 4 was no problem, but snags between 1-2-3 were even worse than between 2-3-4 in terms of faulty pitch, reverb and distortion. Yes, Channel 4 had been *very* lucky.

Unplugging the AC adapter, he placed it, the Head Set and the stroppey Voice Changer into a black bag. Then he took the bag upstairs to his own office and locked it in a cupboard.

Stiles sat idling at his desk for five minutes or so before making a secure call via his speaker-phone to Sir Haslam Bryant at the Turf Club. His secretary was expecting the call. At *this* hour? Should he be worried?

*“This operation. My colleagues and I were under the definite impression that those hidden pension fund losses we arranged for you would be put to some meaningful use. Don’t ever mistake me for some old fart with a St. Georges’ for underpants. What the hell are the Americans up to this time?”*

Stiles felt the sides of the mouth twitch at the image of Sir Haslam propped up in his Chesterfield.

“Truth is, Sir Haslam, we’re all being corn-fed this time. This op is an American-Italian venture in the main. We’re *far* down the pecking order. Besides, funds nowadays come from everywhere and anywhere. Piecemeal arrangements. I realise, with your own experience, Sir Haslam, you’ve more call to ask than most –”

*“– Don’t follow, Stiles. You were in naval communications back in the day. Clarity essential. Always. You are aware of my own naval background, of course, the fact I know every little detail about your service record? Your fracas with that Wren on shore leave in Dartmouth, for instance?”*

“Sir Haslam, I –”

*“– Don’t interrupt. Just tell me, keeping it as loose as the matter demands, what did Thames House have me raise eight million for this time?”*

Stiles clutched his forehead. Why was he so bloody deferential in these situations?

“Well, okay – loosely speaking. It’s the Russians, Sir Haslam. A Russian Security Analyst called Eskin, to be precise. A Dmitri with two ‘i’s, like Shostakovitch.”

*“There’s only one ‘i’ in Shostakovitch, I believe...”*

“...I meant the Dmitri, sir. They’ve sent this Dmitri over here to snoop around after George Morgan and their vacuum bombs developed by GRU. We hope that we can use this girl we handle to lead him on a hike. You know about his wife, too, I think?”

Sir Haslam murmured his assent.

“Well, with her help, we’re hoping we can find out something about the way Moscow seems to be outsourcing now for these jobs. And there are one or two things she needs to tell us about her husband.”

Sir Haslam Bryant let out a slow sigh of measured exasperation. “*Anything more?*”

“Not really, Sir Haslam. I met the Russian yesterday to discuss the very definite limits to our hospitality. He’s seen no active field work for twelve years according to the FSB datascript we requested, although that might be a lie.”

Stiles paused, wary of tangents. “I think he’s arrogant enough not to task himself with awkward questions about why the hell he’s actually here. We think there’s a chance he’ll overstep the mark. Any Russian involvement with trouble in Western Europe can be made to work for us.”

*“Very well. That’s loose enough, at least. I suspect you’ll find the Russians have a well concealed motive for sending him over. You should be rooting around for it as a priority. They’re not even remotely stupid enough to allow themselves to be easily embarrassed. Nowadays youngsters like you forget the lessons of recent history. When you’re safely clear of the debris, I’d like the full story. I’ll sign you in for a chat, face-to-face. At least you’ll get a decent lunch out of it.”*

With that, Sir Haslam hung up. Stiles sat back in his chair, sour at Sir Haslam’s taunt about Dartmouth. No point in moping, though. His wife had arranged a blasted dinner party for the weekend, and he’d to pick up some game pie and a case of Cockburn’s from Fortnum’s that afternoon. He’d not quite trained himself to those meaningless routines couples endured when the spark was gone. Still, routine demands wouldn’t trouble Bel and Georgy Morgan anymore. Lucky bloody *them*.



...

Bel noticed they were being followed into the industrial estate off Alscott Road by a dark saloon. Zal drove through a large double H-shaped enclosure of light-industrial and storage units, some with loading platforms, most with roller shutter doors and no business signs. He turned right at the large fence bordering the estate, drawing up in front of the last row of units.

He was still wide-eyed and edgy. “Wait for us, here. Me an’ the lads’ll shift Swain.”

He climbed out and slammed the door, catching the seatbelt buckle. Arms swinging and ankles and feet splayed, he shambled over to a unit with its shutter half-open, yellow lighting and the sound of a generator coming from inside. Some thick rubber leads snaked through the gap in a figure-of-eight. The dark Sierra had dimmed its headlights and pulled up behind the BMW. Two men in heavy sweaters and jeans got out and followed Zal into the unit. The shutter rattled fully up.

Bel needed fresh air. She got out, wishing the hell she was tucked up in bed; even some sad rom-com and Häagen Dazs fantasy was better than this. She brushed against the sturdy iron lattices and took a seat on the bonnet. There were traces of old machine metal, rubber, lubricants, cigarettes and petrol in the air; fresh, it wasn’t. But she’d noticed two things: a third, very tall blond man had stepped out of the Sierra and stood talking into a microphone headset; and raised headlights illuminated the fence in front of her.

Headlights and the low hum of an engine. A Mercedes turned into view where the units ended. Suddenly feeling hemmed in, she tightened the belt on her coat. A bearded man in an overcoat climbed out the Mercedes, and approached with a rolling stride. Had everyone forgotten Swain?

“Excuse me, Miss Andreus? Can we possibly have a word in private?”

She couldn't meet his gaze in the dark, but she could imagine him as the pirate Blackbeard. Bear-like shoulders, Grecian beard and moustache, a cool menace that might turn fiery any moment: a bad piece of business. "From Georgy, right?"

"Yes. Perhaps in private? In the limo?"

She'd caught the trace of an accent. "Listen, I'm here with my friend, you know? This should concern him too."

Sliding down from the car, she took a few steps towards the unit. He blocked her path, flashing Special Branch ID above the ridge of his coat pocket. She glanced back at the tall blond in his sharp silvery-grey suit. There was a nervous pulse in her left eyelid and his features were blurry.

"Are you feeling ill, Miss Andreus? You look pale."

Should she call out to Zal? Who were the other guys with him? Would they pitch in? "Stress, I suppose. Look, I guess you know about our business here, so..."

"Don't worry about that. Your husband has scheduled a trip abroad for you."

A helicopter was overhead and drawing close. Surveillance? Zal appeared at the front of the unit, giving her a quick thumbs-up, catching his balance on one foot, before swinging back inside.

Maybe Blackbeard was the real deal? She'd be nonchalant, phlegmatic, quite dumb, according to her drill. The nicety or two about Georgy's welfare drifted right past.

He reached into his inside coat pocket for a cigarette. "It should take only a few days."

He placed a gentle hand on her forearm. "Shall we leave now, perhaps? The limo?"

She caught the tension in her own voice. "A few days?"

"A few days, no more."

When she first got into Direct Action, a naïve girl driving cops and security contractors up the wall at demos, sit-ins and the like, making a choreographed spectacle

of herself was the safest way to stand out. Now fear felt like slow cement drying around the heart. There was nowhere to run. And no way to stem the fear...

She felt a knot in her stomach. This was wrong. Georgy wouldn't have let his colleagues send *this* guy. Backing away, she tried to find a gap between his body and the Mercedes; but the driver anticipated, nosing the car forward. Blackbeard was laughing at her. She had to *try*. Darting forward, scrambling over the hood, she clipped her knee.

Doubling in pain, she felt herself sliding across the bodywork, before Blackbeard sprayed liquid into her face. "*Zal* – you fucking prick!"

She felt suddenly sluggish and dizzy. A tranquiliser? Blackbeard grabbed her by the elbow, as her free fingers massaged her left temple, trying to keep alert. Her muscles went slack. She felt herself falling then being hoisted up roughly, then dragged, spun and bundled into the warmth of the car.

She'd been in worse fixes. Think about '91, '92, face down in watery darkness for hours and hours. And under the ice as a child...

The tall henchman climbed in on her right. Two doors slammed shut. Blackbeard was on her left. The car began to reverse. The driver was invisible behind the jet black partition window. Somehow she felt this made sense because she didn't know where she was going...

...They could have been her pall-bearers spiriting her away, but this was a time for willing yourself to stay alive...

...Blackbeard's coarse fingers under her chin hooked her face towards him. She smelled coffee on his breath, his eyes coal black, his beard the same...

"Bacardi?"

Confident, predatory eyes. He tapped the drinks cabinet with his outstretched foot.

She couldn't fight. Not here.

"No. What did you spray...?"

She just couldn't.

She felt her head droop in turning from him. It was anticipation. The question why she allowed herself this reflection flashed into her mind, before she slumped sideways, unconscious.

...

There was a noise like a canister popping open and a sliver of light at the far left of the room. Maybe she was in the flotation tank again, tilting in a bubble? No, she was dry, and there were two out-of-focus men crouching far from her in this... *studio*? There were blueish-yellow TV lights.

Blackbeard the Special Branch man had trimmed his beard. Now there were just strips of hair over his jowls. He moved closer, his broad mouth smiling. "Did you enjoy our little experiment to test whether irradiated prisoners can glow in the dark?"

Did she *imagine* that? Her head was spinning, and her head, shoulders and arms were hot. She was wearing a loose top and trousers instead of the dress and coat. She'd been drugged, stripped and changed. And something else was wrong...

More footsteps across the floor, and she was hoisted up by both arms and dragged forward. Her legs gave way and she was pitched into the centre of the studio. Her hip took the worst. Breathing deeply, gasping, the sound enveloped her as though she was in a tight dark space. There was a shout. She was dragged onto a spongy-soft sofa. Twisting herself upright, she saw the pinprick on her left forearm. Red and tender. She took more deep breaths and looked up into a camera on a tripod.

The far wall behind the camera lit up. Numbers, or codes maybe, flashed down the right side of the screen, on-off-on-off. There was a black and white image of a man's head, and then an upper body. The man was lying back. White letters ran across the bottom of the screen.

Blackbeard barked an order up a flight of stairs to her right and made for the steps. A woman appeared at the top. She was middle-aged, blonde, and stocky.

Blackbeard came back and took a Director's chair from beside the camera. He jerked his thumb back at the screen. "Some warm reminiscences?"

His head seemed out of focus. Flushes of heat seared her shoulders, chest and stomach, making her flinch. What did he mean? "What did you shoot me full of?"

"Something for your memory."

The second man sat down on another sofa at right angles from her. There was a budgie printed on his tie. The stocky blonde handed Blackbeard some kind of folder which he threw onto the sofa. Then she sat down beside Budgie with a watery smile.

Bel felt cooler, shivery. The soundtrack from the screen was down to a murmur, the voices babbling and overlapping. There were balaclava-wearing figures with their upper bodies and movements digitally fogged.

Blackbeard leaned closer. His hair was glistening with pomade, or was it dazzle from the lights? "You are here in connection with your husband's recent work in the former Eastern bloc. Open the folder and take out the top plastic sheath. It is his profile from an Interpol Suspect List."

She tried to focus on the printout, on Georgy's details and three of his aliases: Carter and Carton, and a third too faded to read. There was a column headed "SUSPECT" below his details, and a black silhouette bottom left of the page. Her hip ached. A silhouette instead of a photo? She wanted to talk about it. *Wanted* to. Under "SUSPECT" it read: "Death of British Chemist & Environment Researcher Dr. Benjamin Carter, St. Petersburg."

The name Carter meant nothing. The second paragraph was headed: "Illegal Weapons of Mass Destruction".

"Intelligence services have identified your husband as Carter's killer."

The blonde fidgeted with a pen and pad. Blackbeard kept marking out his space. "Come on! *Wake up!* You *want* to talk to us. We *know* you stayed in your husband's home, waiting for his instructions! No denials!"

“I thought Georgy had left for good. I thought he might be in America. Savannah, Georgia. He has family there.”

“Georgy in Georgia, eh?” Blackbeard chuckled. “You’ve been watched around the clock over the last three or four years. We could monitor all the letters you sent to Evelyn and these stupid anarchists. What a joke! Now stop wasting *time!*”

Why was he shouting? Didn’t he get it? “I’m not! I can’t concentrate with you prowling around!”

“A crazy Anarchist Bombshell with a taste for state-of-the-art explosives!”

She caught the blonde and Budgie exchanging looks. “Fuck off...!”

A forward stride. He slapped her hard across the cheekbone and jaw. Long, deep breaths. Her ears were ringing, and her head and neck were bunched against the back of the sofa. She was anticipating worse. He pulled her legs forward again, and she slid to the floor.

“Get up!”

Slowly, she got to her feet and back onto the sofa. Blackbeard raised his hand again. Heat and tiny convulsions tingled through her body. “*Bastard!* I know the drill. I’m not a baby, okay?”

“We’ll see...”

He squatted down. “We know how you check your whore’s clothes for audio bugs each morning, and look for little bumps in carpets, mattresses, even behind the canvasses of paintings. You check up your ass, too, I don’t doubt! Then again, if you *don’t* give us the right information, by the time the courts are through with you, you’ll have been better off a dead cripple who had been raped by *Mau Maus* – like your friend *Evelyn!*”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. There were tears on her fingers, but no blood.

Silence and calm, for just a few seconds. Then Blackbeard stood and ruffled her hair. “Wake up and enjoy the show!”

She concentrated on breathing. Interrogation could cause heart attacks in healthy people. She looked at the screen again. He was there in black and white. There was white powder around his mouth and he lay in a freezer full of ice.

“Recognise your boyfriend?”

Rian. It was so long ago. Yet just like the dreams she’d had. Feeling light-headed, she held her head in her hands and closed her eyes tightly.

“You know what I think, *Bel*? I think it was catching something unhygienic from *you* that killed Mr. Swain earlier tonight!”

“Head lice, you mean? Unlikely,” Budgie ventured. “What you’re seeing is real, Miss Andreus.” The monotone didn’t go with his kitschy tie. “Weren’t you there to witness your boyfriend’s death?”

She needed to justify herself. “I don’t remember it. I want to, though. Jesus...how am I supposed to think like this?”

She was crying. The tears felt good and the questions stopped. Blackbeard fiddled around with a pager, flexing his shoulder muscles as if working out some pain. Could she really tell them what they wanted? Georgy’s voice was in her head, telling her that deceit and double-bluff were the actor’s tools. Use them! Even if you don’t know the truth, make them believe you do! The cameras and director’s chair should have helped.

Blackbeard grinned stiffly. “Ok, Bel. Time to tell us where the microfilm is stashed. Or maybe the information has been transferred?”

She didn’t flinch. She knew nothing about microfilms. What was she *supposed* to know?

The screen went blank for a short time. Then blown-up passport photographs appeared of three different women side by side. Her heart jumped. The third photograph was of Evelyn. No mistaking it. Evelyn, and she was *older*. Well *of course* she was. The hair was different, shorter and elegantly fringed. The expression might have been harder, the eyes colder; but it was Evelyn!

Yet the longer she stared at the photo, the less she was sure...

“So,” Blackbeard continued, “what about your financial arrangement with your husband, and the sealed letter to be opened in the event of some accident? An account set up for share transfers, and your safety deposit box in London? Why would your husband do this for the woman he is divorcing?”

“Listen, I made some calls to the bank.”

“We know. Your private calls using the scrambler were hot on the hook. Your phones doubled as microphones when they weren’t being used.”

“Yes, Miss Andreus,” Budgie pitched in. “You were monitored by Echelon, a system supporting the American National Security Agency. Some of your calls and a number of emails were flagged.”

Blackbeard lurched forward again. “So no more bullshit!”

His mouth moved at strange angles and his voice echoed when he spoke. She was growing very, very tired...

“Our information points to packages with microfilm being sent to your house. Was there something inside the home you used to share with Morgan? Something he may have hidden better than the phone number of some cheap girlfriend?”

His female associate was on her feet. “Maybe she’s ready to tell us now?”

Blackbeard had turned away, and without warning, the screen powered down: he had a mobile phone, his thumb scratching the space on his chin as he paced about. Two Blackbeards: the real one and his electric shadow.

He motioned to Budgie. “Bring a chair nearer the screen for our colleague.”

“I can manage,” the blonde said tersely.

Bel stared into space. Moments later, she was staring into the woman’s right palm.

“Bel? My name’s Muriel. Can you concentrate for me? Look. That’s the size of the thing we’re after.”



The tiny foam pad bore a tinier dot the size of a pinhead. It reminded Bel of an ant's eyeball or a fish egg. "*That's* microfilm?"

"Yes. A microdot. These are still used sometimes. You see why they believe you could have hidden it somewhere, or received it in some object without knowing?"

"It would have ended up in a tissue and the bin if I'd picked it up in the house," Bel said, the words slurred.

Muriel nodded. She slid the foam and the dot into a little pillbox and pocketed it. "We still believe your husband sent something through to you. He may have still intended to come back to England only weeks ago. He doesn't anymore."

These were things she could talk about. When she'd been staying at the house. "I was around, sure. If what he sent was valuable, though...?"

"It might be worthless, just sent through as a dummy run before something more important. However, we have to be sure."

Muriel had a square, homely face. Creaseless. Maybe wise. Someone's clever thin-lipped auntie who liked books and gardening and schoolgirls. "Important? Such as what?"

"Hmm...I suppose there's no harm. The operating codes and instructions for the bombs your husband stole."

Blackbeard, now standing by the screen, coughed loudly. The green-fingered aunt's eyebrows knitted into a frown.

"Still, never mind that. Have you received any packages recently? Think long and hard, Bel. Any mail, or any notification from the bank about safety deposit items? Any contacts from solicitors with outstanding documents, contracts and so forth? Any delays in items purchased from stores or over the Internet? Anything due that could have been intercepted?"

Muriel clenched her hands in her lap, her voice and mouth not quite working together. "Bel, we *know* you want to talk."

Holding up her forearm, Bel pointed to the red dot, now a tiny lump. “*It* wants to talk...”

Georgy had told her *when the time was right*. She placed her forearm to her ear. “It says... ‘The Book’.”

Muriel smiled. “A book?”

Bel shrugged. A cakewalk. “Well...maybe a couple of rare-ish books from Amazon ordered *long* ago. Still not arrived.”

Muriel leaned forward. “Good. The microfilm could be concealed like that. It would certainly be no problem for someone to intercept the delivery.”

Bel wanted to sleep. “And redirect my account address, maybe? Georgy bought us this little holiday apartment in Honfleur.”

Muriel flashed a brief smile. “Alright, then. It’s a trip to Normandy. You have the keys? It doesn’t matter if you don’t.”

“A safety deposit box in Bayswater.”

The bank. What was it about the bank? Georgy’s assets. Tangled, so tangled like his DNA. Yes – his *share* transfers. Had they gone ahead? She’d have several hundred thousand to her name. The very thought gave her a jolt. She’d need the details about the funds in her new Swiss bank account.

“They won’t see me on a Sunday, though?”

“It would be easy enough to make special arrangements,” Muriel said. “Perhaps not essential.”

Blackbeard had come back. He leant down and placed a thick arm around her shoulders. The pressure of his grip numbed her right arm, and she felt the heat rush through her arms and chest again. He planted a kiss on her forehead, smiling down like a fairytale giant with strong coffee breath. She was dimly aware of something falling near her feet. She felt faint...

“Good, Bel. *Good*. Now you can have some moments in the genteel atmosphere upstairs.”

Blackbeard began speaking quietly to his associates, as she began drifting back across the galaxy on her sofa...

...

The room was well-lit with oval porthole windows across each wall and pitch black beyond. Her arm felt stiff. She'd been given some combination of shots. The woman standing with her hand in her skirt pocket was hazily familiar.

Still, Bel felt sharper. Smelling salts? An upper? "Where are we?"

"An Airship Simulator when the outer background and internal acoustics are set," Muriel said, the trace of a smile on her lips. "But I think you're too sophisticated for pyrotechnics."

The semi-circular sofa felt taut, brand-new. The room had three gaming tables, a chrome-railed bar and a mirrored dance floor. A robotic cat was perched on the bar top.

"This isn't like any Special Branch routine I can remember."

"A joint operation," Muriel said. "One in your best interests."

"I *know* what's in my best interest."

"Well, for now I have to remind you that these premises are escape-proof. However, we're leaving soon. You'll be taken back to London. Do you want to see the robot do its stuff?"

*Nice try, but I caught the trace of smug and superior, honey,* Bel thought. She shrugged. The bulky steel door behind the bar had a keypad beside it.

The robot was swept up and set down again between the sofa and dance floor. It looked like Lego sheathed in Perspex. The woman went to the bar and pulled a shiny black adapter unit from under the counter. Coming over, she slid it into a gap underneath the sofa and activated a button or switch. The cat made a humming noise, a purr, warming up. After several seconds it gave a jolt and began to move with a clunky side to side tilting motion like an insolent swagger.

“She’s called Cassandra. She’s a new kind of spy. I’ll be back in a tick. Anything to eat?”

“Not a chance,” Bel snapped. The woman walked matter-of-factly to a far door.

The cat approached the sofa, inclining its shiny black Perspex-covered head to miaow a greeting. Toys, ornaments, drugging and counter-drugging. Alice in Wonderland.

The woman came back in a short-sleeve shirt and slacks and with wetted-back hair. Less stodge, more of a glow. The cat doddered in a semi-circle and the woman went behind the bar again, this time removing a pistol from a sealed plastic bag.

“Smith & Wesson. Not loaded, of course.”

It was offered handle first. Bel looked it over briefly. It could have been the gun Georgy gave her to hide, but she couldn’t be one hundred percent. Was this meant to be an icebreaker?

She pointed the gun at the other woman’s chest. “You should know, I’m not anybody’s poor little victim. That bastard who brought me here. That *Blackbeard*. I’ll kick his balls right back up inside him!”

“Oh, I doubt you’ll meet again.” A concerned look. “Do you remember much that happened downstairs?”

“Bits.” Bel angled the gun at the woman’s head. Why not just rush her and slam the butt into her face? Maybe for a second or two that seemed possible, but gestures didn’t bother this seasoned pro. She just smiled and sat down opposite on the round sofa.

“You still haven’t remembered me, have you? Summer of ninety-four, the embassy hospital in Kinshasa? I was there when they put Evelyn’s coffin on the flight back. That’s why I was brought in to help tonight. My name’s Seligman, Muriel Seligman, although I went by my maiden name Whitlock back then.”

Long pause. The name didn’t register.

“I knew your husband Georgy professionally, and maybe certain facts an MI5 officer wouldn’t get from just anyone in MI6. About his family, for instance. But I think it’s time we made a move. I’ll tell you more on the way.”

MI5? Bel threw the gun onto the table. Questions needed answering. They headed to the back of the airship, to another door with a keypad. Seligman punched in the code. “After you.”

Bel stepped out onto a metal staircase. They seemed to be inside a huge hangar. There was a cloying, sweet, leathery smell to the place. Careful to stay side-by-side, they followed the Z-shaped staircase down to a lower landing.

“So, if Eve is dead, how exactly did she die out there? Septicemia, we were told. And that she’d survived rape and battery.”

Seligman’s fingers felt along the inner railing. “Ninety percent of an agent’s workload is very prosaic. My only mystery involved your friend. As I said, I was with the FO in ninety-four, trying to protect our nationals in Shaba, mostly aid workers like her. They weren’t given any training in guerilla warfare situations, after all...

“...So – to the facts. When Evelyn was taken into the main hospital in Kinshasa after this alleged assault hundreds of miles away, there was a virtual wall of MI6 and local intelligence personnel preventing our access. Your husband informed the Embassy from London rather belatedly that this was a matter of national security.”

A couple of flights down, they were out in a well-lit haulage depot. Bel spotted CCTV cameras on top of the border fencing.

“So – what else?”

Seligman’s lips pursed. “He probably didn’t tell you. Secret agents tell their wives very little, I shouldn’t wonder. To keep it brief and to what I *know*. The rape story’s very unlikely. These youths in Shaba were political activists and they were massacred by Congolese forces in the precise spot Evelyn’s supposed rape took place. This was reported in several African states and in the French Press after a French journalist discovered the truth. The episode was buried, though, by much of the Western

media. Unusual, given that it could have quite easily been passed off as yet another incident of its kind in the Civil War.”

“And the ones that reported it, they didn’t mention a white woman being killed?”

Seligman nodded. “The French Press would have, for certain.”

“So, I guess you’re saying she *is* still alive?”

“She may be,” Seligman smiled. “I mean, the Embassy was entirely bypassed when it came to the death certificate and other documents. We were inquiring about it at the airstrip when the coffin was loaded onto the plane. The plane’s destination was later confirmed as the South African Cape. It’s just conjecture, but your sister-in-law might well be living and working under another name abroad, possibly for MI6.”

Bel stayed silent. Well-worked stories couldn’t be trusted as a rule. She still kept a few of Eve’s letters and postcards from that eight month stint. Mostly she’d just complained about the VSO’s rickety jeeps and her lumbar pains. But an undercover *guerilla fighter*? How *did* she end up in hospital?

They were walking downhill. Bel could hear ticking noises from somewhere. Beyond the depot was a squat stone turret with a ratchety rotting door turning in on its hinges. It was lit inside, but the stairwell reeked of damp and moss. They walked down two abreast. A grubby latticed window had spider cracks. At the bottom of the stairwell a holly bush crowned the high wall and the gated wooden door.

As Seligman turned, two holly branches curled like horns above her head. “My car’s just down the road. You lead.”

On the road, Bel saw a Mercedes like the one in London. Its engine and headlights started up. The same trap? The moonlit fields beside the road were no use. Maybe there was another way out through the enclosure?

Turning, she rushed Seligman, who sidestepped her nimbly, grabbed her forearm above the wrist and twisted it behind her back. Bel tried to stamp her heel on Seligman’s foot. The Mercedes drew up alongside. A tall, lithe, grey-haired man stepped out. Bel

swung her right foot at his chest, but he absorbed the kick, grabbing hold of her waist, half-dragging, half-carrying her to the car before hoisting her into the back seat feet first. He leant over and she landed a single punch to his mouth. A revolver was being pointed at her head from the front passenger seat. The rear door slammed and the central locking clicked as they drove off.

Her abductor had the chiselled, unflinching look of a Roman Centurion. The smaller man with the gun gave her a quizzical smile. “We’ve spoken before, Bel. Perhaps you don’t remember?”

She rubbed her eyes with her palms. Her scalp felt hot and the cut still felt strange. The man’s name and upper-crust vowels hadn’t registered at all.

A faint shake of the head. “Don’t tell me. We met at a Royal garden party?”

“We haven’t been introduced. We’ve only spoken. And I’m not posh, Bel,” Stiles said, pouting. “My companion, incidentally, is Doctor Vannier. An excellent doctor. Quite a few hours you’ve had. Hopefully your information will prove useful.”

The doctor took her wrist and checked her pulse. There was a fresh cut on his bottom lip. Then he peered closely into her eyes, his mouth tensing, his breath warm on her cheekbone.

Could she warn him off? Or was she just a patient presenting familiar symptoms? *Yes, it’s the limo with Blackbeard all over again, you dumb, strung-out bitch!* Her nails scratched his face...

Unfazed, he spoke in French, the voice rich and rounded, the tone cold.

Stiles shook his head. “*Rester calme*. This is the girl who can’t fall through the ice anymore, who just slides on the surface. Slim Slow Slider...”

4.

Around 6.30am on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October, on a street in the garment district near the centre of Sofia. Drizzle and a light mist had spread across from Vitosha Mountain, and the echo of round-the-clock restoration work on the synagogue gave the city's centre some sign of life. George Morgan stood in a church doorway, in Fedora and long black raincoat.

He was watching two circus trucks across the street. Clowns' faces and dancing bears were painted on the side with the words *Belenescu Brothers* in bold letters. The trucks were loaded at regular intervals with heavy crates, some metal, some wooden, borne by two-to-three men apiece. The crates were brought out from the basement of a large warehouse, black tarpaulin masking its front along half the length of the street.

The gaffer stood on a truck's ramp giving instructions. He was older, in his sixties. A small black box was brought out after the last crate. The gaffer signalled to Morgan with his thumbs. Then he took the box into the driver's cabin of the first truck. The other men secured their vehicles. Then with a final thumbs-up, the gaffer drove off, heading south and out of the city. The second truck drew out, hooting its horn five times to the warehouse staff before taking a second right for the railway station. Several large ventilated boxes for transporting circus animals were ready for the early morning freight to Milan.

Morgan finished his cigarette, turned up his collar against the rain and walked around behind the church towards the station. He kept a fixed pace uphill through an immigrant quarter of run-down, graffiti-strewn tenements. There were no shops, just a Red Cross unit boarded with Xs of wood at the end of the street. There was no litter. People had nothing to throw away. He cast his eyes three and four flights up at the dirty, often broken windows, most without curtains. No-one looked out at this hour. He might prefer Sofia's old Romany districts with their rag-and-bone men, perfume sellers and prostitutes to this district of the dead.



Opposite the unit, the gutted remnants of a firebombed mosque merged with an embankment of bushes bordered by a barrier-type fence. A rag doll, its face breaking out in stuffing, was impaled on one of the stakes. Morgan wished he was lazing on his riverboat in Provence, listening to Eric Dolphy and sipping a Bandol. Risking his neck to get out of this game was more worthwhile than risking it for Queen and Country.

A steep flight of steps led to a road and five minutes walk to the station. On the road, he heard rustling from behind and below. A huddle of Middle-Eastern men emerged from the bushes and ran to the railings. There were five, three more than expected. Morgan thought the three extras were Turkish Kurds, since there had been a recent influx to the city. They looked very young, their faces furtive, lost and hopeful in turns. Their grey-brown shirts and trousers had kept them well camouflaged in the murky light amidst the vegetation.

The first of the men reached the road and gave Morgan a relieved nod. “Mr. Jafe, yes?”

“Jeffe.” A *nom de guerre* of indefinite origin was best. “We should hurry.”

The front-runner was Meshrak, a Turk. Two days ago Morgan had received the man’s details from his Rome contact via helicopter drop while still holed up in a ragged nameless village near the Bulgarian border.

Meshrak looked like a Western-educated Arabic and History scholar, with his soft open face and well-chosen spectacles. He wore a padded waterproof jacket; the inner light came from being rewarded to think at his leisure. The others joined them and the Englishman was troubled by two scenarios: first, his dapper attire and three young immigrants in tow might suggest vice to the police or station authorities; second, Bulgarian Intelligence might assume the extras were Jihadists and intercept, ignoring the plan coordinated with the Italians.

He offered the men cigarettes, lighting each with a graphite lighter with ‘J.P’ studded in diamond chips. The younger three accepted with no eye contact. Maybe the

diamonds suggested vice to them too. Still, he knew the Kurds wouldn't last the course, and he'd no intention of smuggling them onto the train to Trieste.

“Which of you is Jamir from Southern Lebanon?”

“I am Jamir.” The eldest of the five, stocky, balding with crooked copper-framed spectacles was the second man expected by the Italians.

“Good. Okay. I have enough money for an extra three tickets, but there are only places with the cargo for the two of you as arranged. The other three must travel normally.”

The Englishman gave Meshrak a hard stare. “I take it their passports hold up, but make sure your friends fully understand that we can't waste time at the Serbian border. And there will be further checks during the delays in Belgrade and Zagreb. Suggest they wait until Belgrade at the latest. I think Trieste may be impossible for them. If they have other arrangements to make, they should make these from Belgrade.”

Meshrak spoke quietly to the men in Turkish. “That is fine, Mr. Jeffe. Two of the men have family in Belgrade and arrangements have been made for the third.”

The rain was heavier and the group started walking.

“We have forty minutes until departure. Meshrak and Jamir, you will wait outside the station until I've sorted out your companions, then follow me when I come back out to the luggage depot.”

Somehow Morgan doubted the three younger men were political, traveling the round distance via Turkey or Albania for this passage to Belgrade. They'd probably come to Bulgaria from Germany on the word of relatives. That mattered little: only Meshrak and Jamir counted, for they would ensure the Belenescu's cargo safe passage into Italy. The Italians would intercept the train at Belgrade and chaperone bombs, terrorists, and one erstwhile MI6 agent safely to Milan.

The Red Cross truck followed them down to the city's morning market between the International bus and train stations. Morgan thought being tailed by a Red Cross vehicle was some Serbian war criminal cum surveillance expert's twisted joke. A fighter

jet blazed red trails of smoke high above their heads, the sound reminding him of a giant vacuum cleaner turned down to a dry hiss as they reached the market. Fish and poultry stalls were already setting up, but the only ready food was roe fish and cheap Bulgarian caviar. The fish wouldn't smell the same in the rain. From there sprang the random, dreary thought that the Irish surname 'Morgan' had never suited him. Mitchell Forest Napier had died over twenty years ago, and his resurrection was overdue. His son was twenty-one this month. The son he'd only seen as an infant. The gift from a gap year in a Balinese paradise before institutional loyalty and a sham marriage put pay to his freedom.

Morgan refocused. Just loading the three extra travelers on an early bus was very tempting, but the shelter of the train station beckoned. He still couldn't judge what the personnel in the truck were planning.

The clock above the station entrance read 6.55, so they'd be around fifty minutes behind in Northern Italy. After a full eighteen years of fieldwork, he still struggled with time outside GMT. Meshrak and Jamir loitered outside near some Romany peddlers. The Belenescu crew would have dispatched eight large crates by now at the storage depot, and two would be empty.

Morgan led the three Kurds to the public toilet. "You have payment?"

The tallest hesitated, then nodded. Aside from the black eye, the heel of his right boot was weighted. The Englishman packed the three into a cubicle, standing guard at the door. After about twenty to thirty seconds, the word "Yes?" and then the tallest emerged and handed over the small string-tied packet from his hollow heel. It was probably heroin. There was no lower limit for personal use in Bulgaria. The Kurds wouldn't board the train.

"I'll have the tickets here for you five minutes before departure. Understand? Five minutes."

The tall youth gave a weak smile and a slow nod. He probably hadn't understood. No difference. Morgan walked straight to a security booth at the station

entrance. He flashed a Special Police pass at the guard. A short alarm burst and he entered the booth, stooping at the tight entrance, before handing over the package and confirming the location of the three suppliers. The guard didn't ask questions, alerting the railway police on standby straight away.

Morgan walked out for Meshrak and Jamir, and then all three headed round to the storage depot behind the platforms. There was no sign of the Red Cross jeep, just an Alsatian emptying its bladder into a drain by the kerb opposite. The depot was a windowless black annex with a turnstile for entry. The narrow booth alongside was unmanned. Morgan unbuttoned his coat and pushed his way through, the others following into a dark hallway with a minaret of light on the far wall. Turning right at the wall, the annex became a maze of short thoroughfares. Turns left, right, then left again, and the metallic ringing and occasional belching of stationary trains indicated they were nearing the depot proper. The dying trickle of the Vladaya River from the goods station's underground pipes was also audible. A shaft of brown-yellow light ahead came from under a wall-length corrugated steel sliding door. Morgan stopped at it and turned to Meshrak, whose eyes were full of questions.

"Now, there should be no-one in here. If there is, I'll take care of them. As soon as you're sealed in the crates, you'll be loaded onto the train with the rest of the goods."

Meshrak nodded. Morgan concealed himself behind the door as he pulled it open. He looked again at Jamir who was pale and sweating heavily. There was no alert. The Bulgarians would provide an armed escort on board until the Italians met the train at Belgrade. Morgan led the two men inside.

The storage area was warehouse-sized, and divided into rows of vertical stacking units, mostly occupied. Beyond the goods-in-storage was the Dispatch Section where the signed-in items waited. There were two small windows on Morgan's left and a locked door leading into the main station. Four coffins were stacked on vertical trolleys. Morgan could see the Belenescu Brothers' wooden crates behind the coffins, some

loaded on forklifts. Everything was set for the 7.30 train. He had twenty minutes to seal up the special cargo.

Morgan tested the weight of each wooden crate on the floor, finding two of the lightest unsealed and empty. He opened the crates and beckoned the two men over.

“There’s straw for your comfort, as you can see. Three adults could fit in here.”

Meshrak smiled. “We only have guarantee of passage to Belgrade, Mr. Jeffe. I think it will be fine once we are out of Bulgaria.”

Meshrak was outwardly cool and formal. Perhaps he and Jamir were ready to die at a moment’s notice. “Have you a pocket torch? Other tools? Food, water...?”

Meshrak smiled again, patting his jacket and trouser leg. “All we need.”

“Okay, well climb in. The cargo’s already been weighed. They’ll load you on in about five-to-ten minutes.”

The men climbed into the crates, Jamir needing a supporting shoulder to hunker down. The Englishman sealed the lids tightly with the attached flaps of adhesive black plastic. He looked around. No-one was coming.

As he prepared to leave the way he’d come, there was a sudden noise. A gasp and a burst of movement shook the crate containing Meshrak. Then there was the wheeze of a silenced gun and wood splintered somewhere in front of him. Ducking down, he reached into his inside pocket for his .38. More noise and a slow, agonised yell from behind.

Morgan dashed to the crate, glancing nervously back as he pocketed the gun, before prising the flaps loose and lifting the lid. There was a hissing sound from inside. Meshrak’s face was ashen, his head slumped on his chest, his breathing shallow. From beneath the straw at his neck, the dark V-shaped mark on the viper’s head bobbed to and fro. The rusty zigzag band of its back was just visible around sixty centimetres from his body. The straw rippled as the snake loosened its coils. Meshrak was paralysed.

Morgan slammed the lid down and resealed the crate. It was a clever killing method made to look like some sick prank by the circus crew. And it was most likely a diversion. The lethal contents of the Belenescu cargo were the prize.

Still, warning his Italian contacts was hardly his main concern. He had to get out of the station. He drew his gun again, his mind racing. A double cross? The Bulgarians? Pursuers from St. Petersburg? Maybe the British Joint Terrorism Analysis bods had demanded ex-colleagues track him down as a hostile propaganda trophy? Escape via the storage area now impossible, he considered the locked door, but Meshrak's paralysis was catching. There was no sound or movement from Jamir's crate, yet another puzzle Morgan had no time to dwell on.

He crept towards the Storage Area. This was what all agents dreaded, something he had only faced twice in his career.

Morgan felt the air from the second bullet brush his right cheek. It embedded itself in the Belenescu cargo behind him. He ducked, catching his balance before he hit the floor, and dashing right shoulder forward, tried to force the locked door. Once, twice, three times. No good. The sound of running feet forced him to turn. He levelled the .38 to shoot. There was a figure half-concealed in the doorway to the Storage Section, just the right half of his body and lens of his sunglasses visible, the silencer of his gun angled towards Morgan's chest.

Morgan darted back, but he wasn't quick enough. The first bullet tore into his upper thigh and a second lodged in his left calf. The pain surging through him, he managed two retaliatory shots and the half-figure and weapon withdrew from sight.

His chance gone, Morgan clasped his leg and turned away to catch his breath, no longer alert to any movement behind him. A train was arriving at one of the station's outer platforms. Pain in his lower back made him double over, his leg couldn't support him, and he fell to his knees, closing his eyes tight.

Just before the bullet tore into his neck, he remembered Bel smiling warily on the platform at Edinburgh Waverley. Their first date. On the train, her eyes had smiled too when they talked about their favourite songs.

5.

27<sup>th</sup> October, 2010, four days earlier. Mid-afternoon in Alexandria, Egypt. Osman Yusef Kasir stood in a bookshop off Omar Letti Street. He was reading a recent publication on the use of Girl Guides by British MI5 during World War I, author Wormold Woad. The Girl Guides aged between fourteen and eighteen had patrolled the roof of MI5 HQ, running messages between clerical duties. Kasir smiled, remembering his mother teaching him how to build a coop and rear pigeons on the roof of their apartment building in South-West Cairo.

A tourist in hibiscus shirt and creased cream slacks browsed at the Local History counter. An ugly, heavysset American with a tangled mop of auburn hair cropped at the sides, his name was Gefog. He made films and financed covert CIA operations and was here to meet friends.

Kasir activated the buttonhole camera concealed in the right cuff of his suit jacket and recorded the American's right profile for thirty seconds. Then he took Woad's book to a window table.

The street was half-cloaked in shadow, half-bathed in yellow sunshine. Kasir's watch read ten-past-three. Alessandra Baranyi was due at quarter-past. He'd recruited the thirty-seven year old scholar two years earlier for the Egyptian Secret Service and CIA to train in clandestine communication techniques. Some defectors from Libyan intelligence had assisted. Baranyi had spied for Egypt on the West's behalf. The Gaddafi regime was her target; ideology, a dead father and brothers were her motivations. And she'd done well. The imminent Milan operation on 5<sup>th</sup> November had grown from that seed. It was planned eight months ago.

Kasir scanned a few more pages. Woad disparaged the Mata Hari model of the female spy as a calculating French myth, suggesting her head had been removed from display at the Museum of Anatomy in Paris because of poor bone structure. La Dame



Blanche, a spy network stretching across Belgium and France during WW1, apparently consisted of “tomboys” with “peculiar drives”.

Kasir closed the book with a tired smile. Across the street some African students headed for the Faculty of Engineering. Sounds rattled on in the distance. The industry of the old port would always somehow find its way through the city’s bustle. Alexandria played a recording of its own commercial history on a loop, so it would never be erased. Kasir lamented the lack of music in the city during daytime, quite different from Cairo.

There were raised voices near the shop entrance. Two men in their late-twenties strode in, loudly saluting the American. One wore a cap, but otherwise they wore matching khaki and low-slung camera belts. They ordered coffee from the proprietor who was struggling in the heat, and all three sat two tables from Kasir.

The one with the cap rapped his knuckles on the table. “Hey – you won’t believe it. This building back in Matruh just two blocks from us got blown to shit! An apartment. Just after midday. That’s the rumour. No-one’s said if anyone was inside, but...”

He sounded Dutch. And *what* apartment?

The American’s heavy shoulders heaved. “Yeah – we talked about scouting locations close to that area, maybe Tuesday. I hadn’t decided finally. Y’know we can find any number of beach resorts, and better ones. Where’s those damn ’cinos?”

“Yeah, well,” the Dutchman continued. “My *point* is that the top front of the whole fucking building blew straight off. Doesn’t sound like a *gas* explosion. Maybe a bomb? Won’t be able to start shooting next month, for sure...”

Baranyi should have left her flat in Alexandria’s Western District about half-an-hour ago. Kasir activated his cell phone. She’d never been late before. An explosion in Matruh seemed a chance event, but she *did* vacation there.

The proprietor returned with three cappuccinos. The American sniffed his like a connoisseur.

“So what’s this to us? Do you think they’ll let us have some shots for the aftermath?”

The second newcomer shrugged. “Who knows. We’ve been scouting since Wednesday. Y’know – after you couldn’t make up your mind for the hundredth time...”

“Okay, okay.” Gefog slurped his coffee. The open exhaust of a passing motorbike tore through the conversation.

The capped European again. “Rudi and I put the word about. Y’know, for the part of Mary Magdalene? And – this is it – there *was* a woman staying in that very building. Left her address yesterday. She was interested. Forty, tops. Very dark, deep eyes, and this crazy headscarf with Sistine Chapel prints all over. ”

The glass near Kasir’s cheek had grown cool. He set the cell phone to eavesdrop. If Baranyi was dead, he’d get the information back in a coded message. Then again, no-one expected her to be in Matruh. Meeting each other’s gaze, Kasir and the American exchanged nods.

“Well, we could polish up our diplomatic skills and ask the Department of Culture to let us film the debris. We’d only have to mock up the explosion on the lot. Same props as *Harbinger of Jericho* and *Night of Chaos*. But a ready-made aftermath” – the American toasted his cup – “now *that’s* something!”

The film titles sounded like the work of so-called End-Timers: American religious groups like Baptist fundamentalists and Seventh-Day Adventists. Israel regains the Great Temple, America confronts the denizens of evil and then Apocalypse! Baranyi had converted to Christianity whilst studying in the States. A possible gambit.

He felt the phone vibrate against his left palm. The message was in numeric code, giving the apartment’s precise location, the time of the explosion, and instructing him to head for Matruh within the hour. Baranyi was a suspected casualty. Her age, a ‘37’ with a strike through, communicated that last part. The cold, reductive manner of the message hurt. His hands were shaking.

He flexed his fingers and punched in a message. Who was behind it? The Libyans? Iran or Russia? A homegrown sleeper cell?

Several minutes passed. The tone of the trio's conversation had lightened. Kasir tried to imagine Baranyi's two days since their last contact. Had she been with a man, a brief last romance? He loosened his tie and shirt collar.

Then a reply. A pipe bomb in the apartment's heating ducts. Liquid explosives suspected on the premises. Multiple deaths, the final number anticipated in the low twenties. Responsibility presently unclear. Operational Command wanted Kasir to explain the liquid explosives. He had other ideas.

He cleared his throat. "Excuse me, gentlemen. I couldn't help overhearing. I work for the Department of Culture based here in Alexandria. The woman you mention with the headscarf was a noted Christian scholar. It is very sad news about this explosion. It is bound to be the work of some terrorist faction."

Gefog grinned coarsely. "No kidding? God, that's worthy of a film, even. Look, what's your name? Come and sit here with us. We could use some advice."

Kasir nodded and joined the table. "My name is Jacob Mistry. From Jerusalem."

Gefog clasped Kasir's hand in both of his own. The gesture felt genuine.

"Wouldn't you *know*! Heaven sent! Friends call me 'Waco' or 'The Virginian'. Confuses a lot of people. Now tell us about your work for the Department of Culture. Maybe you're the guy to help us through the red tape with our film."

...

It was around five when Kasir arrived in Mersa Matruh to survey the scene. It didn't feel like an official duty. He felt nauseous and lightheaded and his footsteps were unsure. It was a delayed state of shock. He hadn't imagined how he'd feel if she died. She'd been unattainable, but he'd enjoyed her company, her scent of jasmine and lavender and his feeling of being alive in the world; but it wasn't the time for these thoughts.

Sporting a dust mask, he could only give the devastated apartment block near the centre of the resort a cursory inspection. That even a fragment of her bone, a torn scrap of her flesh, might be nearby sickened him. There was a potent sulphurous smell throughout the upmarket neighbourhood, and ash and white dust everywhere, on the railings and bordering trees of the private park opposite the apartments. There was no sign of human casualties at street level. Car windows were shattered at the near side of the park, but the debris ended abruptly just beyond the line of trees. The TV crews had set up along the pavement to the right of the building, civilians with digital cameras taking up marginal positions. The American had asked Kasir for access to the scene for a location shot. Kasir had promised he'd support their application to the Department of Culture; but after today the scene would be too shopworn for a movie.

On the other side of the square behind a rippling black cordon, groups of onlookers mingled in front of a stretch of smart shops and delicatessens. Young couples were still holding hands, street hawkers glanced at the men in uniforms, and tourists and local shoppers were united by a lapse in purpose. A jogger limbered up at the far side of the park, oblivious to a barking Borzoi alongside voicing its curiosity on behalf of the humans present. The medics were retrieving bodies from the building, but otherwise the sense of death was strangely subdued. Some of these people might imagine they were dreaming, Kasir thought. People did not accept unexpected events lightly and disaster often seemed to slow the wits. Besides, the military would have cleared the area if terrorist activity had been the official line.

Kasir skirted a far trajectory of brickwork gingerly like a foraging bird wary of damaging its feet. GIS had arranged the release of a sulphurous compound to mask the hydrazine from the explosion. A gas leak would be officially blamed, despite the sulphur in the air. Otherwise the Ministry of the Interior had covered-up well: the rubble could have been caused by a wrecking ball. After the medics and forensic experts finished, the clearance trucks would arrive and tidy the scene as if on a standard Demolition Order.

His eyes were watering. He thought of witnesses. What fragments of perception might stick in the mind? Would any two people remember the same details?

Kasir left the forensic investigators to do their work, only clarifying that the apartment's water and heating pipes, possibly at the source of the blast, had been removed for laboratory tests. He walked to the waterfront and checked into a hotel for a couple of hours, longing for nightfall. He left around seven. The Arriosi restaurant and bar occupied a round corner of weather-beaten white stucco ushering day trippers onto the seafront promenade, dust-devils doing the opposite when strong evening winds got up. Security was tight in the resort; but as the night inked over the sky's blue ridged base, smart-casual tourists from Cairo and Alexandria were still enjoying the sultry heat on their early evening walks. On the beach behind the bar, the new Lotus Eaters with their date wine and marijuana hummed a minimalist composition. The Arriosi's bar cashed in on these students, as if they'd brought the gift of the Sacred Lotus itself to the area. Kasir read the menu at the restaurant's acacia-bordered entrance. The hors d'oeuvre of sautéed lotus root, baby bamboo shoots and wood ear mushrooms in a garlic and soybean sauce made his mouth water.

He was early for his American contact. Eight months planning had gone into this operation, while deals, payoffs, logistics, modus operandi, and optimum location were arranged. Almost a decade on from 9/11, the Americans still needed to keep oil sources like Libya risk-free. And they wanted to deflate Gaddafi's propaganda bubble after Al Megrahi's return to Tripoli. The blood of American civilians was a price too high for their oil.

So the false flag operation in Milan would implicate Tripoli, allowing Washington to muster international support in clipping Gaddafi's wings. Nowadays, Kasir's old friends in Egypt would applaud his role as heroic, certainly for a forty-four year old part-time Professor of Economics. His work at the LSE was under the auspices of the institution's MI6 network: he was the GIS's man in London.

Less welcome were the stark divisions and narrowing minds here in Egypt. The historical shaping of regional identities, beliefs and institutions was scarcely debated now. Since the Sinai bombings, the war against Jihadists, infiltrators or outsiders, had become a political mantra for many. Mubarak's regime had been quick to capitalise. Egypt had become the country where foreigners would arrive and disappear after a few days; where thugs would seize political dissenters, often students, from sidestreets and dormitories. If Syrians were mere torturers, Egyptians could claim to be black magicians. Kasir had known of two female Yemeni students whose deaths had been linked to a meat processing factory near Cairo. Their crime was to teach computer skills to the young unemployed in Giza. The real criminals only spent a few hours in police custody.

In the locals' bar in front of the restaurant, old men played Siga on five-by-five boards, the sound of evenly dropped stones announcing each new game. The restaurant was GIS owned and secure. Besides, with the latest satellite technology, the remote rendezvous of the Cold War era was impractical. Access was via a courtyard with a backlit fountain of aromatic pink water at its centre.

Kasir chose a corner table. Since losing his wife and child, he'd grown fussier about privacy when dining out. Before, the joy of watching his little daughter eating a pureed meal in her high chair made any restaurant visit a family experience. Reading the menu, he grimaced at the evening special: braised winter melon stuffed with a young deboned chicken, ginger and shallots.

He ordered a glass of Chablis. Alessandra Baranyi's favourite. They'd dined here together only once. A family of French tourists and two businessmen were the other patrons tonight.

Richard Borringer strode in wearing a patched suede jacket as Kasir's wine arrived. The CIA had returned to their former power under the Democrats. A few years ago clandestine outfits affiliated with the Pentagon were in charge of America's False

Flag operations. With his square-jawed determination, Borringer was the agency's perfect poster boy.

"Hello, Yusef." The American took his chair. Leaning forward, he fingered the menu in Kasir's hand, his sleeve brushing the candle flame.

"Special's kinda weird..."

Borringer lowered his voice to a quiet, grating rasp. "To business, then. *Right* – this new micro-vacuum bomb the Russians perfected – literally just a few months back? Still with the boffins – not part of a buried arsenal. The prototypes were stolen... What's that you're drinking? Chablis? I'll have one of these, *waiter please!*"

"And there was a buyer?" Kasir sipped his Chablis. The French tourists were giving him curious looks, the wine glass in his hand.

Borringer drummed his fingers on the table. "Sure – this Brit company Thermofare. A contract on the quiet. The Brits are up to their stiff uppers in shit as far as the theft goes, too. They've put the heat on some fucking rogue agent at MI6. A tad convenient, but maybe of interest since you've a post in London, *right?* Their guy would be behind the specs for the bomb getting swiped 'bout the same time, no question. Listen, I've been on the road since eleven, Yusef. Could really do with something – waiter, *yes you!* Oh, the wine – thank you. Could you bring me and my friend here two of your specials? Thanks.

"Now – one of their guys in Baghdad was bragging about how easy it'd be to send out the new baby bombs. They're no bigger than these melons we'll be chowin' on, before too long I hope." Borringer frowned huffily. "Although, I dunno, let's hope the bombs are smaller than that even..."

"...Any which way, the contractor was killed. A guy called Swain. The nimrod tried to double deal on hardware paid for by the British military. So no more middleman."

Borringer's eyes narrowed and he jabbed his finger at Kasir, making the flame stutter. "Now, here's the drill. These babies are comin' into Milano in a few days.

They're *ours* now. All obstacles, mules and authorities, done and dusted – or as *good* as. Our boys and SISMI have thrown a blanket over the town. This thing just got even bigger than False Flag.”

“Yes, I follow.” Borringer had been brutally frank. “But Baranyi’s death here, Richard, presents my more immediate problem.”

“I know, Yusef.” Borringer sighed, relaxing in his chair a little. “*Sure* the Libyans might have killed Baranyi. Y’know, a treason plot’s a treason plot, after all. Still, there’s no chance of Tripoli knowing about Milano. Baranyi could’ve been traveling there for any number of reasons. You’ve got contacts on the ball in Italy, right?”

Kasir watched the French diners puzzling over their newly arrived braised melons. “Well, yes...”

Kasir knew the Strategy of Tension from the nineteen-seventies was a model for Milan, but he felt the Italians’ loyalty came unfeasibly cheap. Besides, from what he’d read, the original *strategy* was a conspicuous disaster. High ranking SISMI officers were tried for the Bologna bombing in 1980 and the aim to discredit the Italian Left failed.

Borringer coughed twice, before resuming in his normal voice. “Hey, you know we might have that package you wanted ready prepared? This friend of ours, the English explorer?”

Coded conversations with Borringer were easier to follow. Tonight though, nothing was easy. “Yes, I see Richard.”

Borringer gave a double wink. “Well, he uses it back in England to spy on all those nasty little homegrown tree-huggers, bums like your lotus people out there. He’s using it right now on something, programmed with instructions in *his own* voice captured for posterity. In short – something that just *might* fit the program for Milano now your own equipment’s gone ‘Fries Up!’”



Borringer swirled the wine in his glass, his voice hushed again. “I gave your bona fides to MI5 myself on this one. No real need, of course, with your work at the LSE.”

Back to normal volume. “You just punch in a code to make the gizmo work, so I’m told.”

“A woman?” Kasir whispered.

Borringer nodded.

“British? Muslim?”

Borringer gave a half-shrug. “British. Sound interesting?”

Kasir took another sip. The wine tasted sour. He wished he was outside walking on the beach, close to the water’s edge.

“She is not Libyan, though,” he said quietly. “If she has to travel it will need to be under a new identity. As a Libyan.”

“Simple enough, Yusef. Bound to be plenty of dead infants around the date of her birth. Most probably got her original identity that way.”

Kasir wouldn’t have thought so. “Birth certificates and passports aren’t easily rushed through in Tripoli. We only have a few days, remember. The child of Libyan nationals, or a Libyan father just. A child of the same age, who died in England? Perhaps this is a better approach?”

Borringer beamed, thumbs-up, returning to full volume as the food arrived. “Jesus, you’re cookin’ my friend. Keep that your last option though.”

As the waiter left, Borringer whispered: “She’s active, Yusef. Her name’s in the frame, but you’ll have to act fast. Even if she has to travel as your dead girl, Baranyi.”

The melon was brownish yellow, like a jaundiced skull split in the middle. Kasir wasn’t sure whether to broach the subject of the film crew; in any case, viewing Borringer’s mouth full of food wouldn’t do his already dwindling appetite any favours.

Borringer extracted a reedy strip of ginger like a lizard’s tongue. “By the way, Yusef – I hear you’ve been discussing loaves and fishes with ‘The Virginian’?”

II

6.

2nd November 2010. Kasir had arrived from Frankfurt on the eight o'clock flight, taking a taxi from Heathrow to MI5's Technology Assessment Centre at Bletchley Grange, West London.

At the Grange he met Bel Andreus's MI5 groomer Stiles, who led him down a chilly three flights to a darkened observation room. Two small footlights below the one-way glass preserved its outline.

"She's been here over fifty hours now and this has been running about forty minutes," Stiles said. "We use Tranquility, a safe designer drug that induces total compliance. And after recent problems we had to implant her." He jabbed a finger between his own shoulder blades where her biochip had been injected. "Just so you know."

"Recent problems?"

Stiles loosened the knot in his tie. "Yes. She *bites*..."

Kasir wasn't sure how to pursue the subject. The French operation several hours ago seemed the better tack. Borringer had shared the details by phone. The operating codes for the Russian bombs were clearly the American's priority.

"I was glad to hear that she was helpful. The microdot?"

The MI5 man pinched the skin of his neck. "Hmm, yes. The information was stored on a flash drive. We've still some business with the Russians, however."

Kasir sensed tension. Borringer had mentioned the British were working with a Russian. Still, it wasn't an Egyptian concern.

They watched in near silence for over an hour. The subject wore a hospital gown with heavy rectangular padding under the flats of her hands and wrists: her stare was vacant and her body limp. Electrodes on neck and temples monitored EEG readouts, her neuro-feedback. Her calves and forearms were shackled to the heavy metal frame of the chair. Her right ankle was padded. The room resembled a metal box, visual images

running on every surface, speakers booming back from strategic positions. A generator sent out ELF and VLF electro-magnetic waves in tandem with the audio-visual triggers. Intensive thought control.

The electronic voices were channeled into the observation room. Kasir watched the images, repeated at intervals, often in the same combinations. Some he understood: the Venetian canals, Biblical tableaux, and the imposing font of San Agostino chapel, as well as other Milanese landmarks. In addition, three magnified photos were projected regularly, often interspersed with disturbing, if stagey, presentations of violent acts perpetrated by females. Kasir recognised the photos of George Morgan and Rian Van Warne. He didn't recognise the man in the third photo. Bel's heightened agitation in these moments suggested the tactic was effective.

Bel. He thought of her as Bel.

He couldn't fathom the other images. There was a picturesque street in the rain, canals, wartime photos of refugees and urban poor, and CGI of wispy skulls, explosions and tidal waves. There was a grainy image of a blonde girl and a blond, bearded boy in a faded red and black motorcycle jacket handling artifacts on an archaeological site, then walking arm-in-arm at night through a city courtyard. Then the blonde girl stood by a canal. Cloaked and pale, she was laying out small clay bowls of water or wine by makeshift cardboard coffins. Drawn, elderly faces of both sexes appeared on lamplit streets. Then the image of opera singer Maria Callas in the role of Medea appeared for the fourth time.

"So, Mr. Stiles, I presume that part of your work this evening is to *de-program* Miss Andreus, as far as any previous persona is concerned?"

Stiles tutted. "The sorceress business was cooked up back in ninety-seven. Apparently, giving her some illusory command over the elements counteracted a childhood fear of drowning that might have hindered her program. However, I certainly can't take any credit. I'm not an agent-runner, Professor, just the overseer of certain programs, and occasionally the operator. I'm not the actual programmer or one of the

shrinks. But she's yours. The new information has real *hooks*. Now she thinks she's a murderer, she'll be too scared not to play ball. And then there's the lure of Venice. And of course, the fact that the long lost Evelyn Morgan may actually be alive and well."

"And is Miss Morgan alive?"

"Hmm..." Stiles poked in his ear with his little finger. "Nowadays, she's Six's business."

The offhand manner irritated him, but Kasir persevered. "I have more immediate questions about the program. Why we call her 'Slim', for example?"

Stiles seemed puzzled. "You mean the Van Morrison song? One of the shrinks can fill you in. I'd set up a meeting for early tomorrow in any case."

Kasir said nothing further. For now, he'd learned enough.

§

*She pushes the door inwards, stepping in and leaving it on the latch, feeling for a light switch. There is a light humming noise and a small dash of red light in the darkness. Her fingers trawl down the wall to her right. They dance in the dark until, at last, she finds a switch and the overhead strip lighting ripples into life before stuttering and sputtering in crackle and hiss...*

*In front of her is an inverted 'U' of five deep freezers. She tests the first two on her right. They are either jammed or locked, but they are both silent and their outer temperature is the same as the room's. Two facing are the same. Only the one against the back wall is working. She studies the lid for a few seconds. It is a panel lid and is certainly colder, so she slides the freezer open.*

*The harsh white interior light reveals what lies encased in the huge block of ice inside. His hair is now beaded white. She vomits down the front of the freezer...A bit on her skirt, a bit on the floor...she turns to run, and –*

She woke up shaking and shivery. The dull, blue fluorescent lighting was on all the time. The lighting was the same even if the rooms changed. Her back, hip and ankle

were all throbbing and she needed painkillers. She wouldn't scream the walls down today. It was still early. Nobody came anyway. The windowless room brought back memories of similar situations, or perhaps just one...

The private hospital, the place the oddyspaces began their work. They'd brainwashed it out of her for years and years, but Georgy's psychiatrist had given her the memory back. She'd been interviewed almost as soon as they'd stabilised her. After the overdose. A grim Eastern Block-style compound in some desolate coastal spot north of Edinburgh. They asked if she could swim; one of the first questions, and she couldn't figure the hell why? After a couple of days she was on this special exercise regime to strengthen her heart muscle and liver function. There were detailed explanations. The doctors were convincing. The coke and the booze had caused some real damage, they thought. She was told to strip naked by two sympathetic nurses, poured into a very light wetsuit and fitted with a breathing mask. Then she was taken to this darkroom where two of the nurses lowered her face down into a tank of warm, rippling water. She was suspended there for upwards of an hour. It was strange that she didn't even think about panicking. Was she maybe hypnotised in the water? It felt weird, like waiting to be born again. All she could hear was her own breathing. She'd gently flex her knees and pass her hands under her stomach and breasts to prevent the stillness becoming her enemy. After a while she'd pretend breast stroke or splash her feet in order to keep relaxed. That was only the first trick she learned for doing that.

It made her chill worse thinking back to the Floating Room, but it was a bracing chill, a way to face the day. Molten steel had blended with her marrow, leaving her all at once purified and unbreakable.

In the bathroom mirror, she could make out the beginning of a bruise, a shadow ready to spread along her jawline. MI5 took their precautions: the mirror was protected inside hard plastic casing, the cups were plastic, and there wasn't even a toothbrush for a weapon. There was only a trickle of liquid soap from a mounted dispenser beside the sink; not enough to choke on. Her stomach was bloated. She tried sitting down. She'd

been backed up for days. One of these plastic cups might come in handy. The first bastard at the door would get a stinking eyeful! If they wanted to treat her like an animal...

No, too undignified. She flushed and got up to wash her face, soaping over the tender jaw a few times until the skin felt dry enough to peel. Her lower back and hip were stiff, her fingernails pale and matted like whalebone. What the *hell*? What did they want? Swain and Georgy's mysterious fucking book should've been enough. A murderess might be expected to tough these things out, or rot in jail. Was that what they were counting on?

Actual killings she couldn't remember. Just one death.

There were two pieces of chocolate on a Kleenex by the bedside table. Early breakfast. The sweet coated her teeth as she looked around the room. There was a bureau with a yellow doily on top, a wooden chair with its legs twined together and a red velvet footstool. Again, the weapon potential was close to squat; but these pieces of old tat concealed bugs for sure.

A foil strip of morphine capsules lay beside the Kleenex. They were always careful to keep her well-stocked. Six left. The pain wasn't so severe. She pressed one into her hand, downing it with a cup of water. Five left. She thought of finishing a handful, of oblivion, of choice; but there wasn't a choice. There was a little phrase in her head, something her grandfather used to say: 'All these things too shall pass'. She remembered those words spoken in his Dutch accent as he held her freezing little body tight, carrying her away from the pond. He was talking about the nightmares she'd have later.

Feeling sad wouldn't help. She sat on the bed, emptying the last capsules onto a tissue and wrapping them up. It might just look like idling, the product of pure boredom. Rolling the stiff foil as tightly as possible, she narrowed one end to a point, compressing it as far as possible by twisting and twisting. Sliding it between index and forefinger, she rammed it into her palm. It scratched and chafed, and she had to leave only the tiniest

part exposed to prevent the whole strip from bending. It might put out an eye at the right angle.

Right now, she could do it. Just thinking of that little traitor Zal was enough. And if these bastards wanted to keep her on board this nightmare train, they could expect to be part of the wreck.

§

Wednesday 3rd November. They left Bletchley Grange before midday. Over two hours earlier, Kasir had sat in a cramped West London bookshop café with Bel's MI5 appointed psychiatrist, Dr. Darius Fox. Fox had been happy to drink mocha and talk for Kasir's buttonhole camera. He stressed the complex role of water in Andreus's trauma, her attachment to her Dutch grandfather, and her disjointed home life. There had been a journalist father based in Amman who'd only spared his daughter one week at Christmas every two years. There had been time spent in between with an alcoholic aunt and a young cousin with a spinal injury. Maybe small things...

She slept soundly beside him in the limo's rear. There were faint red indentations on her neck from last night's electrodes. During twelve years with GIS, he'd never imagined a scenario quite like this. And if Stiles' opiates and truth drugs weren't novelties in his field, Kasir had never resorted to them. He'd brought codeine forte and it wouldn't be enough. She'd rebel, lash out, he was sure: after her three violent outbursts in London, his gashed shin and swollen ankle were testimony.

His forehead felt tender. Days of agitation, fear, unhappiness. He couldn't imagine this woman as Alessandra, yet time constraints meant she had to be. The Americans wanted no photos of Bel Andreus for the media; she (or her body) would disappear immediately after the bombing. But the careless damage to Baranyi's memory...why hadn't the horror of it dawned before now?



Bel's cloak was bunched up around a bare upper left thigh, her fist tight round the hem. She woke calmly on a stretch of beech-lined country road near the manor.

The limousine turned into the first driveway on the right. Gate-entry at the retreat was by voice recognition. Massingham Manor was rented per quarterly for the teaching of Philosophical Inquiry classes and workshops by 'Collaborative Faith', also known as 'The Other Magic Circle'.

Kasir had learned few facts about the Circle. Founder Matthew Mangrave was murdered in 1970, the crime never solved. In the nineteen-eighties, Mangrave's wife Paula devoted the Circle's resources to a variety of Direct Action programs, including the Greenham Common encampment. MI5 infiltrated at this stage, and later when the Anti-Poll Tax Movement became a cause célèbre. Bel and Evelyn Morgan, Paula Mangrave's niece, became activists in the early nineties. Since then, the Circle had been an MI5 concern. Paula Mangrave, meanwhile, had been in prison for the past six months.

Ruffling her hair and rearranging the cloak around her legs, Bel looked over the front grounds. There were some dozen vehicles, half of them off-roaders, parked outside the manor.

She coughed hoarsely. "I could murder for a bloody cigarette."

Looking him over frostily, she added: "You're supposed to sell things, aren't you? Little shopkeeper from *Mister Benn*?"

Kasir frowned, not understanding. He produced a packet of B&H and lit her cigarette. He tapped on the partition window with his ring and the window lowered.

"Please, drive past the main entrance round to the garages."

"Certainly, sir," the driver said.

Bel grasped Kasir's hand, inspecting the silver ring inlaid with gold and diamonds. "You're a Mason?"

“Well no. It was a gift from an English friend. From the order ‘Sons of the Desert’.” Kasir pointed out the detail with his pinkie. “With the scimitar and crescent moon.”

“So no funny handshakes?”

“No funny handshakes,” Kasir smiled.

She held her cigarette with perfect poise. Suddenly she stiffened.

“Bloody back! Itching like mad too. What’s *your* name again?”

“Kasir. Yusef Kasir.”

A cinder path between the garages led to a gate. Beyond it a wider paved pathway curled round to the small chapel building. Twin towers flanked a rose window on the front facade and invocations in Latin were carved high up on the walls. Still higher up were dragon-snouted gargoyles leering from short turrets. There was a peal of thunder and the first splashes of rain. Bel ran ahead into the building.

At the end of the aisle, the altar stood in front of a large memorial brass plate. The font was in an arched niche to the altar’s left. Bel ran her fingers back and forth around its interior. When she turned, her expression was closed. She flexed her knees lightly. Her pale blue eyes looked tired.

He nodded to a side door behind the altar to their right. “Your living quarters are through there. It is an old caretaker’s house. Let us go through and talk.”

Beyond the connecting vestibule, the chapel house had four fairly spacious rooms: living room, kitchen, bathroom with shower cubicle, and a bedroom with a garden view. A marble headstone with ornate gilt sylphs was at the garden’s centre, and an asterisk of paving stones extended from it. A ditch ran along the left of the garden. Ivy covered a walled entrance to the main grounds.

She took in the room without giving him a glance. Kasir tried to see the accommodation through her eyes. Enough space and light? Comfortable? Or perhaps it felt like a prison.

“Who’s buried in the garden?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Kasir said. “But there is a crypt beneath the chapel.”

He tried to ignore the knot in his gut. “In a way, Miss Andreus, we are both coming a little blind into this operation. I expected the young woman doing your job to never set foot again in a European Union country. She was a spy the Americans knew of. They would have guaranteed her citizenship there.”

Still no eye contact. “What happened to her?”

Kasir guided her to the living room with nervous hands. One cheerless small window let in a narrow pool of light. Another facing the garden was just visible behind heavy navy-blue curtains. There was a bashed television with warped aerial sitting squat in front of the curtains like a guard dog, a chair and sofa, and an enameled vase of asters, board game compendium and magazines on the coffee table.

“Suicide. In Alexandria. She worked at the library there. Her father and brothers were killed under the Gaddafi regime. She believed our operation would help create a fully accountable government in her home country.”

Bel rolled up the cloak’s sleeves, exposing recent needle marks on her forearm. A level look. “You know I’m wanted for murder in *two* countries?”

Suddenly her face was in her hands. For an instant. “Jesus, I’m stitched up, aren’t I?! I suppose I should be bloody grateful I’m not in jail! I hope you don’t think I was trying to kill *you* earlier?”

Kasir gave an involuntary laugh. “I wouldn’t worry. I understand it’s difficult, but after this is over, you will be safe and secure for life.”

A little pout of the bottom lip. “What the hell *is* all this business about my husband falling and hitting his head? It was just an accident, right? And now he’s supposed to have *died* from it?”

“Well, yes – maybe. But perhaps you are not the obvious suspect.”

“No?”

Kasir scratched his temple. “I was thinking less of literal examples, than the general nature of his work. He’d have sensitive information that –”

“– He wouldn’t have passed onto *me*. What are we doing here anyway?”

“A private flight will leave tonight. You’re going to Italy, Bel.”

“That so?” She walked towards the door, arms folded. “Y’know, I never even saw the marriage certificate? We had this registry office, rubber stamp...*moment*. A building round the corner from his office, with another spook the witness. A guy calling himself Cloistermouth, Charles Cloistermouth.

“I mean, who were they fooling?” She made inverted commas with her index fingers. “‘*Cloister Mouth*’ as the witness!”

Her laughter sounded harsh in the room. “God, women are such idiots when they think they’re in love! Charlie Speak-No-Evil, Loyal-To-His-Pals barely managed a smile.”

Kasir cleared his throat. “You know, Bel, the head injury may have led to his death, but –”

“So he’s definitely gone, and I’m prime suspect?”

Kasir made a ‘slow down’ signal with his hand. “Forgive me for asking, Bel. But how do you actually feel about it? Your husband’s...?”

“...Death?”

She wandered into a patch of daylight by the small window. Kasir could see a tiny hairline scar and a faint bruise under her jaw. “I *should* feel worse. There’s so much going on.”

She ran her tongue over her lips. “Then again, you’re not left enlightened when someone close dies. It’s either a necessary next step or nothing at all.”

She walked round the table, arms still folded, eyes down, isolated. “My mother died when I was born, and I can’t have children. There’s no balancing out in that. It just leaves you with your fill of death. Not being able to give life feels like an alliance with death. Your life is framed by death, it feels closer than it’s supposed to feel when you’re wrapped up in the everyday. And Georgy became less and less part of my everyday –”

Kasir held up his hands. “– One moment. There was something sent for you to see, I think.”

He went to the bedroom. Drawing out the hardback book from the dresser’s top drawer, he checked the inside cover before returning.

“This was delivered to Frankfurt.”

He ran his finger around the brown and ochre polyester hexagons. “There was a millimetre thick dot of film imprinted in one of the patterns here with – we are sure – the operating specifications for the Russian vacuum bombs. Your husband planned to sell this in the West. It was posted in St. Petersburg. However, he did not arrive in Germany to collect it. The microdot is now with German Intelligence.”

“*And...?*” She leant against the wall, rubbing her forehead, struggling with memory. “Look, all I know about is the book in Normandy, the one MI5 wanted. I don’t know what happened after that. I...”

“Yes, I see that,” Kasir said. “But something like this might implicate others in your husband’s death. Try to remember, we can help if you help us. Do you want to sit down?”

She took the sofa. Kasir placed the book on the table and took the chair. He perched forward, wringing his hands.

“Listen very carefully. *Slim Slow Slider.*”

Her suspicious eyes softened and her body creased into the sofa. Her breathing relaxed. He stood up and passed his hand in front of her face. Slowly, back and forth about a dozen times. Then he took his seat again and waited. After thirty seconds, he continued.

“You will conduct this operation safely. There will be no risk. Your experience of Direct Action will ensure your success. In just two days, at 2pm, there is a circus procession in Milan city centre. The mayor of the city will be driving very slowly in an open-top vehicle at its head. It is arranged that you will parade as a clown. The clowns will all be carrying helium balloons, holding these above the head always. The balloons

have strips of aluminium foil attached. There will be children along the route, and some will be standing at the poles under the CCTV cameras with the same balloons. No-one will witness your performance except your rightful audience.”

He lit a cigarette and checked his watch. He’d keep the first session as brief as he could. In his jacket pocket was a folded Fedora. He stood and handed it to her.

“This is a bowler hat. A *bowler* hat. You will hold the hat in front of you with one hand. The other hand will hold the balloon. The inside of the hat will be nearest to you. Now hold it out in front of you, the inside nearest.”

Her right hand reached out toward his left ear, while she stared into the hat in her left hand.

“Good, very good. You will keep your finger on the detonating pellet inside the rim of the hat, and you will march with a big smile just like the other clowns. The very important thing for you to remember is where the detonator is hidden. Inside the rim of the bowler hat you will be wearing as a clown. You will feel under the rim the first time you are given the hat. There will be a tear in the rim and you will feel a wire and a small round pellet inside. Feel the pellet. You can pull it out very easily.”

Feeling under the rim for the tear, she drew out the invisible wire and pellet daintily, like drawing a loose thread. Thunder rumbled outside.

“Excellent. Now slide the pellet back into the tear for now. Good. Then you must let go of the balloon and place both hands on the hat, still holding it in front of you when you hear this music I’m about to play. Hold it in front with both hands.”

She leant forward to release the balloon, Kasir shuffling awkwardly to his left.

“Good.” Kasir’s mobile phone rang in his inside pocket. Its tone was the theme from *Dr. Zhivago*; beautiful, if a little syrupy. He placed the phone at her left ear for several seconds.

“When you hear this music, you will march with the other clowns to pails of water in front of you. You will stop at the pails. The pails will have lids with slots – *openings* allowing the lids to be lifted off. You will have your own pail of water and you

will stand still at it. The hat will still be in your hands, and you will take out the pellet by the loop in the wire. You will take out the pellet, holding it in one hand. Do that now.”

Her forefinger hooked under the rim of the hat making a small dent. The ringtone grew louder. He placed the phone on the coffee table. She drew the wire and pellet fully out and held it at arm’s length in her right hand.

“Excellent. You will put the hat back on your head. Then you will kneel down by the pail, and with your other hand you will lift off the lid and touch the inner base of your own pail. The water will be cool and will refresh you. Do that now.”

She placed the Fedora on her head. Then she stood up and knelt down again in a fluid motion. Prizing loose the lid with her left hand, she dipped closed fingers into the pail of cool water.

“Good. *Very good*. Now, this is extremely important. There is a long bump on the base of your pail with another compartment you can open, and there is a space inside. You will feel a little strap on top of the bump. Pull the strap with your fingers and it will open to one side. Do that. Good. Now, with your other hand – place the pellet and wire into the space. Do that. Fit it all inside. Excellent. Now close the compartment on the base tightly, remove your hands from the water and replace the lid on the pail. Then stand up. Do that.”

Procedures done, she stood up.

“Now you will entertain the children in the crowd by walking toward them with the pail of water. Yourself and the other clowns. You will not splash the water around, but you will move very close to the barrier in front of the children and their parents. Everyone will be smiling at you and your fellow clowns. They will think you are going to take the lid off the pail again and make them wet with the water. They will all think that is very funny.”

Perhaps she could see rows of faces, strangely arrayed. Maybe the faces struck her as cold or mocking or hostile: there was the same hard-edged smile he’d seen when she’d spoken of her marriage ceremony. Kasir’s thumb brushed his cigarette butt to and

fro. Years of grooming needn't make the subject entirely gullible. His thumb knuckle rubbed his brow, keeping the cigarette smoke clear of his nostrils.

Now she turned back to the crowd. Kasir sat back down and closed his eyes. Taking a final draw on the cigarette, he blew a smoke ring, imagining it slowly forming to perfection. It framed the face of a young female student from his London seminars by the name of Anoushka. The girl's open yet polite manner recalled his wife Neith, whom he'd met at a similar age. He imagined a scene, a young Neith dancing in a splendid garden while small chirruping birds took turns to circle her and hover. She held aloft a dazzling golden cup. There were no crowds, just birdsong and all the lush and soothing sounds of a British summertime. The cup raised to her mouth fizzed at the brim...

The thunder made him open his eyes with a start. The vortex of smoke was just dispersing. Bel stood, her arms drawn across her chest, humming a quiet melody, and swaying in slow motion. Was she cradling a baby? The Egyptian coughed violently twice, cigarette ash singeing his cuticles. He only managed to croak the word "*Bellissima*" once, before hurrying to the kitchen for some water.



7.

After their session, Kasir arranged for someone to cut and dye Bel's hair. Leaving one of Stiles' security men in charge, he headed back to the manor's reception area. The faxes he'd requested from MI5 had arrived. The first contained details of the police incident log for Amsterdam's old quarters on the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> September 1998. The estimated time of Rian Van Warme's death was 1.15am and the log covered incidents between 9pm Saturday night and 3am Sunday morning. There were seventeen reports from the Nieuwmarkt district where he'd drowned: four common assaults, two drug overdoses, one reported rape, one attempted murder, a house fire, the drowning itself, one illegal use of firecrackers in the street and the rest drug offences.

Seated with the crumpled sheets in the lounge, one report caught Kasir's eye. At 9.20pm, police had been called to a rented warehouse studio apartment after a woman was pushed down the stairs by her partner. The man had fled. Two neighbours on the spot mentioned concussion, but the woman had evaded the officers at the scene. The couple didn't return.

No reference, though, to the scenario in Bel's MI5 file, where she'd been picked up wandering semi-dressed and dazed near the spot Rian drowned. If she'd been used in an MI6 operation, was there a cover-up? Did it extend to Rian's death?

The second fax gave Kasir some clues. It included three pages of edited Interpol reports added to the standard fact sheet. Bel had been interviewed *twice* by Interpol investigators in the weeks before and after the drowning. Firstly, in Amsterdam, as a suspected decoy in a diamond heist. Her links with underground anarchists were précised, and a funding operation mentioned. Kasir found this part strangely noncommittal. What was missing?

The second interview took place in London in December 1998. A number of Internet extortion rackets had been attributed to Van Warme between 1997 and 1998. An Edinburgh-based financial services firm had hundreds of client credit card records wiped

in the biggest fraud. A £250,000 ransom was paid up within a week. However, Van Warne's accounts were cleared just days before his death, and the money was never traced. Bel was a suspect, but as before, no charges.

The report also linked Bel and Van Warne to an international jewel-smuggling ring based in Amsterdam. During their time together, Bel had been arrested with stolen rubies and sapphires at Schipol Airport. In custody, she'd mentioned names and addresses. Under threat from the ring, Van Warne changed identity, moved apartments and set about blackmailing ring members via several Internet viruses. He was under police protection, but details of his location may have slipped out. Kasir wondered if MI6 were involved.

The fax concluded with Stiles' unfussy instruction: ESC 20.00 HRS, G.S. They'd be leaving for Milan tonight, as planned. The "ESC" denoted escape.

Kasir decided to kill time in the grounds. It would take more than a faked escape to gain Bel's trust, he suspected. He took the narrow winding path towards the woods at the manor's rear. A red-haired woman in a light raincoat led a child, a boy no more than five, in his direction. The boy stumbled away from his mother, staggering a little, catching his balance, the tiny hand finding its guide. Kasir thought about Saif Gaddafi's speech in his father's name at the LSE that April. MI6 had not considered regime change in Libya the ultimate objective of the Milan operation, but clearly it was in Washington. The more consideration Kasir gave the matter, the more uncertain he was about the British agenda.

The woman and child approached. She was pinched and haggard looking and kept her eyes down. Kasir smiled at the boy, troubled by the uncomprehending wide eyes and the sense of alienation from the mother. Was she another like Bel?

The flaws in the program concerned him more. A light drizzle started up. There was a bench under a cluster of oaks and an hour to think things through.

He returned to the chapel house as the MI5-approved hairdresser was leaving. Bel's makeover didn't bring Baranyi to mind at all. The teased black hair, greased

eyebrows, and long cotton and poplin skirt jarred with the sly, mock-playful personality twirling a cigarette and staring back at him in the bedroom mirror.

“Y’know, Kasir, it’s never happened before. God knows how many years of magic tricks, and this is the first time.”

“The first time?”

She stood and spread out her skirt. “Not used to maxis. I might need to take it in a size. Your Libyan lady was a touch hippy.”

Kasir bristled. He didn’t like these games, this calculated shift in mood. Earlier, he’d found her remoteness and sense of death genuine. And that image of her cradling a baby...

“What’s worrying you, Bel?”

“Well...recollections of our session. I’m just waiting, you know, for the floodgates to open up and a tide of water to wash me into a rubber room.”

Kasir swallowed. Was this just part of her game-playing? Her eyes didn’t reflect her smile.

“Listen, I can bind my breasts, crop my hair and talk like a man, if you need me to. Don’t think I won’t make the effort. But this doesn’t need to be a total chore.”

She opened the top drawer of the dresser. Inside, there was Baranyi’s cosmetics tray, and a collection of combs and brushes in a scarlet velvet case. Bel pulled a mother of pearl comb free from its strap. Turning to him, she wiggled it between two fingers.

“The hair’s a bit short for a *chignon*, but it’s a nice thought.”

“Well, I was considering what Baranyi would have worn,” said Kasir. Refined Egyptian women often favoured classic French stylings. Modesty could mean elegance, not subjugation, as many Westerners thought. He’d grown to think of Alessandra as Egyptian. As a sister. Or a wife.

“Well, how about something more adventurous? Ever heard of Leopoldi Fregoli? Italian quick-change performer from the early 1900s? Changed his personality and

costumes like *that*,” she said, clicking two fingers. “Reversible jackets and pants, one-touch hair colour, and so on. He’d have been a shoe-in for your line of work.”

Kasir watched her narrowly, still trying to spot Alessandra. “Disguises have their place,” he said finally. “But we all have unique mannerisms. If someone knew you well, your disguise wouldn’t fool them. Still, in Milan no-one will know you well.”

The curl of the lip and raised eyebrows said *I’m intrigued*. She was testing him as friend or foe. He wasn’t sure what would edge him into the former camp.

After a late lunch of pizza and coffee, he took her up to the manor roof via stairs, a long balcony and connecting staircase protected by a high wall. A school of hooded ninjas were doing stealth training, while the *sensei* stood stock still by the roof’s edge. By the wall to their left was a white model airplane called a ‘Dragon’s Eye’.

“The Americans use that for reconnaissance missions in Afghanistan.”

“Hmm, maybe they should get themselves some ninjas,” Bel replied. “Although, don’t they already use these guys to kidnap terrorists, stuff like that? I remember reading about it.”

“This model plane has video and infrared cameras on board, and is launched with a bungee rope into built-up neighborhoods. Less obtrusive.”

“Boy’s talk, Kasir. You haven’t forgotten what I said downstairs, have you?” She watched him intently. “I took a risk telling you that much. This might be the middle of nowhere, but don’t think I couldn’t make a dash for it.”

“I’d rather gained the impression earlier of someone philosophical about their own fate.”

“It’s in your hands, if I understand things right,” she shot back. “Look, you get me to Italy, things go smooth and I get what I want, you don’t have to worry. But string me along, and your life’s one fucking misery!”

Kasir lowered his eyes. “So, what are your conscious memories of the session? I cannot believe you’ve never had flashbacks before.”

She lit another cigarette. “*Flashbacks*, yes. But this is different.”

Ninjas were doing rope work exercises on the manor's outer walls. Others on the roof practiced sword skills. Kasir guessed Bel was right about one thing. This wasn't some 007 gag; they'd be assigned covert operations soon.

"I've a clear picture of you leaning forward in a chair with two balloons drifting out at your ears. You're talking to me very softly. You look like a mouse with a man's face. And then" – she paused as the sensei raised a gloved palm – "then I'm smiling like a dolly and putting a bowler hat on my head, and you're smiling *back* because we *both* know that the hat is only a pretend 'bowler hat', and really a Fedora hat..."

Her eyes squinting, her mouth a pursed frown, her look was one of mild pity. "You should be using better drugs."

Yes. Stiles had warned him about the drugs.

"I mean, look at the sky," she went on. "And can't you hear the surrounding woodland breathing? Can't you feel it? Close your eyes. Imagine the trails through the woods, crop circles in the fields..."

Kasir squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Bel, these, em, *tablets* you take. Did you hide any before we left? Are you still taking them?"

She exhaled in a pout. Then, the lips thinning, she gave him a withering look that recalled Baranyi. "You're jittery, and making me the same, that's all! Anyway, what do *you* care about which pills I take?"

"Morphine isn't safe, Bel," Kasir said quietly.

Her cigarette bounced off his shoe, her creased smile one of spite and triumph. "So *true*. I should just cling to you like a limpet through gut fear, shouldn't I? Well, your ringmaster routine isn't working. You know what I'm imagining now?"

Moving closer, she leant her raised elbow against the wall. He caught the scent of patchouli.

"I can see myself in front of a clearing, *naked* apart from your funky Fedora, dancing towards you" – she widened her eyes in mock wonder – "in your little fez and bow-tie, a tray around your neck, selling *peanuts!*"

Back at her quarters Kasir made sure things were secured quickly. Her words recalled his daydream in the chapel house. Just coincidence, or something more? Could she be gifted with second sight?

Just what could she remember of her past?

...

*A night ride through quiet streets, fear of loved ones dying in unfamiliar places. A van. Guys in flak jackets. Medics. She's wet, shivering, her hair a damp tangle, her ears and face stiff, but no memory of being submerged. Just a place near Rian's drowned body...*

*...Making love in the Leidesplein hotel all afternoon; early dinner in a floating restaurant like a pagoda at the harbour; Rian's mother at an evening of Mahler at the Concertgebouw. The mother in a Royal Box with two men in evening suits. Neither have faces. One of them turns when they step inside. He seems to know Rian, but both leave before the recital ends.*

*Trying to find Rian now, she feels a chill. In the water, she slides on a rope inclining from a canal side. A deep breath. Her eyes close. She drifts backwards, buoyant. Impending sleep stops her from drowning...*

She woke in the darkness, running her hands over that damn rough tunic, down over the big skirt. Both dry as parchment.

...

An ex-military policeman called Sparks played German Whist with Kasir while Bel fixed her hair and skirt in her room. There was another session and then dinner in the chapel house.

She stabbed lines in her risotto with her fork. "When am I meeting Eve? Give me a date, a time frame? Something I can focus on to forget your stupid little face."

Kasir and the guard exchanged weary looks. "Very soon – tonight, even."

She threw down her fork, sending it somersaulting across the kitchen table onto the floor, where it slid against the heel of the guard's loafer.

She twisted her tunic in her hands. "Dressed like some *fucking slave*?! Just how you treat your women Kasir, yes? Suffocating them in dirty facecloths and sacks?!"

Sparks flipped the teabag from his cup into the sink. "Maybe, you'd like to quieten down?"

The pepper pot missed his head by inches, cracking a porcelain dove on the wall. "Get this ginger Special Branch fucker away from me! I've had a lifetime in Hell's worth of his sort of bastard!"

Kasir indicated Sparks leave the room. Shrugging and sipping tea, he obliged.

Grimacing, Bel leant back, one hand supporting her hip, the other rubbing her back. Kasir poured her a glass of water from the tap and popped two capsules from a dwindling supply of codeine. Then they sat in silence while she drank three cups of herbal tea and smoked cigarettes.

The questions tumbling through his mind wouldn't join up. What did Special Branch do to her in England? Was she stable enough to fly? Had she ever been loved?

"Better?"

A long drag. A slight nod. No eye contact.

By his watch, it was just before eight. He stood.

"I'm glad. Because now we should leave."

...

Twenty metres along a tangled stretch of path between pines and chestnuts, Kasir added his touch to Stiles' escape scenario.

"We're being monitored. Sensors, heat detection. Security has not been informed that we are leaving. So I've programmed a ten minute delay into the surveillance board.

We're two dots drifting away on an electronic map down in the manor basement. Keep walking and be patient. We'll speed up when the path runs straight."

There was the whirr of helicopter blades in the distance, and the sky lightened with the steady sweep of a beam just behind the trees. They quickened, Bel labouring slightly, Kasir a fraction behind, watchful. After a minute or so, the helicopter's descent became visible two-to-three hundred metres ahead. The chill night air flowed over their cheeks. A minute more and they were out of the woods.

She doubled up hands on knees to catch her breath. Kasir could hear voices ahead. He clapped her shoulder. "Come on. There will have been an alert by now. They will be mobilising security."

They followed the chopper's beams onto a large gravel circle next to a field behind some panelled metal gates. There were three figures, the foremost a woman walking slowly forward in a unisex black reefer coat. The shape of her hair perfectly matched the woman in the passport photo Kasir had seen. Bel held her arms wide for an embrace.

"Eve, God, let me have a look at *you* –!"

"Almost didn't recognise you, Bel. Your hair?!"

"Your *accent*?!"

Evelyn put her arm around Bel. "New teeth, too – and that's not all. At least we're both still roughly the same height. C'mon. Let's get you inside. This is much colder than Italy."

An overdressed Stiles shifted from foot to foot in the chopper's beams, beckoning the women to hurry aboard. Kasir acknowledged the accompanying security man: rangy, hard-eyed in his late-thirties or early-forties, his head shaven, his name was Birch, and he was the MI6 cover for the operation's duration.

They all followed Kasir through the open hatch and moved to the rear of the six-passenger Twin Squirrel. As Kasir sat down he caught sight of a shapeless bundle wedged in front of the unoccupied seat behind the cockpit. Most probably emergency



equipment, he thought. Lights from army trucks streamed into view from the main road. Thirty seconds later, the chopper lifted as the trucks sped across the field's muddied vehicle tracks.

Kasir felt pensive as they climbed. Stiles was busy on his mobile in front. Looking over, Kasir caught Bel's eye and smiled. She didn't reciprocate, but he saw the relief in her eyes.

Soon they were heading south-west. Bel's friend sat a row in front of Kasir. Was she Bel's mysterious sister-in-law, or merely a lookalike? After a few minutes, she left her seat and squatted in the narrow aisle between them.

"Where we're going – it's what you should know first, I suppose," Evelyn said. "Milan. Maybe you've been told? Well, you know that the money from Georgy's deal's been transferred and your bank has arranged an account with a sister bank in Geneva? They just need your old passport and signature. Then Venice."

Bel turned to Kasir. "I take it you've *got* my old passport? Not just this Libyan woman's?"

"Yes. But you will enter Italy as Alessandra Baranyi."

Bel gave the briefest of nods, clasping Evelyn's shoulder. She'd cut her finger that afternoon. The finger plaster was hanging soiled.

Evelyn smiled awkwardly. "You've hurt yourself."

"I don't know – can't remember doing it."

Bel was blushing, and they both laughed. It sounded hollow in the helicopter. Kasir could sense the nerves, the stubborn doubts in Bel. She studied the contours of Evelyn's face the way an infant might a slightly familiar adult's: with innocence, trepidation and a need to believe.

"It's maybe all the talk of money making me nervous. That and – well, I've too many things to ask you. I suppose for now I'm this Alessandra on the false passport they've set up?"

Evelyn nodded. “Yes. I visited France a little while ago on one they had set up for me. Dummy run. They’re – *em* – stopping off at this air base near Folkestone, and we’re traveling...”

She paused, glancing back at Stiles, who Kasir overheard muttering something about keeping a postcard legible.

“Anyway, don’t worry about it,” Bel’s friend assured her. “You’ll get all your documents back through the bank.”

“*You’ve* a new passport, too?”

“Yes. I don’t know if you’ve been told, but...well, this operation involves more new identities. My own cover, like yours, is just until we move to Venice.”

“So – what handle have they given you?” Bel asked quietly.

Kasir wound his watch and looked out on the neon curves of the medium-sized town below. The questions were perfectly natural. It was a positive sign, her thinking of the days ahead.

Her friend gave a hopeless sigh. “You know, right now it’s escaped me. But my *real* name these days is Daniella. Daniella Sebastio.”

A moment of silent contemplation. “Daniella? Yes, it suits. Dani doesn’t, though!”

Bel’s next question came as little surprise. “What about Georgy...when did you last speak to him? I take it you know about the aneurysm?”

Stiles glanced over sharply, before interrupting. “Well, Miss Andreus. How are you looking forward to life in *Bella Italia*?”

The MI5 man stood up. From the dinner jacket, Kasir assumed there was a function to attend that evening.

“Yes, I thought I’d better fill you in. Given the somewhat undignified makeovers you’ve had to endure, we’ve supplied a whole new wardrobe *gratis* for you to take to Venice. Moschino, Fendi, Dolce et Gabbana, La Perla...”

“*Come again...?!*”

Stiles offered his hand. “Just a little something in the way of a ‘thank you’.”

Bel chewed her lip. “One thing – what was the deal wrapping me up in the cloak back there?”

Stiles shrugged. “Had one lying around, that’s all.”

The hand stayed patiently outstretched. Bel clasped the fingers. Good. Composure. Just the right touch. Kasir had to remind himself that this was the same woman who’d cradled an imaginary baby in the chapel just hours before.

“Well, all the best again for Milano. I’m sure you’ll be able to treat yourself to some fetching spring fashions from your own purse before too long.”

Bel’s friend placed a censorious index finger to her lips. An elegant gesture. But Kasir found questions about the flight’s monitoring and the scope of Birch’s brief beginning to occupy him.

A few minutes later, the helicopter descended from cruising altitude onto a helipad in an independent RAF flight base outside Folkestone. The perimeter wire was lit up with searchlights, and voices and truck noise competed with the chopper’s droning blades. Some garbled instructions tore over the pilot’s radio. Something scurried just beyond the outer fence. Probably foxes, Kasir thought; spies forced in from the cold to survive. He watched Stiles depart with calm, alert eyes.

The chopper was bathed in the glare of headlights now. Men in fatigues had boarded, taking pains to shield the bundle from the passengers’ view as they exited again. It required at least three pairs of hands. A drugged terrorist?

Eventually the hatch was secured and the hubbub died and lights dimmed. Evelyn asked Kasir for his seat before take-off. Kasir took Stiles’ free seat and Birch moved a row back, turning to formally introduce himself.

“Miss Andreus, Miss Morgan – or *Sebatio*. My name’s Birch. I’ll provide security for you during your time in Milan. If you have any problems, just let me know.”

“Call me Bel for now.”

Birch gave a dry smile. “Certainly – *Bel*.”

The helicopter's engine began to gather. Kasir turned to face the conversation. Evelyn was touching Bel's knee.

“You asked about Georgy. I better tell you. It's not what you'll have expected.”

Bel opened her mouth to speak, as the pilot's intercom announced their destination as Kent Airport, Manston.

8.

3rd November, 2010, just after 7.30pm. Eskin had kept to one-hundred and forty kilometres an hour on the Autobahn to Konstanz. The stiffness between his shoulders was aggravated by the driving and a few other petty ailments plagued him. Not to mention the bastards at border control who'd taken over an hour that morning verifying his Special Branch ID. It was hard-wired into him, the compulsion to give those glorified postal clerks grief. Luckily, the BND and MI6 had finally set them straight. Fuck codes on flash drives and trips to France; he was on an international hit at last.

London and Moscow had struck a deal with German compliance. The British wanted someone dead, and Moscow wanted a hi-jacked American weapon for the purpose of R&D, a compensation of sorts for the lost vacuum bombs; useful for the ones still in development, in fact. Eskin's superiors had given him the green light to implement London's plan this morning. As he headed for the city's outskirts, he cursed his luck working with the fragrant Dr. Virgil Arbiter again.

Eskin had the part of an American arms buyer, 'Mr. Brown'. New haircut, new suit. He'd considered mimicking his favourite movie actor, Sterling Hayden: plenty of cynicism and emphatic braying, but keeping to the accent was difficult. Besides, he was in no mood for games. His custom Korth would settle any argument over his origins.

He pulled up outside a large three storey villa with gables and shuttered windows and thought about the specs for the hardware SVR would smuggle back to Moscow.

The villa stood behind a well-trimmed hedge. The five houses nearby were unevenly spaced on unlevel ground. Eskin chewed a piece of menthol gum. A moonlit figure on the sloping roof of the house opposite seemed to be checking for cracked tiles. Slightly hunched, moving sideways for balance, the figure made its way to the gutter, sweeping some sodden leaves down onto the front path with a long stick. Two crows disturbed from sentinel duty scrambled up the tiles out of harm's way. Then the man trudged back towards the moon and over the apex, presumably to sweep the leaves on

the other side. Moments later, the head began to bob into view then disappear, like a puppet show for the birds.

Eskin cursed his stiff shoulders, cramping leg and snagging boxers as he walked to the villa. Beneath the frames of two slender windows under the brightly lit entrance porch some wire attachments indicated movement sensors, and a CCTV atop the porch watched the house opposite. He rapped the bronze stag's head on the door.

The movement sensors activated an intercom, computerised female tones directing him to a rear door to his right. He passed another CCTV installation in relative darkness; there were more cameras here than in the centre of Konstanz, he thought. A hare bounded out in an aimless zigzag from behind a silver fir, making him start. A tangle of fairy lights above an oval archway led to the garden. Arbiter appeared in the gap, wearing a tweed suit and a Marilyn Monroe print tie. His hair was newly dyed auburn, and his raised palm indicated either 'halt' or 'hello'.

"Eskin. The merchandise is ready and waiting."

Eskin nodded. He didn't like the use of the word "merchandise".

"Well, if they expect some of the cash on delivery, you will have to pay them. I've enough Euros for the raw ingredients of the Enhanced Blast explosive – that's it. Also, *doctor* – sorry to lower the tone, but after all the driving, I could do with something to help me shit."

Arbiter looked faintly ill. "I've nothing here, I'm afraid."

Eskin gave the Englishman a sour look. "English humour might do the trick. Where are they?"

"The wine cellar, one level down at the back of the house. And a wild *stab* at an American accent wouldn't go amiss. And don't forget my bloody name – it's 'Weiss'."

"White and Brown. Inventive. I'd hoped the Germans might have used one of their own men tonight."

Arbiter frowned. "You realise this is very much in the interest of Anglo-Russian relations?"

“Yes, yes.” Eskin swatted a moth. “However you like to phrase doing dirty work on behalf of your stunted little island!”

“Fine – as long as you understand that the Germans won’t be so forgiving if this isn’t handled cleanly.”

“Let’s get moving!”

The wine cellar was laid out like a Spanish bistro. There was a mural of mariachis and flamenco dancers and six tables with two chairs apiece in front of the wine racks. A mannequin with tuxedo, tray and greased hair and moustache stood by a pillar in front of the assembled wines. Beyond the racks, there was a private bar with names of noted vintages carved on a wooden plaque. Three crimson-dappled glasses stood on the bar top, which was shaped like a Spanish guitar in coal-black wood. The bar front was adorned with four large felt designs of various fruits.

“I take it the fruit and the stud back there are *your* touches?”

“Hmm. We’ve managed running water and a clean bathroom too.” Arbiter lowered his voice. “Incidentally, our man has a curious turn of phrase. Try not to ask him to repeat himself too often.”

“Might be quicker just to shoot him straight away,” Eskin muttered.

Past the bar there was a landing with a spiral staircase down to the cellar proper. At the bottom of the stairs, a liverish light and voices came from a room. Eskin followed Arbiter inside. Two men in their thirties faced each other across a draughts board, dressed in identical black t-shirts with a marksman logo and grey-black chinos. The slighter of the two wore a moth-eaten hat. Apparently, he’d been at the location in London where they’d snatched the Andreus woman, but Eskin hadn’t seen him there: it was the contracted pupils that gave him away.

“Ow do, Mr Brown,” the mark said.

Eskin’s ‘Mr Brown’ had been an associate of the late Ralph Swain. His attention switched to the burly Canadian, and a metal-serrated wooden crate and two rifle cases stacked against the wall behind him.

“Remind me, who are you guys again? What happened to the Irishman?”

The mark frowned. “Swain legged it for a holiday in sun while Customs and Excise folk were ripping guts out his champion pad in Northumbria. Counter-terrorist cops along for the ride, full fun of fair. So *we* didn’t muscle in uninvited, like. We’re here as Thermofare reps. I’m Zal.” He held out his hand. “This big chap here’s Mex.”

Eskin skipped the handshake. The Canadian known as Mexican Radio Vince gave him a fractional nod.

“You’ve phoned through already as like, so we know our fat cheque’s waiting nice and snug for us in London,” continued Zal, unruffled.

“Not quite.” Eskin paused. “You get half the money now – the rest when we’re sure what we’re getting is what we *think* we’re getting. Fair?”

Zal gave a chuckle and slight headshake. He had the look of a malnourished orphan, Eskin thought: hollow-cheeked and beady-eyed, the type of little rat who might have played on bombsites in London just after the Blitz.

His neck still stiff, Eskin indicated the crate with a tilt of the head. “The Enhanced Blast round’s on board, I suppose? Care to run me through it?”

Zal and Mex got up and brought the crate and cases to the table. The still silent Mex ripped the crate’s metallic hinges loose with a claw hammer, while Zal unpacked an American M16 rifle with a fixed underbarrel grenade launcher.

Eskin slid off his coat and carefully perched the rifle on his right shoulder. Its body was stocky and designed for easy balance. Then, lowering it safely back on the table, he turned his attention to the prototype grenade. At first sight it resembled a toy post-box with regal gold top.

“So – this is the perfect replica of the Novel Explosive developed for the Marine Corps? That was the deal-breaker.”

Zal smiled. “Yeah – same specs, no Marine Corps markings. No codes or numbers or owt. Mex’ll run you through performance steps.”

Mex pointed to the grenade with a callused and scorched thumb.



“First off – the specifications. The grenade weighs two hundred and twenty-five grams, and its maximum range is four hundred metres. Can penetrate sixty-five millimetres of steel. The charge was calculated for tank armour, so it’s fine for anything short of blasting the vaults at Fort Knox.”

Mex handled the gun comfortably. Eskin had learned he was ex-Canadian Special Forces, and that his recent mercenary work included torturing Iraqi insurgents with radio wires.

“The launcher’s permanently mounted, better for a thermobaric blast than an adapted muzzle,” Mex continued.

Eskin understood one or two aspects of Grenade Launcher performance. “Strange. I thought a blank propellant cartridge would suit a more powerful grenade?”

Mex’s stare faltered momentarily. “In general, you’d be right. But not for this type of round.”

Then it was back to the gun. “Discharging this thing’s easy if you’ve ever trained a rifle on a target. The rifle portion of the launcher follows the exact same principle. But take care loading, like I’m doing. Watch it closely.”

Mex slid the safety switch on the launcher to the position marked “S”, depressed the barrel’s latch and slid the barrel assembly forward. “That automatically cocks it for loading or extracting. Now before loading, you make sure the bore and chamber are clean and bone dry as a Mother Superior’s snatch. Then you put in the ammo. Simple.”

Eskin ran through the stages, this time loading and extracting the grenade. Demonstration over, he slid back into his coat, letting Zal pack the gun and grenade into a customised leather rifle bag.

The four men moved back to the wine bar. Upstairs Arbiter opened a Margaux and poured three glasses, Eskin abstaining. He didn’t need any lubrication before a kill.

“Painkillers, Dr. Weiss?”

Arbiter sucked his teeth. “Aspirin?”

Eskin shrugged. “That’ll do.”

Arbiter out of the way, Zal, who'd been talking to his colleague, turned back to Eskin. He looked down at the rifle bag propped between them.

"Take it you'll have it well hid, crossin' the pond like?"

Eskin shook his head. "We don't need secret compartments in Europe, just security sanctions." He spun his finger in the air vaguely, thinking of the quickest route to the Russian Embassy in Berlin. "Roving satellite..."

"Yes, we know you're CIA," Mex said, "so smuggling operational short-range WMDs across borders isn't the problem it was for Swain. He reckoned he'd only ship this type of thing in components in future, set up his shooting range and an electronics wholesaler to cover the logistics. But he made sure he kept his hands clean with these Russian thermobaric bombs. I guess you know about that?"

"Well, there's a lot of contacts and diverse suppliers involved there," said Eskin.

"Yeah, that's keeping it tight enough," said Mex, re-setting a computerised watch with a fighter plane's jetstream for a screensaver.

The light vibration of the stacked bottles and the squeak of leather announced Arbiter's return. Eskin lifted the rifle bag underarm, giving Arbiter a wink and the mark a nudge.

"Zal? I'd like your help with this at the car."

Zal just stared back. Eskin wasn't certain he'd come quietly. Whatever else this junkie was, he wasn't a potential entrepreneur in black market weapons. Finally, Mexican Radio Vince slapped Zal on the shoulder. Had Arbiter cut the Canadian a deal?

They left the house via the cellar entrance, Zal carrying the rifle bag. The immediate neighbourhood was clear, but Eskin heard a car's engine idling several blocks away. Walking to the driver's side, he opened the Mercedes' door, neatly palming the Korth with his free hand and aiming it at Zal's chest.

"Get in. And don't think of trying to alert your friend!"

"Aw, fuck off, man! Interpol, is it?"

"Keep it shut, or I'll shoot you where you're standing!"

Eskin raised the Korth briefly to Zal's temple, snatching the rifle bag and using the pistol butt to pound and jostle him into the driver's seat, before slamming the door shut. Opening the rear door, Eskin slid the hardware onto the back seat. As the rear door snapped shut, the front was thrust open again, Zal emerging in a crouched position, a glistening blade swinging towards Eskin's stomach.

Eskin shot Zal once in the upper arm, the knife falling from his hand into the gutter. His balance off, Zal slumped back against the car, and Eskin fired a second shot into his upper right chest. Zal went to ground, gasping, his skull banging against the sill.

Eskin was relieved to see the chest moving, but a torso shot with a .38 could easily pierce an artery, even if vital organs were spared. Eskin knelt down, feeling under the scorched t-shirt. It was damp, but no heavy flow. He pulled the material up to the man's neck and examined both wounds. This Englishman wouldn't die yet; but another bullet this near the vehicle was an unnecessary risk.

Eskin decided to stick to his plan. The contract specified discretion, so he couldn't just waste this English clown in the street. It took ten, fifteen seconds to slap Zal awake. The first groan and Eskin pushed the muzzle into the Englishman's left eye.

"Now get up and into the fucking seat! Maybe I'll take pity and leave you at the nearest hospital, eh?"

Zal tried to raise himself, lounging on his hands and knees for several moments, disorientated with pain, before clambering into the car. There was no sign that anyone had been alerted by the shots. Eskin was sure the British had cut Mex a deal. Keeping the gun trained on his target, he made his way round to the passenger seat.

"Okay. Now, let's spell out where we stand. Frankly, I wouldn't judge *you* a threat to British Intelligence or anyone other than yourself, but I don't want any talk out of you. I can hardly follow a single word you say! You're in pain, but I'll just shoot you dead if you don't drive. You'll get the same if you black out. So – to the lakeside, and don't waste time!"

Eskin tossed the keys into Zal's lap. He'd researched a specific area, perfect for night diving. It was the most isolated spot within Konstanz's limits.

Pale, perspiring and mumbling to himself, Zal started the Mercedes up and drove off. The power steering was a godsend, Eskin thought: a driver could slouch to one side and keep the car straight with one hand. After a kilometre or so at modest speed, Zal seemed to get some wind back, managing to rest his right forearm on the wheel. Eskin kept the gun's aim steady as they joined the miniautobahn connecting the rural outskirts to the town. There were periodic small embankments scooped out on either side which created the impression of a spacious toboggan run.

Eskin popped four 75 mg aspirin in his mouth. "Want some?"

"A world of fuckin' use for a coupla slugs," Zal spat. "Gobby but nowt much else, you Yanks!"

Eskin swore at Zal, slowly and repeatedly in Russian, relishing every syllable.

"The *fuck*...?! I gie Swain wooden overcoat, just for this shite?!"

"Wooden overcoat'? I know what that means. Here, catch." Eskin threw some of the small tablets in Zal's face. The car swerved.

"Now, careful! You crash, and I'll shoot you in the head. I'm not sharing a hospital ward with a filthy junkie pig!"

"As like! I'm a man saw champion opportunity, me." The Englishman hissed the words through gritted teeth. "Took Swain's place, is all."

"Except your spymasters don't want another Swain around," sneered Eskin. "Maybe why they had you kill him first of all, no? As for your plans, the old guard in my country like to say that capitalism in the senile phase will sink into its own excretia. That's shit to you and me. You are proof of their argument, boy."

Zal just glowered ahead. It began raining as Eskin caught his first glimpse of the Bodensee. The water was flecked with orange overhead lighting from a two-lane bridge connecting the Bodensee's north shore to the Swiss border. There was a sign for the border town of Kreuzlingen alongside directions to the bridge. Out of the corner of his

eye, Eskin caught a haze of light on the south shoreline dazzling back from the Alps. A chalet-type hotel loomed large to their right.

The bridge offered the obvious route out of Germany: just under an hour's drive to St. Gallen, then a further four hours plus to the Italian border via the treacherous Splügen Pass. Eskin wondered whether that was the thermobaric bombs' route into Italy.

"Head left," he ordered.

They took the slip road into the old town. Blood had trickled down over Zal's hand. Eskin knew his driver might not last the distance. There was space at the roadside now. The risk was low. The pistol in his right hand, he activated the magazine release with his left, briskly pocketing the loose magazine. Then, scarcely pausing, he smashed the steel gun butt hard into Zal's right temple twice. Eskin grabbed the handbrake as the car veered sharply left onto a grassy embankment, gasping as he was hit in the face and chest by one of the billowing airbags he'd forgotten to disable. An infuriating electronic pulse protested as he shredded the bag viciously with a pocket-knife. He managed to wrestle himself free after about half-a-minute.

He made his way around to the driver's side. A convertible laden with suitcases and a vacationing family slowed to help. Eskin had just enough German.

"Bitte schön. Ein Defekt, recht aus Ausstellungsraum. Kaum eine Katastrophe."

He shrugged and smiled casually: if they suspected anything, they'd lack the balls to act. The father frowned and nodded tersely. The jowly children sat in back like miniatures of their parents as the car continued on.

Breathing hard, his shoulders leaden with the effort, Eskin cut the airbag away from the driver. Grabbing the left wrist, he felt for the pulse. It was very faint. Grasping Zal's collar with his right hand and lifting the legs at their back hollows with his left, he hoisted the body over into the passenger seat. Taking the wheel, his body aching, he continued the remaining quarter-mile to the town's northern shore.

Elegant residences with ample driveways and cosily lit old-fashioned hotels dotted the kidney-curved waterfront by the Bodensee. Konstanz was a retirement town.

Eskin saw no sign of the convertible on the road ahead. Passing the police station at the old town's heart, he relaxed. His destination was minutes away: a small bay sometimes used by the British Army for diving instruction.

A deserted parking area and brief promenade cordoned off the bay. Eskin turned in and parked. The strip of sand was illuminated by the promenade lighting, but further than ten metres into the lake, all was dark. A light rain had started. A couple walked their dog on the sand, and Eskin could make out the rippling effect of an underwater strobe light by the promontory. The night divers might only number one or two. He'd chosen the right spot. Still he'd wait and watch awhile.

Eskin propped Zal up in the seat for the young couple's benefit. He took off the stale hat, squeezing it into the man's trouser pocket. The time dragged on. He should have brought cigarettes. At least he could have jammed a couple of butts into the mark's nostrils to relieve the tension.

A rubber bone was being thrown repeatedly to the water's edge for the schnauzer to retrieve. Growing impatient, Eskin stepped out and unlocked the car's boot, taking out some jump leads.

Springing the secret compartment was a complicated business. Unlocking the bonnet, Eskin attached one lead to the battery jump box, before prizing open the casing of the automatic seatbelt's retractor spool on the driver's rear side and attaching the other lead to the exposed switch wires. Then he switched on the ignition, revving lightly. The rear seats gave a jolt and a thud, and Eskin switched the engine off. Moving to the car's rear, he wedged the rifle bag upright behind the passenger seat and levered the seating up with his palms to reveal the compartment, before placing the rifle bag inside. Then he repositioned the seats, forcing the edges down until he heard a click. That done, he disengaged both leads and returned them to the car boot.

The BND had supplied Eskin with the clothing he'd requested. He lifted the two fleece-lined buoyancy jackets and one pair of waterproof trousers, before climbing back into the driver's seat.

Rain drizzled on the windscreen. The couple with the schnauzer approached the walled steps leading to the promenade on Eskin's right. Eskin grabbed hold of Zal, hugging him and pressing a thumb to his neck. He had a job finding the pulse. It wouldn't be long now.

Eskin waited. A full minute passed. His right shoulder was almost frozen by the time the dog bounded up to the top of the steps, panting, tongue out, happy. Its owners, early thirty-somethings, arm in arm, lost in each other, appeared soon after, oblivious to the Mercedes. Eskin's expression hardened. As soon as the couple were close to the road, he pitched Zal forward in the seat, positioning his forehead against the dashboard.

There followed a full quarter-hour's shifting and pulling to get the limp body into the buoyancy jacket. Then Eskin attached Zal's crutch strap, before slipping a rubber compass with an internal locator device good for five fathoms into the jacket's inner pocket. Both jackets came with these compasses, but this way Zal should stay on the radars of German and British Intelligence.

He closed up Zal's jacket, pulling up the hood and tightening the extra adhesive rubber on the metallic yellow reflective patch beneath the collarbone. Eskin's fingers and palms were smeared with blood.

Catching his breath, he looked over to the promontory. Concentrating, he saw that the strobe light was attached to the underside of a small marker buoy. The divers could be underwater for some time still.

Eskin slid into his waterproof trousers and put on the other buoyancy jacket. He laughed to himself, saliva flecking his chin: Zal's balls might freeze and drop off in his chinos. Zipping up the Korth in his top pocket, Eskin climbed out of the car. At the passenger's side, he dragged Zal out and upright, before locking the doors. Then he attached the D-ring on Zal's jacket to the retractable clip on the belt of his own: this way they'd both stay upright.

Eskin felt in his other pocket for the German police handcuffs and the roll of duct tape he'd brought along. Then, placing Zal's left arm around his shoulder, he shuffled to

the steps on his left. The rain was slightly heavier. Eskin's right hip and lower back bore the most weight as he made his way, carefully, unobserved, down to the beach.

The water gazebo was attached to a strip of pier in front of the stretch of rocks that formed the shorter horn of the bay. The pedalos were unused in winter and were cloaked in white tarpaulin resembling a huge manta ray. Eskin could make out that much. Otherwise, his eyes were straining badly in the dark. He could only just identify the outline of a tugboat and barge moving Rhine-ward in the distance, as he guided Zal along the open pier and down onto the gazebo's connecting walkway. There, Eskin unclipped the D-ring, depositing Zal unceremoniously on a wooden bench. Lowering himself into the ice-cold water up to his hips, Eskin waded into the gazebo.

He tugged at the tarpaulin with all his strength. It might indeed have been a one-ton ray clinging to the semi-circle of pedalos. The chill at his spine, Eskin used his upper body to force a gap between the first two pedalos. Then he managed to force back the tarpaulin on the second pedalo as far as the wing mirror. The mirror had a sturdy double stalk, just right for attaching the cuffs. With the bullet wounds, this couldn't look accidental. Eskin knew Zal was dying. The cold of the water should finish him.

Eskin clambered back onto the walkway, and dragged Zal from the bench. Then he slid the body into the water, keeping hold of the fleece collar. Dropping in after him, aware they'd be arousing interest on someone's radar by now, Eskin pulled the body by the ankles towards the gap between the pedalos. The Englishman was still out cold. Eskin couldn't feel a pulse. He'd been right not to waste bullets.

The Russian drew duct tape from his pocket and bound the ankles. Then he turned Zal a full 180° and, clasping the wet head against his chest, extended a strip of the waterproof tape over the mouth. Pulling free Zal's hood, he wrapped the tape twice around the back of the head, tearing it from the roll using a dinghy hook on the side of the second pedalo. Zal's eyes were lifeless as Eskin, crouching, water up to the chest, replaced the hood and cuffed the man's left wrist to the second pedalo. Then grabbing Zal's upper legs, he forced the suspended body as far into the gap as possible. Finally, he



tidied the tarpaulin as he'd found it, hiding his work from the scrutiny of the Alpine moon.

Eskin slipped off his buoyancy gear on the walkway and made his way back to the beach with the clothing rolled underarm. Konstanz's western seafront provided the mountains opposite with meagre footlights. The divers had resurfaced near the longer promontory and were treading water. Eskin returned to the parking area, recapping his quickest available route to Berlin by autobahn, some seven hours driving.

Heading north-west out of the town onto the connecting routes for the A81, he followed the signs for Stuttgart and Karlsruhe. As he drove, he considered his real and present concerns: a suspicious incidence of black BMWs on the autobahn; steadily worsening driving conditions; a blinding headache spreading behind the eyes despite the aspirin; a temperature; and the prospect of his remote link-up in Berlin with Godovin being a chilly, humiliating affair. After that, he'd finalise his plans at his mistress's flat.

He thought of Rumissa in the London hospital; the persistent, disfigured ghost in his life, and the action now demanded of him. From her photos, he could almost be in love with her sorrow and sheer hopelessness. He was attracted to sorrowful women, women unlike his mother, the *sooka* who'd drunk vodka in the miners' bars back in the Murmansk while his father had lain at home dying of spinal cancer. He'd been an innocent in his rough home town, his father doubly crippled with that same innocence on his death-bed. The last words he'd heard his father speak begged he'd be a good son to his mother. He could still feel the worn, blue-black miner's hand slacken when, his seventeen years weighing heavily, he'd chosen to speak the truth out loud for the first time, with the words "my mother's as near to a whore as you could have chosen to damn me with..."

Bird shit splattered in a downward arc across his windscreen. He set the wipers to full power, spreading the stain with spray and rainwater until the last stubborn milky residue was gone. As he drove, the rain seemed to quieten, admitting Rumissa's young, sorrowful voice, weeping, and bidding him to share in her secrets and her mourning...

III

9.

Bel felt as though fog had been drifting in and out of her head for days. All she remembered about arriving in Milan was that the hotel was closed to the public for renovations.

Two agents brought her a breakfast of black coffee and chocolate croissant in her room. They told her that the others would be back for her in a few hours. The hotel was shrouded in tarpaulin and scaffolding, but there were no repetitious clangs and thumps to indicate building work. When she was a child, she'd imagined she could possess hotel rooms in memory, even as annexes to her own home. Perhaps it had something to do with wanting to open out to people, to share in their spaces?

She looked around the mahogany-furnished bedroom. A glass mural with peacocks in full display separated the sleeping area from the bathroom. The ceiling had a painting of a nun levitating above a building in a peasant's courtyard, the incredulous watching faces of children, pigs and old crones superimposed at the bottom corners. There was a short inscription in Italian at the bottom. She squinted up at it, flakes of croissant sliding down her t-shirt front. She could only make out the name Emilia and the date 1460.

Sipping the last of the coffee, she mulled over her evening with Eve. The Italian accent, the deeper, huskier voice, new teeth, greater attention to style – all were plausible enough. Still, when they switched to a private jet at Kent Airport, Bel ran some trick questions. University, the Circle, the Poll Tax riots; a nice little plane ride of sincere reminiscences. Then Evelyn became moodier, guarded. She'd skirted around the Congo episode a bit, *and* her faked death, *and* her involvement with MI6 and Italian Intelligence. Then again, after her bombshell about Georgy...

She was more relaxed talking about Venice, where she'd lived for fourteen years selling rare books just three blocks from San Marco. She'd had affairs with middle-aged adulterers, taken up pottery and learned to prepare sushi. That made tai-chi and the odd

honey trap escapade seem like life in the fast lane. Then a lightning storm had buffeted the plane over Southern France and Eve had held her until it calmed: the *old* Eve. Her friend still had the exquisite hazel eyes, the taciturn laughter and the occasional quirky punchline. If Eve's hips and thighs were much fuller and she hadn't mentioned children, what did that prove?

Then again, why wasn't the question raised in the first place? Bel and Eve had been almost alone amongst their activist friends in wanting kids. Aspects of Eve's Catholicism had been attractive when they were students: the asceticism in motherhood, despite the overflow of hormones, blood and tears.

Bel lit a cigarette and stared up at the levitating nun awhile, thinking of her early adulthood. When she was fourteen, she'd nearly visited Milan with her aunt and two younger cousins, the culmination of a car tour of five countries. Some time after that holiday, her friends had stopped calling her Izzy and started calling her Bella. She'd lied about a red-hot tryst with two local brothers in the resort by Lake Como: a lazy afternoon after a bike ride and a game of pool in a small bar near her hotel. She'd made it sound spontaneous, inevitable, just horseplay to her two closest friends one summer evening. Precious treasure shared.

No, Bel couldn't give up on Eve just yet. Too much history. She let her brain slide into low gear, switching on the TV in her room, numb to a slimy perma-tanned game show host and his pneumatic Bettina Boop rattling off musical inanities. Eventually Evelyn rang the room to say she'd pick up Bel for some sightseeing, shopping and lunch.

"There's a slight hitch with your old passport, I'm afraid. The bank in Geneva hasn't confirmed your account yet."

Bel jerked upright against the headrest. "That's no good, is it? Christ – I need that money! I can't set myself up here without it."

"Okay, stay calm. It's just red tape. Your passport ID and signature were scanned and emailed to Geneva from the Milan branch. It'll be sorted soon. Promise."

“Right. Well tell me more face to face and maybe I’ll believe you.”

Bel slammed the receiver down. She needed to keep a better grip on things. The coming hours might reveal if ‘Signora Sebatio’ *was* just a crap actress wrestling with her lines.

§

Two hours later, it was déjà vu on a taxi-boat along the Navigli Grande. Flowers on its banks masked the smell from even its grimeiest alcoves, and there was lunchtime jazz swirling out from the nearby bistros. Under the dancing sunlight the place cut a near tropical dash through Milan’s industrial smelt. Bel tried to forget she’d never visited before.

She wore an olive skirt and matching top she’d bought an hour earlier. Evelyn sat at ninety degrees to her, arms across chest and slouching on the boat’s circular outer bench in a cream jacket, black slacks and shirt. She swept back the fringe on her right side.

Bel squinted at a marble statue of Christian dragon slayer Giulio looming out of the water to their right. “What happened to the side of your head, Eve? That scar.”

Evelyn uncrossed her arms, gazing at her feet for a couple of seconds. “MI6 gave me a makeover. Put me under the blade four times. Five, actually. As soon as it was arranged I’d spend my life in Italy they created a full body profile for me. That’s how they described it. They removed birthmarks and the dermatitis at my elbow. It wasn’t all bad.”

The dermatitis was familiar from their teenage years, but hadn’t Evelyn had it treated ages ago?

“They wanted to go much further. New teeth, iris pigmentation, rhinoplasty – even a boob job. Can you imagine me as a D-cup?!”

Bel shifted uncomfortably. Who dropped ‘rhinoplasty’ into a conversation? “Seems pretty involved...”

The sun's fingers darted in and out of the water, painting Evelyn's face in a crude chiaroscuro. "I think at first they had big plans for me," she explained. "Because of my supposed family connection to Georgy. But it didn't work out that way at all. And I'm glad."

Bel stroked the Egyptian goddess around her neck. "So, what really happened to you in the Congo? I got a bit of the story about the faked death. The how, not the why. But, y'know – *MI5*..."

Evelyn changed position, raising and clasping her knees and resting her heels on the bench.

"Politics, basically. We didn't understand the relationships. How many supporters the rebels had in education, charity work and so on. But doing distribution work with the VSO, we'd access to resources they could use – food, clothing, medicine. Even the properties earmarked for education, work and welfare programmes needed staff. Some of the rebels were given jobs. The Belgian Government had bankrolled it, but the aid workers before us, wherever they came from, even if they weren't there to tow a political line...well, they got sucked in to the West's agenda, and it happened to us too."

"So you became *guerillas*?"

A surprised smile. "Well, maybe as good *as*. The rebels used the materials from us to pay for arms."

Evelyn hesitated. "It was during these arms deals that some rebels were brought out into the open, arrested or killed. So, I guess we were being used to make that more likely, as pawns to help set them up. French and British Intelligence and the Belgians. They're all tight knit in the Congo, I think."

"And the rebels suspected? They *kidnapped* you?"

Evelyn seemed sad at the thought. "They suspected a double cross. I believe an attempt *was* planned. Not just me, but Georgy wanted my death faked. Things were dangerous. Getting out of the country wasn't guaranteed."

“Guessed as much about Georgy. I still can’t take in that he wasn’t your brother, that he groomed us both for MI5 and MI6.”

Evelyn said nothing. Bel traced the obsidian lips at her chest. “So there was no rape then?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No rape.”

“And no septicemia in the hospital?”

Evelyn looked wistful. “There was a womb infection. They may have mentioned that. It was real enough.”

Bel stared at her. “*You* had a womb infection? I –”

For a few seconds, Evelyn look alarmed. “I don’t really think about it now.”

Bel’s hand was trembling. “None of this really explains your new life, Eve...”

Evelyn straightened her legs again. “I think when you’ve spent some time here, you’ll understand.”

Eve didn’t want to discuss their living together, it seemed. Bel flicked at her pendant. “I bumped into an old mutual friend a couple of weeks ago in London entirely by chance. Remember Hajni?”

Evelyn’s look was guarded.

“*Hajni?*” Evelyn spoke the name with Scandinavian inflection. “Finnish girl from University?”

“Yes. We took the tube to Piccadilly Circus for a couple of lattés and spent most of the time talking about the Poll Tax Demos. Back at the scene of the crime.”

The driver sounded the horn as the canal narrowed, and they slipped under a slimy bridge that smelled of rotten eggs. The engine croaked and stuttered before the taxi emerged to whistles and salutations from the walkway above. Evelyn peered up at the dungaree clad workers on their coffee break as if they were saints come back to life on the Duomo’s roof. The image leaped from Bel’s brain to her inner ear: she was jolted by a violent burst of vertigo, feeling she might even tilt back overboard. With her hearing muffled, Eve’s voice was obscured by the growing hubbub at Navigli centre.

She poked around in her ear and flexed her jaw over and over. Pedestrians moved in dense ranks above the canal's ridge, svelte Milanese lunchtime trade. Finally the motion picture began to get its gentle soundtrack back.

Bel thought the Navigli the most memorable part of Milan she'd seen: a boho-chic ambience, with glass and mirror works, an art gallery, fashion boutiques, delis, bars and cafés. The taxi moored and they took the steps up to the canal-side strip of bistros and boutiques for lunch.

They chose a quieter restaurant in a side-street. There were a couple of American girls to their left, and a few locals. Lunch served, Evelyn dipped a heel of ciabatta into a bowl of rabbit stew with Lambrusco. "I forgot to mention. We've been invited to a party tonight. Some filmmaker. Chance for you to relax before..."

Bel flicked a scallop with her fork. "I still don't believe I'll get out of this in one piece."

Eve chewed a chunk of rabbit. "Good regional dish, this. There's still a hint of fizz in the sauce."

"You did hear what I just said?"

"Yes, Bel. And as I said last night. It's just the same diversion tactic we used to do on demos and sit-ins. Remember what we learned about 'The Power of One'?"

Bel pushed her *coquilles* away. "Yes, I remember the tutorials. Listen, Eve – I'm in no mood for any party tonight. I'd like to talk, and as I was saying – *Hajni*. You do remember her?"

Evelyn prodded the startled baby rabbit's head at the bowl's edge with her knife.

"Yes Bel, I do remember Hajni. I remember everything about the Poll Tax demo too. How Georgy separated from us as the trouble started. How we huddled in a large group on the edge of Trafalgar Square, giggling like stupid little girls at the garbled noises from the police loudspeakers."

She put down her fork, dabbing her mouth with a square napkin which she folded deftly into a small triangle.



“Those skinheaded Class Warrior types started the trouble, throwing missiles at police *and* protestors. MI5 plants, I think. We were herded in at Trafalgar Square, at the perimeter. People were being pushed around by mounted police everywhere. Everyone was terrified of being trampled, but I knew what was going on. Right up until the South African embassy was set on fire.”

Bel remembered feeling disgusted at the trails of horse saliva streaking heads and clothes, but no skinheads. She thought about Georgy’s theory of the Power of One amidst a crowd, and how to blind-side security on demos. Was it all just part of his MI6 mindset? He’d slipped away just before the contact with the horses, appearing beyond a barricade moments later. At the time it seemed as though he’d cleared a pathway for their escape: Bel, Evelyn, blonde Finn Hajni. They’d swerved the looters and police and managed to duck into the Cafe Stromboli on the Haymarket.

Evelyn reached out and took Bel’s hand. “Hajni wasn’t at the demonstration, love. You *wanted* her to be there, maybe wanted that so much you imagined she *was* there. But she died in the flat, in your arms, only a month or two before. The drugs...”

Bel pulled her hand free: what bullshit! Hajni hadn’t died in her arms; the lie about bumping into her in Piccadilly Circus was purely tactical.

“Alright. C’mon, let’s get on with the sightseeing.”

Bel let Eve pay the bill. They browsed a couple of boutiques in the Navigli before hailing a cab for the Duomo. They idled a while around some mythological statues in the piazza, then headed inside.

Bel’s thoughts were running amok. She felt strangely liberated knowing Signora Sebatio was a fake. The Duomo itself made little impact. Disneyland, Vegas replicas, the miniatures hawked by street gypsies – they turned these attractions into monuments to bad taste. Turned on its side, the Duomo might resemble a space station from some Hollywood galaxy buster. Two little girls stood at the entrance in pristine Catholic dresses: Bel pulled a face for them. The girls laughed. Bel caught Signora Sebatio winding her sleek gold watch.

The naves of the cathedral were swarming with visitors, so they took a coppery brown oval lift to the cathedral roof. The interior lent weight, Bel thought, to her spacecraft theory. It was only as the elevator opened onto a patio leading to the roof that she began to wonder if this was the same kind of routine they'd worked on the real Evelyn.

Then again, maybe this was the perfect setting for Signora Sebatio's accuser. Every one of those rooftop statues looked thunderously judgemental: bishops of the *comuni*, saints, Renaissance dukes and Lombardian pirates and bankers.

"Public life is so rooted in the past in Milan, Bel," Signora Sebatio said. There was no eye contact; there'd been none since leaving the restaurant. "I've noticed that elsewhere in Italy. Even the way ordinary people live, just putting on the façade of the contemporary: the love of the same fashions, etcetera..."

"Is that why you chose to stand out today in your cream and black ensemble?"

Signora Sebatio seemed surprised. "I thought I was doing a good job of impersonating a tourist?"

Bel walked over the sloping tiles to view the streets below. "Christ," shouting back, "you're right! When you look down from this height on the square, you can really see it. The women are all colour-coded, beiges and tans, just like most of the brickwork."

The early afternoon colours were sublime. The sunlight was an exotic Venusian pink. Bel could imagine herself quivering high amongst the Duomo's forest of spires in flowing robes. She'd had similar fantasies where she'd saved Rian from the canal...

Signora Sebatio pulled off her cream jacket, hanging it on a bronze serpent atop a short stretch of railings. Bel walked back, until they were no more than six inches apart.

"Bel, I know all this must seem confusing to you...I know what you've been through. And I wanted to say..."

Bel flinched as Signora Sebatio reached out her hand as if to cup her cheek, before drawing it away quickly.

“...There were things I didn’t know when I got involved in this.”

Bel shook her head. “What *things*?”

Signora Sebatio gave a frustrated shrug. “Things that could get me killed. Oh look, you’re crowding me! Let’s walk. I’ve had pins and needles since that boat ride. I still need to shake a few out.”

They skirted several buttresses, joining a small crowd of sightseers. Signora Sebatio squeezed past the bodies close to the edge. Bel followed suit, a very beautiful Italian couple in smart tops and slacks with digi-cams muttering something as she passed. Looking back, Bel could see the cream jacket still hanging on its hook.

“Hey...what is it? You’re not thinking of doing something stupid?”

Signora Sebatio faced her, eyes darting this way and that, the expression pained.

“Why the hell couldn’t you forget about me?! Can’t you see I’ve been dragged into this thing? They want you to do a job and I’m the lure.”

“No – the fresh start in Venice is the lure,” Bel replied tersely.

She touched Signora Sebatio’s sleeve, unsure why. The woman drew away.

“I’m involved with some of the same people you are. We shouldn’t get close. You’re just being selfish in trying to turn back time. It would be no good for either of us.”

“You still haven’t said...?” Bel’s words trailed off. There was only anger in the woman’s expression.

“Leave me be, Bel,” Signora Sebatio yelled, storming off in the direction of the elevator.

“What could get you killed?” Bel shouted, running to catch her up.

Signora Sebatio pulled up, spun round, and headed past the buttresses towards the enclosure of statues. Suddenly she slowed, a stitch in her side, the trace of a limp also. Confused, Bel watched Evelyn’s stand-in lean against a black Mephistophelean bronze, her hands up in surrender, her lips moving.

“...Can you hear what I’m telling you? Bel! I might not be there to meet you after tomorrow, and I –”

Signora Sebatio’s hazel eyes were narrowing, her sallow face worn and anguished, the shape of the mouth wrong, the hands forming a protective brace at her chest. Bel wanted to grasp the woman’s shoulders, shake out the truth; but as she drew close enough to try, her own hands and arms felt weak and limp. She felt strangely placid, not at all angry, but she’d drawn too close: Signora Sebatio shouted some words, before sending jabbing fingers into her throat and solar plexus. Doubled up and out of breath, Bel felt her feet being swept away. Crashing to the ground, her head hit one of the hard ridges on the statue’s robe...

10.

4th November, 2010. Midday. Kasir stood feeling lost in a Trussardi raincoat at the Wagner stop of the Metropolitana. He preferred not to drive in Milan's city centre. The number of pedestrianised roads had doubled since his last visit in 1995.

When the train arrived, he chose the busiest carriage. A couple of Japanese students in Minnie Mouse-style dresses started giving him curious looks. By the second stop the two girls were whispering to one other. Kasir's gaze lingered on their fried-egg buttons, first-rate cover for audio receivers. The wearers' charisma barely touched him. In this line of work, even fleeting connections were a luxury.

Over twelve years ago, his wife Neith and daughter Ebe had been killed by a taxi driver two blocks from their Cairo apartment. The dreadful banality still gnawed at him. Elements no greater than random speed, chaotic parking, no pedestrian code, and a mother's faith in familiar routes had shattered his world.

Wonderful little Ebe: at three-and-a-half, she'd charmed both neighbours and strangers with her infectious bustle, her sibilance, her grandmother's olive eyes and retroussé nose. Their long outdoor weekends were now framed in his memory. Small details. The tiny round arms and legs, the chrysanthemum in her hair, the crisp cotton skirt, the flip-flops; how her eyes would dart away from his when he held her in his arms, all his love looking up at her too much to understand; how she always helped him pick a certain flower in the park, the perfect flower, to give her grandmother on Sundays. Her smile like a bold little exclamation mark...

He bitterly regretted never seeing the woman she'd become, never spotting the first small indicators of adulthood. But for all the treasures Ebe had left him, her mother would inevitably haunt him more. Neith had been at the centre of their circle of friends, maternal yet ageless in honour of her name. Her energy had radiated into other lives, while she kept his in perfect equilibrium.

After her death his life was framed by offices and surveillance rooms. At first, gathering intelligence covertly for a number of anti-corruption agencies; latterly as analyst and strategist with the Ministry of State for Administrative Development. His entry into the Secret Service, or GIS, had shocked many, but gave him some respite from old friends, old locations; from relationships that would never stretch his emotional limits, and from women whose only attraction was some nebulous likeness to Nieth's ghost.

And being different, he'd been guided into a specialised field. People used to trust him readily. He caught his strained smile in the streaked black of the window as the train sped through another tunnel. The Japanese girls now ignored him. Why wouldn't they? In their place, he'd have thought this distracted foreigner affecting Milanese élan an oddity as well.

Kasir got out at Piazza del Duomo and headed for the Belle Epoque splendour of the Galleria: another tunnel, vaulted and glass-topped. He killed fifteen minutes at a Breakfast Trattoria, ordering an espresso and egg crêpe. He paid his bill and left the Duomo's marble spires behind, heading into Via del Carmine. He made his way through the piazza past the Palazzo and climbed a double staircase up to a shadowy Via Brera. A truck and winch blocked half the thoroughfare. A huge sheet of tarpaulin was being fixed over several shop fronts opposite. A prison van slowly approached on the usable road.

At the end of the street, Kasir turned left. The private, exclusive family-run crypt faced the HQ of a Secret Police Unit. Journalists rarely snooped around after a story.

Giordano Manchiatti crossed the street to join him at the entrance. His default expression was cold deliberation and his features crude, but with city-sharp eyes that scrutinized everything from a 6'2" vantage point. Kasir thought the adjective 'swarthy' fitted, although an Egyptian or Syrian would regard it an insult. From Manchiatti's GIS file, Kasir knew the Italian didn't merit such sensitivity. In his early twenties he'd been initiated into Propaganda Due, or P2, the covert Masonic lodge doubling as a secret

right-wing government during the Strategy of Tension years. His right forearm sported a Masonic tattoo with the fascist slogan *Molti nemici. Molto onore* (“Many enemies. Much Honor”) scrolled underneath. Manchietti’s father-in-law was a former P2 treasurer, which would have served a future *capo* of Milan’s Secret Police well.

Manchietti clasped Kasir’s shoulder. “Glad you’re on time.”

Kasir held his gaze. “Thank you for agreeing to this.”

“Think nothing of it. I will do the talking, so everyone knows where they stand.”

City records were stored on the floors above ground. The crypt was two flights down from the street entrance.

“Incidentally, Giordano. Did you bring a copy of the postmortem report?”

Manchietti paused on the steps, patting his suit before pulling a long thick envelope from his inside pocket and handing it over. “You’d be as well reading this while we’re inside. The proprietress is as convivial as her corpses.”

The enamel seal on the thick oak doors depicted a viper swallowing a child, the emblem of the Visconti family. Kasir thought it would be fitting for the family of Saddam Hussein.

Signora Borromeo’s cold smile and five centimetre long nails complemented Manchietti’s description. The scent of incense recalled Cairo flea markets. Kasir hated it. She led them through the crypt, her heels clicking on the terrazzo mosaic floor.

“The body arrived yesterday, signor.”

“Good,” said Manchietti. “There will be no arrangements as yet concerning the two others. You needn’t make any further preparations.”

Three men had been killed at Sofia station, but Kasir only knew the Englishman’s identity. He’d been smuggling the others on board the train to Milan as cargo alongside the bombs, when Bulgarian Intelligence and the CIA intervened. It had been an audacious theft. Morgan and his Russian contacts had already sold the bombs to the British.

Signora Borromeo turned and shook her head, puzzled. “So, signor, the one from the train...?”

“Yes,” Manchietti said. “Just to check some details.”

The crypt ended at a solemn brown archway. Through it a box room with a vault led to the morgue. Signora Borromeo punched a code and opened the vault. Manchietti and Kasir stepped into the blue-white chill after her, leaving the door ajar. The cool air cut through the smell of incense. There were ten rows of two drawers apiece on either side of the morgue. Signora Borromeo stopped in front of the last two on the left.

“The corpse is embalmed already?” Kasir asked.

Signora Borromeo shrugged. “He was shot, I was told.”

She slipped the band from her hair, the bun tumbling down like an animal shaking itself awake. The bun had concealed a key and Signora Borromeo unlocked a drawer on the lower row, before carefully drawing the sheet clear of the body.

Even in death, Kasir thought Morgan had changed little in six or seven years. Back then, the two had worked together intercepting Czech replica missiles bound for the Yemen. He was tall, angular and refined looking, despite autopsy scars running from the neck down to the lower thighs. The forehead and right cheekbone were bruised where he’d fallen. The hole to the right of the Adam’s apple indicated a fatal perforating bullet wound, fired through the back of the head or neck by someone standing or crouching over the prone body. The degree of laceration indicated a handgun.

Manchietti reached forward to raise Morgan’s head in his large palm, angling it to the left. “Look at the left scalp region. What do you see?”

Kasir peered closely, the formaldehyde in the air making his eyes water. Manchietti’s fingers circled several small wounds, compatible perhaps with a knife point.

“You will see in the report that the CT identified a small hematoma. Your girl, perhaps?”



Kasir nodded, grimacing. Bel's file *had* indicated a knife attack on her husband. Drugs had also been mentioned.

"There was an injury to his back and one lower down, as well. Knife, not bullet," said the proprietress. "A serious injury."

Kasir had noticed another, older abrasion on Morgan's forehead. "What about a head wound? Traumatic aneurysm, anything of that nature?"

"Read about it later," Manchietti said brusquely.

"Would you like to see another of our guests?" Signora Borromeo said, deadpan. "Only the finest embalming. The very finest, Signor...?"

"Mistry." Kasir gave his pseudonym mechanically.

"What did I tell you?" Manchietti said. "She should run a hotel!"

"I see how you act, Signor Mistry," the proprietress smiled, closing the drawer. "He means something to you. He is of some value, perhaps? There are many beautiful young men, young women, pass through here. It is a – *hmm...* little *cupboard*, using something quaint for you – a little *cupboard* to hide the scandal. Many politicians, many wives of politicians, and sometimes the child of some family of importance. Not just in Milano..."

Manchietti nudged Kasir with his elbow. "No history lessons, Signora."

Kasir spotted Signora Borromeo stifling laughter with her hand. He glanced at Manchietti, who pulled a small diary impatiently from his suit pocket, offering it to the woman. It was open at November and a safety-deposit key was taped to the page.

"Part of your payment. At the station as arranged," Manchietti said.

The woman's smile lingered. "You want my details now? For the remainder?"

Signora Borromeo unclipped a red enamel locket of a scarab on red beads around her neck, scooping out what looked like a tightly rolled cigarette paper and handing it over.

Manchietti read it and nodded. "Fine, the balance will be wired to you by the end of the week."

On their way out of the building, Manchietti explained that Morgan was to be moved to Rome. “The British might want to do their own examination,” he said. “It matters little. Our American friend is waiting for us at headquarters. You’ll have time to read your report there as well.”

Manchietti’s mobile phone rang. “*What?! When did this...? Right. Well make sure they get her straight to The Virginian’s. Presto!*”

“...Yusef, there has been an accident. At the Duomo. Miss Andreus has suffered an injury and Signora Sebatio has panicked. Details are unclear, but we have Andreus at a secure hospital at San Babila. We will transfer her from there. As you heard, I’ve instructed we follow our preparations for tomorrow.”

Kasir was incredulous. “She may be unfit. Why was I not consulted about the security arrangements for today?”

Manchietti didn’t answer, talking into his phone again as they headed to Secret Police HQ. The building had some militaristic stone carvings around its entrance: it was outwardly an army recruitment centre. Inside there was a smell of fresh paint and staff transferred boxes and trays of files between rooms. Manchietti strode through behind reception and punched in a code on a door. On the other side was a claustrophobic, pencil thin elevator down to the *capo*’s basement office. Kasir looked in at the elongated oval room, a serpent’s head on the underground body of interrogation rooms and databanks stretching out beneath Via Fiori Chari.

Manchietti checked a data directory, rallied some orders to an aide and freshened his breath from a dispenser, before directing Kasir back to the main Observation Room where Borringer sat frowning over a black coffee. Eight personnel occupied workstations with multiple keyboards and small monitors. The large Wide Area Surveillance Monitors took up around two-thirds of the remaining room. Tomorrow’s circus parade through the San Agostino district would be tracked moment by moment. Around the walls, Kasir counted twenty-two electronic maps, three with tracking operations running.

Manchietti pointed to an active map and the trail of dots leading from the district of San Babila. “Our vehicles are now moving towards Porta Vittoria. She is in transit south. Maybe you’ll decide it’s for the best, Yusef, if she rests this evening.”

Borringer leant his arm on a workstation keyboard, his brow furrowed.

Kasir stuck to his brief. “No – I’m afraid we have to direct her through the routine this evening. I will have further time with her tomorrow morning.”

“Incidentally,” he added, “if you could perhaps remind me – what is the precise purpose of this parade?”

“Civic celebration. The chapel’s front façade has just been restored. And for charity also,” Manchietti added.

Kasir stroked his brow. “A circus...”

Manchietti shook his head absently. “Our political masters would not sanction our disrupting a more prestigious occasion, Yusef. You can have no objections at this stage.”

“Yes, the Papal visit to Milan in a couple of months was off limits,” Borringer smirked. “And a circus parade implies innocent pleasures and sympathetic targets. Our terrorists will look desperate – dangerous and pathetic at the same time.” He checked his watch. “Besides, the parade is only part of the show. I’m meeting Mayor Pardo at six to make sure his people have our little contingency plan for his safety off pat, so...”

The American finished his coffee and left. Kasir took his seat, gazing at an inert screen.

“You may have been right in your reservations,” Manchietti said. “Both these English women may prove unsuitable.”

“Both? I understand about Bel. The decision to use her was opportunistic. There has been insufficient time to guarantee –”

“– She is rebelling,” Manchietti nodded. “Obviously she does not believe Signora Sebatio is her old friend. She may be delusional, or the lapse in time may have clouded her recollections. And the Morgan woman is struggling.”

“Bel responded emotionally when they met,” Kasir said. “I don’t believe she automatically behaves with some degree of suspicion to people. But you are the first to confirm that Morgan and Sebatio are one and the same.”

“Yes. Morgan is MI6. Fully-trained, since coming to Italy.”

Kasir’s little finger scratched his slender earlobe. “And now, she’s gone *missing*...?”

Manchietti’s eyes hardened. “We know where she is. And in other matters she is useful to us. I do not believe it appropriate that she play the role of her friend’s keeper any longer. That is why I have arranged to take care of matters. It is better all round if Morgan disappears from the program, whether Andreus believes in her or not. The circus owner will tell you more tomorrow.”

“I can’t speak Romanian,” Kasir said flatly.

“I believe he speaks some Italian.” Manchietti gave a half-smile. “Just make sure that *Andreus* understands what she is being shown.”

“Which will be?”

Manchietti checked his watch. “That Evelyn Morgan is no more.”

Kasir’s left hand idled over the keyboard. He continued to stare at the screen. One question was more pressing than the others. “Listen Giordano, about using the code tomorrow? So many deaths...”

“Statistics do not concern me,” Manchietti said darkly. “However, we have contingencies, other suspects. One casualty is enough. You’ve been briefed about that.”

Manchietti took another paged message, turning away to his office. Kasir had long suspected that Bel’s death alone would be enough evidence of a failed terrorist attack; that the volume of liquid explosive could be regulated made that simple to arrange. But the contingency plan outlined by Birch that morning meant Kasir was now at MI6’s disposal, not that of SISMI. It was the natural arrangement. Egyptian Intelligence had closer links to London than Rome.

Rome, in turn, was closer to Washington than Cairo. Manchietti hadn't mentioned the Morgan woman's betrayal of her country, her defection (if the word was applicable) to the CIA. And according to the files Birch had shown Kasir, Bel might help redress matters.

Of course, he understood that MI6 really wanted revenge for Sofia and the loss of their bombs. Quite where that would leave him – and Bel – with Borringer was unclear. However, the divided loyalties and shifting priorities in this operation were nothing new. He would still have to play his part tomorrow to Manchietti's liking, at least initially.

Kasir watched the surveillance team. He felt deprived of life's fundamentals in Italy, even anything palatable to eat, just dreadful old soup and veal recipes. And a strike of some kind had caused a dearth of international newspapers. However, it was Alessandra Baranyi's alleged betrayal that cut deep. GIS now suspected the hydrazine in her apartment had been stored for Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Kasir would demand more evidence in Cairo, but he just might have groomed a double agent.

Its importance seemed a distant memory, but he pulled out George Morgan's post-mortem from the Trussardi and began to read.

The four pages indicated the cause of death to be shock and haemorrhage. All injuries resulted from firearm ammunition (three bullet wounds to the neck and leg) except bruises to the head and face, and a broken wrist caused by blunt force impact by object or surface. Prior injuries included wounds inflicted to the head, lower back and buttocks by an undifferentiated sharp object. The CT results mentioned by Manchietti were précised. There was a prior spinal injury at L5 with a gap (inches, fractions unspecified); presumably this was less serious than it might have been. Abrasion injury to the forehead was consistent with a fall against a hard object. Under 'other remarks', the report detailed an earlier procedure to treat a 'Superior gluteal artery false aneurysm' by 'embolization using coils'. This was attributed to the stab wound to the left buttock. How an aneurysm could result from a knife wound to the buttock was beyond Kasir. He

noticed the report was unsigned. However, Bel's file suggested she'd attempted murder, albeit in a drugged state. That still implied she was *capable* of murder.

Today Bel had been the victim. But not tomorrow. Not like Alessandra Baranyi. Tomorrow all of it would have to stop...

Kasir's eyes fixed on the monitor. The line had grown static at a green outline on the map indicating zero signal interference: she'd arrived at the Virginian's residence on the city's outskirts. Kasir could also determine aerial activity, two dots adrift like a new constellation forming to the West. A cluster of smaller white dots formed a trail to the property's gate, and there were three – no *four* more on the driveway, moving towards the arriving party.

Kasir checked his watch. He'd take an extra hour before leaving to join the others at The Virginian's. He left the building and walked back to the Palazzo. He chose a quiet spot to sit down and took out his mobile phone and headphones. He'd duplicated the video and audio transcript of yesterday's conversation with Bel's psychiatrist, Dr. Fox. He accessed the file. Fox appeared onscreen with his moustache, ear stud and Lautrec-print waistcoat.

“Amsterdam? Well, the impact of Rian's drowning is easily enough explained. You've seen the file, Professor. The complex part water played in the original trauma, the near drowning under ice at five?”

“Yes, but surely the later trauma is not merely an extension of the earlier?”

Fox looked sincere behind his arched fingers. “It's precisely that. I believe the associations water has for her also inform her guilt at not being able to save Rian, at least.”

Fox drummed right fingers on left knuckles as if working up a list. “You see, Professor Kasir, and I'll try to keep this fit for a layman, it was the melting of the ice that she associated with being saved: in effect, water itself, rather than adult intervention. Now, obviously, Rian's drowning created conflict with that belief. Little short of a schism, in fact. The onus upon the adult to intervene reasserted itself, compounding

Bel's sense of guilt. And taken alongside what we've established over some years as some peculiarities of self-image..."

"Peculiarities?"

"Well, again Professor, that's alluded to in the file. As a consequence of her childhood experience, she's come to imagine herself as somehow 'glacial'. The phrase 'deep frozen' appears many times in her testimony. This is no mere act of verbal self-deprecation. It's nothing short of a belief that terrifies her as she associates it with her imminent death."

"This is an explicitly stated belief, Dr. Fox?"

Fox laughed a dimpled laugh. "She'll never actually bring herself to articulate it. She's erected too many mechanisms of defense. Breaking down one or two won't solve the problem. Besides, her very appearance, and even alterations to it, seem to unconsciously reinforce the self-image. And there's nothing to do about the fair complexion and prominent cheekbones..."

"However, some pursuits she indulged in, I've no doubt, were attempts to compensate. A whole compass of hot-blooded pursuits to melt the ice in that imaginary deep-freezer: promiscuity, drug-taking, adventure and thrill-seeking on escapades with anarchist activists. Then the part of the program allowing her to relocate herself in the Ancient World, the Sorceress identity and the association of a command of the elements, particularly fire. You know, it wouldn't surprise me at all if this is another manifestation of her desire to be saved by water again."

"Yes, and that identity hasn't been expunged, doctor. I witnessed evidence of that last night. I take it the trigger phrase 'Slim Slow Slider' relates to this command of the elements also?"

"Obliquely, yes. To her self-control on the ice, Professor. The fact that it wouldn't crack under her again as it did when she was a child. And the song was a favourite of her husband's. The emotional connection."

"That's interesting, if she no longer loves her husband. So again to Amsterdam. I understand from her file that in the first instance, some detail of family history was used to make her comply with an MI6 operation there?"

“Well, she was convinced it was a jaunt to wartime Amsterdam to save Jewish survivors of the Nazi occupation. She’s of Dutch descent on her father’s side. Her grandfather was among the Dutch Royal Armed Forces who escaped to London after the Wehrmacht landed. In at the start of the communications network between the government in exile and the Dutch Resistance.”

“Forgive me, but the success of this fantastical role would depend on a denial of the historical details of the period. Even if the Dutch Resistance was an emotionally charged subject. Even if she loved her grandfather?”

Fox nodded emphatically. “Her grandfather died when she was a teenager, Professor. Her family life and her time at school, neither were settled as such. He was the one who comforted her after her accident. His love meant a lot.”

Kasir switched off the phone, pocketing it with the headphones. Perhaps Fox’s exploration of ‘water’ as a generative concept proved neither phobia nor fetish on Bel’s part. However, water *might* just prove a redemptive element in Bel’s revised program; that, and the persona of her late grandfather, Arne Andreus. Stiles had used a simulation of George Morgan’s voice to activate Bel, and instructions from a loved one should by rights produce better results. Bel’s ‘emotional connection’ to Georgy via his favourite song title was no longer strong enough. However, the revisions would have to wait until tomorrow morning. Tonight Bel was the star attraction at The Virginian’s party.

If nothing else, Kasir had detailed evidence of Bel’s program. He also had contacts at the International Court of Justice. When the time was right, he’d use them.



11.

November 4th, 11am. Eskin stood in a dirty yellow beam from the Russian Embassy's basement garage lighting. He'd driven through the night to get the weapon to Berlin on time, and the bastards from Military Intelligence weren't even there to examine it as arranged. He'd be dealing with SVR instead. The weight of the rifle bag underarm was aggravating the dull ache between his shoulder blades. These damn ailments were coming on thick!

A low hum signalled the elevator's descent. Eskin smelled lacquered chrome as the door slid open. Lev Wakhevitch, SVR's Security Director at the embassy, had an oval head and a face Eskin could imagine reflected on the back of a spoon. The unfamiliar bespectacled face of a second man hovered twelve inches lower than Wakhvetich's.

"Eskin. You've made good time." Wakhevitch's smile wasn't reciprocated. "This is Schötler, a former East German who works for us. He'll be examining the Novel Explosive."

Eskin stepped into the elevator which was much warmer than the garage. He rested the rifle bag against its rear panel, and stood between the two men.

"Before I forget..." Wakhevitch reached into his suit pocket, handing Eskin a stack of photos tied with a rubber-band.

The SVR man pressed a button on the unnumbered panel and the lift ascended, its motors and cables silent. "All as required, I trust?"

Eskin flicked through the photos of locations in London, of the hospital where Rumissa Bourkova was being treated and its surrounding streets. He grunted his assent and pressed the stack into his raincoat's inner pocket. Flexing his shoulders, he grimaced.

“Godovin may discuss these with you. Homeland Intelligence takes the same interest in London we do,” Wakhevitch continued genially. “I see you have some pain there.” He spun his index finger vaguely behind his ear to indicate the spot.

“That’s nothing,” Eskin said. “There were two BMWs with me all the way from Konstanz. Yours?”

“You’re well covered. Don’t worry,” Wakhevitch said.

Eskin sniffed at Schötler. “What kind of test are you going to do here?”

Schötler frowned and stared myopically. He was about to speak, but the elevator had drawn quietly to a halt.

Wakhevitch ushered the two men out ahead, taking charge of the rifle bag. “We have the specifications on file. Schötler has the microfilm. He can transfer it onto a computer for us.”

They walked past clerical offices with wall to wall box files and a darkened surveillance room, its split screen wall monitors just visible behind tilted Venetian blinds. It was easy to believe they were three or four levels below the street. Through one set of doors, an early morning focus group was underway in a conference room: a tutorial in picking up paper clips, Eskin supposed. Schötler led them down a corridor, past a washroom and a computer cluster full of machines under repair, to a locked door where he stopped and fumbled with a set of keys.

Wakhevitch gave Eskin a benign once-over. “Technically, Eskin, you don’t have to be here. When is your appointment upstairs?”

Eskin looked at his watch. “Half-past. But I’m interested.”

“Fine. Shall we?”

The two men followed Schötler into a dimly-lit computer lab, Wakhevitch closing the door behind them. The SVR man placed the rifle bag on a table, nudging boxes of equipment aside, before unfastening the Velcro and zippers and removing the Novel Explosive.

Eskin watched Schötler transfer the microdot file onto a laptop using a smartpen. Alongside the laptop was a large white console like a futuristic kitchen appliance. Eskin guessed it was an advanced microscope system. Wakhevitch slid open a panel door at the base, then fetched the grenade and placed it inside, fixing it with some clamps.

“We get an image of the internal structure with 3D X-Ray scanning software,” Wakhevitch explained.

Eskin adjusted his watch’s chronograph. “Amazing...”

The X-Ray activated, the grenade’s skeleton appeared on the laptop screen. Schötler switched screens around a dozen times between the scanned image and the file containing a detailed diagram. He added notes to a reviewing pane each time. Finally he said something in German to Wakhevitch, Eskin only catching the word “enziffert.”

Wakhevitch tapped the man’s shoulder. “Genuß! Deine Fortbildung, Schötler.”

The SVR man nodded to Eskin. “Let us leave him to finish. I will direct you to the Reception Room.”

The formal Reception Room was on the top floor of the building, which was only the fourth floor accessible via the official entrance. The functional rooms below ground seemed a world away. Each floor had a manned security kiosk, and Eskin was buzzed through without a word.

Inside, he took a seat and waited. On the main wall two large black bears wrestled by a frozen pond, the rear left paw of one having cracked the ice at the edge. By his chair looking out over Volkspark Friedrichshain, a sectioned oval window was decorated with four scenes from the October Revolution in filigree glass. On the adjacent wall hung a small, unfamiliar portrait of Lenin, with extra shadow rounding a domed forehead, a cliché intended to exaggerate his intelligence. Eskin understood that his country sorely needed a new breed of hero.

There was a phone console on the table beside his chair. After several minutes the green light flashed, and Eskin picked up.

“Eskin. Glad this part of the operation went well.” Godovin’s voice had an edge to it. “You received the photographs from SVR?”

“Yes, that old woman Wakhevitch. I would have thought he’d have been –”

“– Never mind such thoughts, Eskin. This is a secure three way conversation. You’re satisfied with the photos Wakhevitch gave you?”

Eskin pulled the photos roughly from his pocket and free of the band. He should have anticipated SVR listening in.

“Of course,” he said sharply, flicking through the photos. A stamp had lodged between them: Japanese, with a bonsai tree. Eskin brushed it to the floor.

“I believe you have a mistress in Central Berlin. Fraulein Schütze?”

Eskin squashed the photos into his pocket again. “Yes.”

“Good. I’m so glad. You will, I am sure, take your pleasure with her. It is fortunate she sleeps into the afternoon. Still, a nightclub hostess would have to be more enjoyable than *a stolen bride on a cold winter’s night...*”

...Suddenly Rumissa occupied his thoughts once again. Godovin’s tone was even and respectful. The actions he’d take were framed and annotated like step-by-step instructions in an assembly manual. When the Chechens’ false heroine was no more, Russia would find its new hero, and Dmitri Eskin would feel like a real man again. Yes, this operation would redeem him, Godovin promised. His lady hadn’t been as hostile as he’d first imagined.

...

3pm. Eskin sat in a wicker chair in the living room of a flat two blocks west of the Ku-Dam, eating a slice of cold mackerel pie. Marika Schütze lay in the adjacent bedroom in a benzodiazepine induced sleep. Wakhevitch’s photos lay scattered over her back and lower body.

Eskin regretted the need for her sedation. Newly transformed, he longed for physical variety, for the turmoil of passion. His desires were increasingly masked in

strange narratives. A cartoon had run through his mind on and off for days: a grizzly bear tearing a stenographer to pieces, her tiny disembodied hand rattling the return key the last body part devoured. The stenographer, he knew, stood for bureaucracy, for FSB, SVR, MI5 and other acronymic serfs; the bear, the true soul of Mother Russia.

Eskin went to give his hostess one last look. He gathered up and pocketed the photos. Then he leant over to stroke her hair and shoulders, arranging her dressing gown for modesty, before slapping her buttocks for luck. Not quite satisfied, he went to the dresser for a suitable comb, bunched up her dark ringleted hair and twisted the whole into a *chignon*. Then he fixed it with the comb and gently inclined her head to the left.

In another inner pocket was the newspaper article about the Katyr Yurt massacre that he'd last read on the Gulfstream from Kamchatcka. He returned to the living room to read it again.

It was February 4th, 2000. My mother would ask me if I knew the date before I left for school. Our school was at the edge of Katyr Yurt, and we had been there all morning in the assembly hall, afraid to leave. None of us were sure of what had happened that morning, but we had all heard the loud explosions and some of the boys said these were rockets landing. There were only two teachers with us in the school. At about three in the afternoon, Madame Vikhayev came in to tell us that we should get ready to leave.

I remember staring out at the street from a small window beside the school entrance. There were Russian soldiers outside and we could hear gunfire. Some of the soldiers were standing at small trucks or next to cars, and they carried chains. They were chaining bodies to the bumpers. Other soldiers approached the school by the front garden and playground, motioning to the children and the two teachers to come out. Past the soldiers I could see more cars drawing up in the street, with white sheets draped over their roofs or tied in strips like flags from wooden sticks or pieces of wire. Some of my friends were crying, pushing at the front doors, but they would not open.

I still watched things happening outside. Suddenly I saw my oldest brother Riz at the school gate, shouting. There were other adults too, and the soldiers told them to stay

back. Some of the soldiers had forced open the school doors. The air from outside had a strange smell like burning matches. We all wanted to go outside, even with the smell.

The soldiers were speaking to us in harsh voices, but I felt that they wanted to help. The children had all to move in lines of twos, so that they could get out the gates to their waiting families. This took a very long time and a queue was formed deep into the assembly hall. I remember being near the middle, with a younger boy beside me. His name was Zaid and he had just moved from Grozny before the war. He looked very small and very scared and I hugged him close to me. He was gulping air a little and I stroked his hair. We seemed to be standing there for a very long time. But as I got outside, I could see my father Zernya and my mother Taba. They had joined my brother Riz at the school gates. I could see my mother crying and smiling when she saw me. I smiled, but wondered where my sister and other two brothers were?

The soldiers guided us forward. They told us we would be driving to a safe place. Others were talking into radios. I was told after that they are called walkie-talkies. My brother had found one of these in a cellar in the village when he was collecting bottles for the market.

When I reached my family, I said goodbye to Zaid, even though I did not want to. His own family was not there. I noticed my brother the most. He seemed angry and was shaking. He was fifteen at the time and knew more about what was happening. He only looked at me once, and he wouldn't look at the soldiers. My father had to point out our car to them before we could leave. In the back of our car, a Volga, I squeezed in between my other brother Ruslan and my older sisters Madina and Matusa. It was very uncomfortable. The windows had to stay shut and it was difficult to breathe. No-one spoke a word. I was very frightened.

As we drove out through the village, there were terrible things outside. Although we did not want to see them, we could not help it. We were children. There were dead people piled on one another at the side of the road and some of the big trees at the village centre had split into pieces, often blocking the road. There seemed to be only a few cars ahead of us and they had to drive slowly round the trees. People from the first car and some others helped to move the trees aside, so we could all drive on. As we came to the end of the village, to our house and the neighbours' houses, we could look out no more.

They had been blown away: nothing remained except burned pieces of wood. I remember thinking that, if we had stayed in the village, all our house would have been good for was lighting a fire.

There were many cars behind us now on the open road to Achoi Martin, and my father drove more quickly. I still don't know if we were as near the front as I thought at first: I could not see so far ahead in the back. My brother Riz told Ruslan that the Russians had dropped bombs on the village from parachutes. Petrol gas from the bombs went on fire falling from the sky, making the sky explode. Our people choked to death and worse in the streets. I remember my father telling Riz to be quiet. These were the last words I heard my family speak.

I remember the helicopters becoming louder above us in the sky. And the planes. I remember an explosion ahead of us - one, two, three explosions - and my father stopping the car. My mother was crying loudly and looking back at us. I looked away, out of the window. Two planes were flying quite low towards us. I remember wanting to pray. Then we were blown up. I landed on the ground, in the mud.

Such easy propaganda, Eskin thought. A touching first person account in a liberal English rag. Very clever. Whether by Rumissa's own hand or some MI6 scribe's, it was a perfectly executed piece of fiction.

Eskin sat for a minute in silence, before folding the article back into his pocket. Leaving the apartment for the café down the street, he tossed Fraulein Schütze's spare key into the first bin he saw. In the café he ordered a taxi for the airport. He was booked on the 16.45 flight to London. At the counter he ordered coffee, pumpernickel and schnapps, taking the tray to a table with a complementary *Bild*.

As he read, he rubbed a phantom ache along his jaw line. The German Parliament was holding emergency sessions in response to an upsurge in racial violence in Berlin and Hamburg: arson attacks on Turkish businesses up threefold during 2010. Eskin pursed his lips in satisfaction. A funeral cortège passed outside. A slow, spinning ballet dancer in jade dominated a jeweller's shop-front display across the street. He

drank his schnapps and scanned the sports pages, flicking back to a main-page spread of Angela Merkel addressing an audience of financiers from a slender, hourglass-shaped podium.

Outside a silver taxi drew up, occupying one-and-a-half regular car spaces. Eskin rammed his fingers into the uneaten pumpernickel, boring into the black grain as though gouging weasel eyes. He thought of Stiles, the supercilious, greasy little MI5 *zarasa* he'd met in London. He glowered out at the street for a long time, absently flicking knots of broken bread across the table. When he snapped out of it, the taxi driver was peering through the café window, giving Eskin a look he didn't like one bit.



12.

Bel awoke with a start and sat up in bed. She reached for a bedside lamp. A flick of the switch revealed an old-fashioned, elegant bedroom with two single beds. When she rubbed her head it was wrapped in muslin. Her head and eyes felt heavy but painless. On her right, there was a high-backed marble dressing table with a fine, mahogany-framed mirror shaped like a heart. The table had a dainty basin with two small stalked mirrors behind the taps. There were Impressionist watercolours of Mediterranean villas spread evenly around the walls. The wall to her right was indented in an L-block. It felt like a hotel room.

She'd look out the window. Her right foot touched the floor, and a faint bleeping came from somewhere. She shoved the starchy, uncooperative sheets down free of her body. Her white, frilled nightdress had the same scent as the room. She stood up, felt dizzy, and sat down again. Her back and shoulders had been pressed against something hard...

She barely had time to register the two men entering her room before one threw a pink cotton dress and pair of beige sandals at her. The dress snagged around her forearm and the sandals fell at her feet.

The men wore turtleneck sweaters and shades. "Get dressed. You are expected downstairs. Hurry!"

Bel shook the dress free onto the bed, stooped to pick up one of the sandals and threw it at the nearest turtleneck. "Sorry – but I don't wear bloody *beige!*"

Suddenly, the men were bearing down on either side and she was sprawling on the bed, being stretched out like a star and pinned down. One gripped her ankles, while the other held one wrist and knelt on the other. She thrashed against the restraint, but they were prepared. What did the bastards want? Her nightdress was pulled up and over her head. It snagged on her chin. She tried to bite the man's fingers, but she bit into the cloth and her tongue, choking on some loose thread. She was coughing and a flat palm

was placed on her belly. The nightdress was pulled clear, her head tilting backwards over the edge of the bed. The fingers around her belly slid to her inner thigh: she lashed out with her knee, but it was pushed to the side. She could taste the coppery blood in her mouth.

Suddenly her head was thrust up and forward. She caught sight of dark glasses and bared white teeth for a split second. Something to focus on. She tried to jerk her body to one side as a light cotton top was pulled down over her head, rough hands at her ribcage forcing the dress down to her waist. Then she was flipped over onto her front, a hand at her rear dragging the dress fully down.

She thrust out her ankle. On target! A gasp. She was turned and hoisted up again by the waist, then pulled back by her shoulders. Casting a punch backwards over her right shoulder, she connected with his face. There was swearing and the grip tightened on her arm. If they thought she was some puppet...!

The one in the crimson turtleneck sat on the bed at her feet holding a pair of flat-heeled sandals. She kicked one onto the floor. More swearing as he retrieved it. The other gripped her underarm from behind, his free hand unclipping and unwrapping the bandage from her head. She tried to roll off the bed, but he dragged her back...

“Don’t be stupid, signora! We do it this way because you are difficult.”

She tried to calm her breathing. “Fucking perverts! Where am I?!”

“There is a party downstairs – you’re the guest of honour,” shouted the one holding her shoulders.

“A party...?! Oh, why didn’t you just fucking say so!”

The crimson turtleneck shoved on her first sandal, the thong cutting in and making her gasp. She remained still. The second slid on more easily. She kicked out at the turtleneck one last time, but she was weaker. The bastards would keep, though! For now, they had her on her feet and through the door.

The house had a courtyard design with three doors on each side of the upper level balcony. No handy exits or open doors to dart through. Low voices echoed from

these rooms and some light orchestral music drifted up from below. The pagoda-type roof had some foliage on its underside: ivy and giant bay leaves. She tried taking it all in. The walls were laden with ornaments and casual chatter came from below. The turtlenecks gripped her arms tighter coming down the carpeted staircase. She tried to sit down. As they lifted her forward, she noticed the one on her left had a dagger tattooed on his hand. She spat a trail of reddish saliva at his shoe, but it splattered onto the carpet.

She was about to meet unfamiliar people wearing a fuck-all dress! What were they expecting from her?

A raised rockery snaked through part of the lounge, dividing the guests into roughly three groups. Most were sipping clear beverages. A vivid painted bronze mural caught her eye. It covered one of the ground floor walls and was fractionally shaded by the balcony's lower projection.

Before the sequence of pictures could draw her in to a story, a stout man in heavy black eyeliner, a red gown and a crown of thorns appeared as from nowhere. His huge hands clasped hers, but she pulled free. He wore red contacts.

"If this is your place, you want to think about hiring yourself some new monkeys!"

She turned to the one who'd fitted her sandals. "Did 'Mama' buy your pretty jumper, shithead?! I'm having you and your boyfriend charged with assault!"

"Hey, calm it down. Calm it *down*! Now, Miss Andreus, take it easy and relax. This is a party – you're amongst friends, right? Take yourself a drink and get to know everybody."

He was an American. He craned his neck up at the lower balcony, absently directing her down the steps to a table where four women sat dressed for the kerbside.

"Thinking of setting me up in a new career?" she shouted back at him.

The women's party clothes looked unwashed, their stockings were ripped, and their make-up was teenage freestyle. A butler dressed as Dracula handed her a glass of wine as she sat down. Her elbow was jogged and the wine spilled onto her bare thighs.

She stared icily at the bushy strawberry blonde alongside who was now patting her dry with her left hand.

“Sorry *dah-ling*...Tell me, who you meant to be?”

The voice was rich and masculine, the eyes glazed. Her features were solid and square, unlike her Mediterranean-looking friends. Large hands. Maybe she was a *he*? The accent was Eastern European.

Bel shrugged. “Come again?”

“Yes. Your dress. Here, we are Swinging London.” The woman dampened a feathery eyebrow with her finger. “You are Twiggy, no?”

“With black hair? No, I’m Liz Taylor! Look...*signora* – please just fuck off! *Grazie?!*”

The blonde made a huffy face and snorted.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” said one of the younger girls opposite. “Your head, it is sore?”

Lashing out wouldn’t help. Bel focused again on the pictures from Antiquity. Whatever was happening to her, somehow she sensed this might be important. But why? How? She let the mural draw her in. In no time, the pictures seemed to take up all four walls of a very different room. Then she began to remember:

*...She was clothed in a robe and headdress, being carried aloft on woven weeds...*

*...Horns and bells and wordless chants accompanied a procession along a riverbank, young goatherd warriors at the procession’s head beating the air with their long flint and wooden shields. Vultures circled high ahead, effigies and rising smoke visible on the ground below. A bed of straw circling a plinth had been set alight...*

*...A village priest bound a young transgressor fast to the plinth with rushes. Eyes aflame behind his calfskin mask, the priest anointed the Sacrifice with the blood of a freshly slaughtered ox...*

*...The priest was dancing, drawing the path of the soul's passage in the hard sand with the blade of his long axe. The path was drawn as an expanse of arcs leading to the sun...*

*...He threw his arms wide. There was a short chorus of horns...*

*...Two warriors approached the plinth, cutting the Sacrifice loose and throwing him to the ground at the priest's feet. The horns ceased. The priest uttered an invocation and brought the axe down, many times, until the body was broken and severed into pieces...*

Clasping her head, she shook herself awake. "Christ! Everything's coming apart!"

...

Kasir leant forward, breathing the word into her face. "*Bellissima...*"

He knew her trance-like state of moments before wasn't due to the trigger phrase. The outburst was unusual too. What then? Opiates? Some quirk in her program? A combination of the two? At her feet, a glass lay broken at the stalk.

"Yes?" She rubbed her face in her hands. "I was...Christ, I can't explain it! And where were *you* hiding? I was practically raped upstairs!"

It was his turn for confusion. "*I was upstairs. We should discuss that later, though. We have to rehearse your steps for tomorrow. Come with me.*"

Kasir took Bel's arm, but she jerked it loose. "I need air."

She pushed through the throng towards the garden. Kasir gave the agent at the stereo a nod to ensure the correct order of music was understood.

He caught up with her on the patio, her agitation growing. "Why are we at a bloody fancy dress? And that woman back there had a fake hand."

Kasir could smell the spilled wine on her dress. She shouldn't have been drinking with her medication. However, she seemed very alert. What was happening?

"An actress. Our host is a filmmaker. Bel, do you feel up to this?"

She hissed away what he realised was a pointless question. The guests milled round Gefog under the blue-black sky. He stood red-faced, arms outstretched like Moses in front of a barbecue pit; without his crown of thorns, Kasir thought he resembled the Devil.

The atmosphere was very strange. Kasir had anticipated this last minute run through being a more sombre affair. Why the Roma women were here was a mystery. At least he was not likely to be 'buttonholed', as the Americans liked to say. After Matruh, Borringer had given Gefog Kasir's bona fides, and tonight the American was observing a distance. Gefog aside, Kasir only recognised two SISMI agents and Gefog's companion from the bookshop in Alexandria, the one who didn't wear a cap. He was seated behind a tripod-mounted camera on the patio, recording the guests. Kasir had checked that the filming would end prior to Bel's routine. Out of the sight of the lens, he adjusted the buttonhole cameras on his jacket sleeve and lapel.

Bel weaved her way through a cluster of suited males and some tables and chairs, just as the music changed. Someone had amplified the speakers at the back of the house: a familiar Van Morrison song...

She seemed only slightly calmer as Kasir joined her in the garden. Gefog as Moses-Beelzebub chewed a cigar and parted the crowd. She was peering into the empty darkness between the trees at the garden's edge. Did she plan to escape?

Gefog approached her, glowing like Satan in the combined porch and summerhouse lighting. Claspng her shoulders, he drew her head to his chest before placing the bowler hat on her head. She stood, legs crossed at the ankles, looking aimless and relaxed.

Then without warning she punched Gefog in the chest.

Gefog staggered back, spluttering his cigar onto the grass. Some loud coughing. Then he began to laugh. "My word, sir – we got ourselves a wild beast!"

"Bel – the steps," Kasir whispered close to her face, leading her towards a metallic red bucket on the ground.

Kasir motioned to the Italian agent by the stereo. His name was Livi: Manchiotti's protégé. The lush symphonic theme from *Dr. Zhivago* began at volume. The air was very still, insects whirring near as Bel approached the bucket. She removed the bowler and pulled out the wire and pellet from inside the rim. Kneeling down, she prized free the lid and felt for the ridge on the bucket's base. She found the strap to open the compartment and glanced over at the guests. The hat slid onto her knee as she placed the detonator in the compartment and closed it. Then she lifted a dripping hand and turned arms wide to face the crowd.

Just as suddenly, her arms swung down by her sides. Her expression was hard, resentful. She hadn't replaced the bucket's outer lid.

Kasir watched Livi talking urgently to the Roma women who were clustered at the grassy edge like gulls washed up at a shoreline. He ushered them into the garden. They were drunk and giggling. Now Kasir understood why they'd been invited: to take a soaking as stand-ins for tomorrow's crowd.

"Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread!" Gefog shouted.

Moonlit water danced at the bucket's circumference, as Bel homed in on two of the four women. Her expression was stern. Every step seemed purposeful. A slight brunette raised an indecisive forearm, screaming as she was soaked. She kicked off her high heels, gathered them up by the straps and ran back to the house in tears.

The other women wanted out of the game, but Bel cornered a petite blonde in a diaphanous dress between the barbecue pit and a small bush: another soaking, another tearful dash for the house. The last two women shouted abuse at Livi and a colleague in Romanian as the agents harried and shoved them into the garden.

The strawberry blonde turned her ire on Gefog who whistled and gestured at Kasir to calm things down. Forced back, she circled the barbecue pit warily as Bel began stalking her. Kasir could tell the blonde was tougher and drunker than her friends who were now crying together on the patio. She shouted, throwing up her arms, yelling more

words in Romanian at the guests. Bel rushed to the other side of the pit, catching her off-guard, and the woman stumbled backwards drunkenly, her forearm trailing on the red-hot grill. She screamed and swore, gesticulating wildly. Bel drew close and threw water over the woman's face and upper body.

The blonde stood spluttering and tried to slap herself dry with one hand. Bel lurched forward and emptied the last of the water over her adversary. Some splashed onto bits of pork, rinds and dried-out wedges of apple on the grill, which sizzled and hissed fiercely.

Bel was laughing. The blonde froze. The SISMI men were uneasy. Gefog and Livi looked grim.

"*Crazy English Bitch!*" the woman screamed, yanking the metal bucket from Bel's hand and aiming several blows to her upper body.

Kasir darted forward as Bel staggered back. He caught hold of her waist, just keeping her upright. Kasir noticed the blonde's artificial right hand, as she threw the bucket inches wide of his head. She was crying now, supporting her scalded forearm. Charging round the pit, she set about confronting Gefog and Livi.

Livi met her halfway, drawing a taser from his jacket, and firing the electric charge into the woman's shoulder and left side. The blonde gasped in pain. Her legs buckled and twisted beneath her as she collapsed. Bar Gefog, the others watching began to argue.

Kasir saw Bel's chin was streaked with blood. "Bel, are you hurt? *Bel!*"

"No – bit my lip," she said flatly.

Kasir couldn't guess what she was thinking or feeling. Suddenly, Livi jostled him aside for the bucket, checking inside before shrugging to Gefog. Livi replaced the outer lid, then walked back to help the barely conscious blonde.

The Italians cast Kasir exasperated glances. Pointing to Livi and the woman, Gefog made the briefest cut-throat gesture with his thumb. The serious looks on the



American's SISMI cohorts curdled Kasir's blood. He stared at Gefog. 'The Virginian' had helped fund this operation, but he was a dangerous fool.

The patio was now eerily silent. "Come. I don't want you to catch a chill out here," Kasir said, wiping the blood from Bel's face with his black handkerchief. She pushed him aside.

"Come on, Bel. There's a sauna in the garden's summer lodge."

He opened the lodge's sliding windows. She still looked angry as she stepped inside. The low burr of the sauna's heating system caused the right-angled staircase to vibrate. Kasir supported her as she climbed, but she shrugged him away. Upstairs, she staggered against both walls of the narrow corridor leading to the sauna. Kasir tried to help her undress from behind. Again, she resisted.

Unable to squeeze past, he gripped her shoulders. "I don't know what happened out there, Bel, but I think you deserve some time to yourself. And you need to get warm."

His fingers tightened, his forehead touched the crown of her skull. He felt he could scarcely breathe. He didn't feel he *deserved* that luxury.

"*Bellissima...*"

She turned slowly, scrutinizing him wearily. Suddenly, she slapped his face hard.

"Well, Kasir? Are you going to tell me what the hell's happening here?! The *who*? The *why*? Or do I throw you back down these stairs and make a run for it?"

§

9.20pm. A dark grey saloon drew up at the rear of a black circus tent. Three horns sounded and a brunette appeared at the slit in the tent's canvas, one cream suit with theatrical blood rolled tight inside a transparent carrier in a matching stained hand. Evelyn Morgan, swathed in black, climbed in the back without a word.

The past two hours had been well worth the trouble, despite no small discomfort. Tilting back her head on the seat rest, she dreamed of relaxing for the first time in weeks, or months, or even years. It would cost close to sixty grand for the privilege: she hoped her former handler in Venice had things detail perfect and his mob contacts were the prized assassins he claimed. She knew this was Manchietti's show, though: the *capo* had drawn her into the CIA's plot in the first place. Still, no-one had warned her about Birch. On the flight from England, she'd assumed he was some ex-SAS heavy. She flinched, thinking back on it.

Yes, she was still vulnerable. Still, at least everything would be tidily arranged and well-planned on Lugano. With Manchietti's guards, surely she'd be far away by Sunday? Between them, Manchietti, the Egyptian, a film and some finely tuned hypnosis would finally convince Bel there was no more Evelyn; and even MI6 might give up her ghost when she settled in America.

Evelyn's eyes were smarting as she lit a cigarette. A Mercedes had drawn up behind the BMW. Both cars moved off. As well as the private car to take her home, Manchietti had provided security.

Bel's desperation at the Duomo had been too much. Quite horrifying. Evelyn had never used her combat training in the field, let alone on a civilian. She'd been close to unravelling. She'd never dreamed she'd feel that way, that the consequences of what she'd done to Bel might be inescapable. As she was driven off, she wiped away a little something lodged in her eye.

13.

The bleeping noise was growing louder. Bel was nearly back in bed when the door swung open. She climbed in, acting dumb. After about a minute the guard gave her the benefit of the doubt. She lay in the darkness for maybe an hour mulling over Kasir's parting words before saying goodnight: *I promise I will explain, but you must trust me. Act with others as though you know nothing... Many lives depend on you trusting me for just a short while longer. Ours included.* Then she fell asleep.

When she awoke Kasir was standing in the corner of her room. The night before he'd been like a penitent child. Now he reminded her of a stuffed weasel. Flushed, she sat up in the bed.

"So – these trances. Your big idea?"

Kasir puffed his cheeks slightly. "If you can trust me, it can wait. Here it's not safe to talk."

"I see. *If* I can trust you." Bel ran her hands through her hair. "Do you know, I imagined I was part of some ritual blood sacrifice last night? In cinematic detail. Explain that?"

Kasir hitched his thumbs under his belt. "Perhaps your head will clear after a shower. There is a small bathroom, two doors down. Do you need some painkillers with breakfast? Codeine?"

"Fine."

She didn't shower. She'd washed every inch last night, so she just slapped cold water on her face. There was a drizzle of rain on the window of the bathroom and furtive thunder in the air as she slipped on some corduroys. It was either trust the little guy or get madder at the world than anyone could bear, even anyone feeling less rough than she did. The purple welt on her forehead was little worse than a scratch, but her back and hip were still stiff. However, the fear and the guilt had come to matter less and less. The idea of home was driving her on: Venice, Hertfordshire, anywhere. That and Eve, and the

other mysteries. Rian. Her life story. Kasir had been smart not to give her the hard sell first thing. If he was really smart, he'd just keep his mouth shut and let her do her Power of One routine; then she'd find out what she needed to know. *All* of it.

Downstairs she managed a light breakfast of wheat toast and Parma ham with some coffee for the painkillers. The two turtlenecks in their Ray-Bans and a tiger's head mounted on the wall nearly killed her appetite. The trace of the men's hands and fingers still made her itch. Afterwards, Kasir, the MI6 agent Birch and the henchmen led her to a blacked-out limo at the front of the house. There was no sign of the weird American and his menagerie from last night. Good. They belonged in a nightmare. Outside in the car she sat between Kasir and Birch.

"One final briefing before this afternoon, Bel," Kasir smiled. "The one I've wanted to give you. And good news. The situation with your passport is rectified. Your money is ready for you when you need it."

She stayed expressionless and said nothing. The driver sped along a succession of urban dual carriageways, making her nauseous: steely thoughts about leaving Milan behind were no panacea. They turned off at a junction and soon came to a level crossing. Birch gave the driver an order in Italian via the intercom. With his baldness, sharp face and harelip, she could imagine Birch as a medieval monk. Torquemada, perhaps.

The limo moved on. She caught a glimpse of some scattered bikes and kids scrambling on the verge of waste ground. She'd imagined making a break about now, but then she'd been relying on Georgy, Kasir, Evelyn, Donner and Blitzen...just *anybody* to guide her through this hall of mirrors, because Milan might as well have been Madagascar otherwise. Now the parade was her only chance.

The parade: the parade of ducks into the slaughterhouse. She could see an encampment of circus caravans and trucks, and crossing the rough ground, a cluster of up-and-running fairground attractions: a waltzer, dodgems, a Wild Mouse-style mini-coaster, a souped up Ferris Wheel-type contraption with somersaulting cages, and a Mexican Hat. There'd be a shooting gallery with plastic ducks somewhere, no doubt.

The driver sped on through the patrons and workers, horn blazing until they reached a second train of caravans with several rows of market stalls in front. The limo screeched to a stop beside a stall selling puppies, the engine running until a second car pulled up at their bumper. The driver deactivated central locking and the two turtlenecks opened the doors on either side. Kasir led her out on the left side. Birch got out to their right, looking irritated. The goons directed them towards a huge silver trailer with the name I.J. Belenescu in lurid red letters. The old man on the steps was smoking a cheroot. He had a face like worn leather, checkerboard gold teeth, a sheepskin jacket and a hat with dancing girls on the band. Maybe this was how clowns dressed on days off, she thought. The old man smiled and clasped Kasir's hands.

Turning to her, he pointed to a large black marquee. "We have something make you very happy....," ramming and twisting his fist into his palm. "In there. In there."

Then he took her arm. She was slow to react, but Kasir separated them. They started arguing and moved out of earshot, Belenescu remonstrating, Kasir patient but troubled. Dealing with this chancer must be hell for him. She'd caught glimpses of his skeletal anguish, his bitterness at some unutterable loss, his shyness and how he laboured at taking charge. He was an authentic outsider in this spy's world. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Finally Belenescu brushed off her little hero. "La streggha, Signora Andreus. Veni..."

She hadn't the first clue. Kasir instructed Birch to take one of the turtlenecks into the trailer, before the old man led the way to the *Palazzo Nero*.

Kasir attempted to explain on the way. "I don't know precisely what he meant there. This place is where some of the entertainers practice their individual talents."

"Looks a little cramped for trapeze artists and elephants."

"It does a little." Kasir's smile was pained. "I think this is only a diversion, Bel."

Belenescu held open the flap, inviting them inside. There were raised stages on either side and she caught a strong whiff of lighter fluid; the first act on their right was a

heavily tattooed female fire-eater wearing nothing but a glittering thong. Belenescu chewed his cheroot and made the shape of an egg-timer. By the stage opposite there was a large photograph of 'Amphul', a pygmy eating a flute of glass.

She laughed. The absurdity. "What the hell are we *doing* here?"

Kasir gave her a stunned look. She shrugged, prompting him to speak. He said nothing.

On the next stage to the right a female contortionist twisted her body through four wooden hoops. Belenescu rapped his knuckles at his heart. "Mia Zanya. *Granddaughter.*" He blew her a grandfatherly kiss, grinning gnomishly in the sultry glow of the stage lighting.

The next stage had a 'Transformer Man' wearing a kaftan, who appeared to be holding his own head under his right arm. When she passed his left leg disappeared under the kaftan, his eyes rolling up leaving only the whites showing.

The last two stages on the left had gadgets like water-tanks, body bags and locked chests, props for an escapologist. The last stage on the right was inlaid with placards of painted snakes.

Belenescu turned and pointed out her bruised chin by chucking two fingers under his own, before indicating his granddaughter with a nod. "You know, sometime we not have the worth of their love."

If someone thought this was her idea of a last request, then she was dealing with really crazy people.

Belenescu shrugged and looked disappointed. He brushed through a long chintzy curtain. In that moment, he reminded Bel of her Flemish-Dutch paternal grandfather; it was strange, but she'd even dreamed of her grandfather these past few nights. She'd had her first sip of his jenever gin at eleven, and he'd joked that it would put hairs on her chest. She'd really loved that old man, even though his jenever made her gag, but he died when she was just fifteen.

Kasir gave the small of her back a gentle nudge. On the other side of the curtain the temporary plywood flooring was replaced by a haphazard arrangement of large rubber mats. There was a large bust of a genie, and a DVD player in front of a huge widescreen television with three seats in front.

Belenescu offered her a seat, but she stayed standing. For just a moment, the rear of the tent was very tempting.

“Now, signora. You don’t be so scared no more, maybe? This delivered here for Signor Manchietti, but was copy we have for you. We get this, eh –” Belenescu flicked his fingers at Kasir for assistance, but Kasir merely shrugged and tinkered with the button on his lapel. “We get a gift, special gift from old, old friends of us...”

Belenescu tried to force the last words out correctly with gesturing hands. “Russian mafia!”

The old man scratched his forehead, exasperated, before playing the DVD. “Mafia do this last night. Do it for you husband double cross.”

An image appeared onscreen of Signora Sebatio, blindfolded and tied to a chair. Not a movement. Unconscious or dead, it was equally sinister. There was a black curtain behind her and no décor. Nothing happened for around a minute, and then the film seemed to skip. A tall figure in a balaclava walked behind, angling the woman’s head forward. Then the figure walked away.

“What’s this about?” Bel asked. She glowered at Kasir, but he was still adjusting his lapel.

Belenescu made loops with his hand. “Soon, soon...”

A shorter figure, similarly dressed and wielding a large machete appeared from the right, raising the blade above the woman’s neck. The film skipped again. Bel covered her eyes...

“Vidi, vidi,” Belenescu remonstrated.

She tried to turn away, but couldn't. It was the fingers that she saw first juddering on the arm of a chair. *Fingers*, hands like alien creatures, and the cream jacket being splattered red from the gaping trunk of the neck...

The camera panned back and down. Trails of blood ran from a nose and mouth. The head lay on top of an old white cloth streaked with the same blood. The camera focused in close...

Bel's knees collapsed under her as the camera switched back to the body, and she thought she caught a dazzle, a reflection from something shiny onscreen as she slid to the ground. She wasn't out cold. She felt a slap, Kasir and the old man lifting her up, the old man chiding her in Italian. Something about "thanks", being grateful, she thought, unsure why. She was dragged backwards through the musty-smelling curtain and hoisted upright by Belenescu. She turned, trying to run somewhere but slid against the stage with painted snakes, tumbling, the old man's cheroot-chewing grin in an upside-down world, Kasir's fussy hands on her upper body. She vomited, spitting the bile and saliva from her lips...

When she looked up from her knees, Transformer Man had dropped down from his stage. Belenescu shooed him away, pulling her up by her forearms. Kasir was pacing across from her with a black handkerchief at his mouth.

The sickness remained and the nerves and fear were back. Her ankle felt like a ton-weight, and her hip just as heavy, but she knew there was more to the lingering nausea. Her neck and shoulders were stiff again too and she felt dizzy. She leant against the stage while Belenescu waved his arms around, shouting and ramming a digit in Kasir's face. Kasir looked out of his depth. The old man was running out of steam, but he swivelled round, shaking his head at Bel in mild disgust before giving Kasir a fly-swatting gesture and stomping off.

Kasir offered his shoulder. She pulled away limply. "She was decapitated, right?"

Kasir waited for her to move before answering. "It may be a trick..."



“Well, isn’t there some way we can *check*?!” The fire-eater exhaled a purplish flash at them as they passed.

“No...listen, what you said earlier, about imagining things last night at the party?”

Bel shook her head. “The blood sacrifice? What about it?”

“We can talk briefly,” Kasir said anxiously. “You were shown a film under hypnosis and convinced the images were real, and that you were involved in the events. MI5 exposed you to this over many years. And now your imagination and unconscious mind trick you into recalling such images...”

Outside, the rain came down steadily. Kasir shuffled across the rough ground, concentrating on every step. His anxious inner child was back again.

“And so...?”

“...And so it is possible that someone is exploiting knowledge of the fact that your mind plays tricks, believing that the images you witness on film will deceive you again.”

“Who ? The spooks? *Evelyn*? Christ, you’ve a lot to explain *now* Kasir!”

“When the time is right, I will. But,” he said with greater intensity, “what is *most important right now* is that we prepare one final time before this afternoon.”

He continued more calmly. “Remember, it must *seem* authentic. They will be watching and listening to us. I have one additional instruction, very much for your own well-being. Mr. Birch can assist us in this.”

She knew he meant it. “*Birch*, how?”

“Yes – please be patient. He is a well-meaning man.”

Birch was up ahead talking to Belenescu, and he managed to send the old man off somewhere before they reached his trailer. Then Kasir led her inside, through the office where one of the turtlenecks was deep in a magazine, and then to the sleeping quarters.

There was something comforting about the sound of the rain amplified inside the trailer. Then again, could she trust even her simplest feelings now? Had the soothing effect of raindrops been worked into her programming? *No, girl, sharpen up – too many connections. That way madness lies, and you’re not giving them the satisfaction!*

Kasir handed her a black towel, but her hair was only slightly damp. She threw it onto a bed with Paisley patterned linen and concentrated on the details of her surroundings. There was Parisian porn from the Roaring Twenties over the walls, an empty dog basket and a broken TV on the floor, and several bottles of grappa and anise on a short dresser. There was also a mauve top hat by one of the bottles. She took the only seat, a low-slung leather armchair with busted springs that almost scraped the floorboards. Kasir popped back from the office with a bowler hat and a yellow bucket emblazoned with a clown’s face, wedging the door open with a triangle of wood. Birch nodded at Kasir as if waiting for a cue before sitting on the bed.

“Take this as a gesture of our good faith, Miss Andreus. Could you remove your shirt?”

“You were implanted with a DNA chip in England, Bel,” Kasir explained. “In order that we can help each other, Mr. Birch needs to remove it. We’ll tell you what to do.”

Bel stood. “You want me to strip in front of you? I have my fucking limits, you know!”

“*No,*” Birch said. “The chip’s in a gel implant between your shoulder blades. Slip your shirt down a fraction, and I’ll extract it.”

He produced a sheathed hypodermic from his pocket. “Like so.”

At last it hit home. “This thing keeps track of every move I make?”

“It could get you killed,” Birch said.

“Please listen, Bel,” Kasir added.

She hissed through her teeth, turning away and unbuttoning her shirt. Birch pulled it further down. She scarcely felt the needle, but there was a faint tingle at the

spot under the skin. She could hear Birch breathing through his nose. Then she felt a dab of cotton wool.

“That’s it. Feel free to rearrange yourself.”

She did, turning to catch Birch replacing the thing in a tiny plastic case.

She sat down again. “Lucky you had its little case, eh? So what happens now? Won’t it be noticed?”

Birch walked to the door. “Of course. You’ll carry it today, until...well, Professor?”

“Yes, you need to wear it in your clothes today,” Kasir agreed. “They will be listening for the command. I must utter the words –”

She tried to get to her feet. “Look, Kasir –”

“– *Slim Slow Slider*...This is Arne, your grandfather. Do you remember me? How are you my dear?”

“My grandfather...?”

“Yes, Bel. It is very important you listen closely. Now this is your own special bucket. It was mine when I was a little boy. Look at its beautiful yellow colour and the wonderful smiling clown on it. It is my present to you. When you hear your command, you should only use this special bucket. Do you understand? Only the bucket with the clown. This will protect you.”

Yes, it was important to listen and play the part. Now that she knew what it was all about. The command. That song Georgy loved. Sometimes he’d call her ‘Slim’.

“Good, Bel. Now let us rehearse once more.”

*Slim Slow Slider*, your horse is white as snow. Was that how it went? Accept your bowler hat and follow those now familiar steps. She could sense her grandfather applauding her place at the head of the parade. His twinkling eyes and ruddy cheer brought back vivid memories.

“Encore! Encore! Now – there is no need to replace the bucket’s lid after you fit the pellet, Bel. No need for that now. Once you face the crowd, holding the bucket, you

will throw it as far as you can amongst them. As far as you can, letting the water fly free. It is only a *small* crowd, so you will need to throw it with great accuracy. Remember that. Do that now. Throw it as far as you can.”

No crowd, just noise. She threw the pail towards the noise.

“Now, Bel. As soon as you’ve thrown the pail, you must run and *run quickly* into the open church in front of you. A beautiful font of water is inside, cool, soothing, life-giving *water*. Don’t watch the pail as it flies into the crowd – run as soon as it leaves your hand. Do that now. Throw it and run.”

She threw the pail again and sprinted into the church, imagining a precious religious scroll appearing very briefly in front of her face and water softly lapping behind it. She lowered her head into the font, feeling strong supporting hands at her waist. Then her grandfather took her back to the safety of the crowd.

He held her tight, his sunny smile warming her heart. Just as it had when she was small, when she’d skated the icy pond near her parents’ home in Ayr and the ice cracked. She remembered falling in. She remembered the shadow stretching toward her above the ice, her woolly hat sodden, drifting free from her head, her hands flailing up, feeling numb against ice like thick glass. Holding her breath all the while, as the shadow stretched and turned like a dark funnel. If the funnel had been filled with bright guiding light it might have meant it was her time to drift away. But she’d heard voices, then louder voices, and then two men pulled her free into the icy sunlight. And then she was safe and warm in her grandfather’s arms...

They began the routine again. She stood up. She extracted the wire and pellet from the hat, marched to the pail, inserted the wire and pellet into the pail’s compartment, threw the pail with perfect accuracy, and dashed into the church to the font of holy water...

They repeated these steps one final time. Her steps to freedom. Her grandfather helped her up from her knees.

“Now, remember, faithfully following these instructions will guarantee you come to no harm.”

She felt his soothing palms on her face. “Have I ever let you come to harm, Bel?”

There was no doubt. This was the Gospel Truth.

14.

Just before 1pm on November 5<sup>th</sup>, Eskin left the small Maida Vale hotel on foot and set out for St. Mary's Hospital off Marylebone Road. He hadn't needed to hear Godovin's voice that morning. He was flying solo.

He walked along Park Road and entered Regent's Park via a thoroughfare between the surrounding terraces, keeping his eyes peeled for a television crew as he made his way towards the boating lake. A charity event for young patients already under state-of-the-art medical care: typically English, typically decadent and pointless.

There was a street cleaner making slow progress down by the lake, which in Wakhevitch's aerial photos had resembled the splayed skeleton of a duck-like dinosaur. Amplified noise came from beyond the shrubbery on the opposite bank. The sweet scent of the undredged leaves and petals was cloying. Life forms appeared mainly in ones and pairs: joggers, a tramp with a McDonald's bag, idling young couples, an artist with a cascade of curlpapered auburn hair and partly exposed milky breasts at an easel, and what looked like a teal tottering on webbed feet at the pond's rim.

Eskin strode towards the duck's bill. He felt inside his thick grey overcoat for his Special Branch ID, swiping a dozy pigeon with his foot into the pond. The bird fluttered and sprayed surface water with its wings before giving a lame skip onto the path again. There was a footbridge over the duck's bill leading to the park's inner sanctum, flower gardens bearing a royal seal at the entrance. A gift to the people worthy of the Tsars, he thought. Was there any limit to an Englishman's need to be patronised?

To the right of the gardens the event was under way. Eskin counted twelve young adults in wheelchairs on the stage. Tarpaulin on three sides billowed in a gathering wind. There were a dozen or so rows of seating half-filled, the nurses at the front. Clouds brooded close overhead and youngsters roller-bladed around a perimeter path. A striking black woman with a muffler scarf and microphone was centre stage, questioning a panel of four quiz contestants. A figure huddled in a booth at the stage's rear monitoring the

live mic. Two police officers looked on from the left. Eskin couldn't spot a Special Branch presence, but a van or two with satellite tracking systems and radios might be idling kerbside on Marylebone Road nearby.

It began to rain. He would use it as cover for bringing this charade to an end. He'd recognised Rumissa immediately, closest to the contestants, slightly apart from the other wheelchairs. She was older than the other patients and wore dark round sunglasses and a hooded cagoule. The scorched patches on her face looked raw against the garment's luminous turquoise. The woman, who a contestant had referred to as 'Moira', made an overture to the patients. Rumissa ignored it.

Eskin approached the two officers, giving a confidential nod.

"Afternoon." He presented his Special Branch ID.

"Yes sir," said the taller of the two.

Eskin pointed out Rumissa. "We believe that she's in danger. Provisions for her safety are to be revised. Due to the inclement weather, I suggest we bring matters to a close immediately."

The policemen waited while Eskin accessed the codeword of six digits and four letters on his mobile. This had been used in the Finsbury Park operation to snatch Bel Andreus. He presented the screen, one of the officers scribbling down IA644328FM in his pad. Eskin activated 'dial and pause' for Stiles' contact number.

"Our MI5 co-ordinator is Mr. Stiles and he is arranging protection for the girl at another location as we speak."

"That's fine, sir. We'll notify the station."

The rain came down more heavily. The taller policeman leant into his radio. The two officers approached Moira Stewart who gave a *qué sèra* gesture, drawing up her muffler a fraction before making little customised farewells to each of the young patients in turn.

Eskin walked over to introduce himself with a few words in Russian. He enjoyed the girl's sudden apprehension. Yes, she looked like a twenty-year old. She was no

longer young enough to pity. Her neck and right cheekbone were still scarred, but the skin grafts on her face were progressing quite well. When he spoke English, she wasn't immediately receptive, but her insolence wasn't studied like a teenager's. The narrowing eyes, the long intervals of looking away, letting him know she'd ignore him if she could; traits of a resentful people living under occupation. He was sure she knew about her fellow Chechens' plans on Russian soil. All about the recent incursions. Eskin stayed cool, coaxing the girl to use her smattering of English. When she spoke, her voice was faint and ragged. She wanted a cigarette. He hadn't any. Her hands were shaking. He didn't listen to anything more.

The girl's male nurse joined them. He was slim, blonde, Germanic, with a pursed mouth. Eskin explained that MI5 was arranging a safe house to protect Rumissa from a kidnap plot. He explained the role of the Russian Secret Service, navigating those tricky little ties supporting the bond between nurse and patient. The hospital's other patients could be in great danger if the Russian girl wasn't moved *immediately*. The nurse read the situation: who was he to question a Special Branch officer? The two policemen, the nurse and Eskin sheltered the girl as they followed the exit through to Albany Street. A police van waited at the end of the walkway with its engine running. A steel ramp was drawn down at the rear. The officers wheeled the girl inside and Eskin instructed their colleagues in the van to head back to the hospital on Praed Street.

They were in the staff car park at the rear of the hospital in minutes. Eskin was glad he'd left the hired transit van in a lock-up late last night. Just a short distance there and back. He watched the nurse wheel the girl into the hospital. All she cared about were cigarettes. It would have been drugs in a few years. No column inches around the globe, no goodwill from those goat-fuckers she'd grown up amongst. At least this way she'd symbolise the futility of the human spirit.

Eskin gathered the four officers by the van. "Now, I'd like two of you to go inside with the nurse and the girl and explain to the Head of Staff. Have them stay close to the exit, ready to move quickly when a blue van arrives. Patient Bourkova is to be



removed from the hospital for security reasons, on orders of Special Branch. MI5 will be here presently. I will arrange transportation.”

The two from the van exchanged cautious looks. “Yes sir.”

They headed inside, pausing in the corridor to ask an orderly directions.

Eskin gestured to the tall policeman from the park. “I’m going to put you through to MI5. They can scramble the conversation. I’ll talk to them first, but they’ll want confirmation details from you directly. So, the girl’s name is *Bourkova*. My name, as you’ve already seen, is *Wilkinson*. After they’ve talked to you, you’re both free to go about your duties. The girl will be quite safe.”

Eskin speed-dialled Stiles’ number. He spoke out of earshot of the others.

“Stiles, you’d agree the Bourkova girl coming to grave harm would be a diplomatic disaster for you, yes?”

Stiles struggled to keep his voice level. “What is it you actually *want*, Eskin?”

“Reinstatement here in London. At least in the short term. I want a report with flying colours recommending a permanent detail. Then I’ll be gone. You’ll never have to worry about me again.”

“I see. You want sanction as a spy here in the West?”

“Look Stiles, you can convince the good officers here that this is a credible operation, and you are preparing to arrive here shortly to take charge, or I can quite simply end the lives of your little propaganda slut and four sturdy yeomen of the guard right now. *Consider* my request for a moment. I’m putting you through to one of the men at the scene now.”

Eskin walked back to the two officers and handed the mobile to the tall one. Stiles did the talking: it was all nods and eager, shifting glances at this end. Then a confirmation.

“Okay sir,” handing back the phone. “Someone will arrive in twenty minutes. He didn’t specify, sir, but will we –?”

“– Yes,” Eskin said cheerlessly, walking out of the tight, oval car park without another word. He’d left the van in an underground garage belonging to a block of Sussex Gardens apartments. His access came courtesy of a civil engineer from Belarus working on some huge motorway regeneration contract for the Ministry of Transport. Eskin had contacts in the Russian émigré and spy communities. Weapons too, of course. He got in and out quickly using the engineer’s five-digit code, before making his way back the block-and-a-half to St. Mary’s. Thirteen minutes in all. The van’s specifications included a windowless interior and a steel ramp released via a lever on the sliding side panel. In back, there was a black anorak with fur-lined hood and a Beretta M1934 with 20 + 1 in the clip in the inner pocket, a long Indian rug, a bundle of binding twine and an explosive with timer.

Back at the staff car park, Eskin parked between the police van and the double doors. The rain was lashing the roof and spraying into an inch gap at the top of the driver’s window. The winder was jammed. Eskin cursed as he climbed out and into the back, before sliding the ramp down. He changed into the anorak, feeling for the gun and the hunting knife taped into his lower left sleeve. Then he walked down the ramp.

The nurse had brought his patient to the rear porch. They seemed to be arguing. Rumissa had managed to bum a cigarette. Conniving little *sooka*, Eskin thought. Cigarette in mouth, she slid back her hood and unzipped her cagoule. Yes, she was used to smoking. She wore an Amnesty International t-shirt underneath, relishing the damage she’d do with more tales about his country. Only one of the policemen was visible in the corridor, engrossed in his radio, and Eskin seized his chance.

A display of wide palms. “Where’s her security? Come on, you both better stay out of sight in the van until they arrive.”

The nurse gave a light shrug and shake of the head. The girl turned on him angrily. “Come. I go now. No time!”

The mere mention of Russians had terrified her. As it should, Eskin thought. “She’s right, nurse. We could be facing the prospect of snipers.”

The nurse released the wheelchair's handbrake and swung the footrests around against Rumissa's ankles. Cursing under her breath, she scooped her feet up and into place as she was wheeled down the slats, up the ramp and into darkness.

Eskin jumped in after them, doubling back the hinged ramp and clamping it down tight. The nurse stood side on, and with the daylight it was easy to mark out the exact point on his spine. Now or never. Eskin ripped free the knife from his anorak sleeve and forced it in hard. A sharp twist up and a thrust sideways at the base, and the spine was severed. Eskin shoved the slumping body to the floor.

The nurse lay paralysed and in shock. Eskin pulled the sliding door over, the nervous question in the girl's voice drowned out by the noise. Shading her eyes with her hand, she tried to turn and look at him. Pocketing the knife, he clasped her throat, feeling the scorched flesh, dry and rough as sandpaper. His fingers tightened on the carotid artery, the small body jerking to no avail against the locked brakes. He placed his fleshy left palm over her mouth, feeling the rapid passages of air tickle the hairs on the back of his hand. Then suddenly, she jerked her head to one side and sunk her teeth into his index and forefingers at the lower joints. He felt the bite once, enough to puncture him, then twice...

Eskin let out a rasping yell as he tore his fingers from her mouth. Blood sprayed back into his face. Something to stem the flow, and quick. She was spluttering, spitting him free. Then she started screaming. She'd managed to release the brakes.

He had to act quickly. The chair backed into his legs, the wheel crushing his toecap, the footrest clattering the van's bodywork as she tried to turn. Three hard punches to the back of her head with his good hand, and he frantically dug into his anorak pocket for a handkerchief, a piece of cloth, anything. Then he remembered. There was a chamois in the passenger seat compartment.

The rain rattled louder outside. The girl lolled, dazed, in the wheelchair. Breathing hard, he coiled his left arm around her throat. She gave a jolt, his knee hard against the canvas backrest, a burst of mucus soaking his ruined hand. A low wheeze.

Another jolt. Another punch to the head. Then two more. Her whole body shuddered. Grasping the left side of the head with his right hand, Eskin twisted the neck with all his strength until he heard it snap above the noise of the rain. He relaxed his grip and caught his breath. The little terrorist slumped forward in her chair. *No matter what happens now*, he told himself, *the job is done*.

Tightening his mangled fingers into a fist, Eskin exited the back of the van and made his way round to the passenger side door. He assumed Rumissa's scream had gone unheard. He climbed in and hoisted himself into the driver's seat.

He pulled out of the car park and made his way northeast to Stiles' Finsbury Park HQ. A direct attack, worthy of the Samurai or Taliban fighter; if Stiles and his colleagues were there, all the better. He slowed at the first junction, leaning over to pull the chamois out of the passenger seat compartment and winding it tightly round his ruined fingers. Little bitch! He'd need a fucking tetanus shot! What story would he cook up for Godovin? He'd have to have been injured in a fight. Outnumbered, using anything to hand. Or else tortured and maimed and still refusing to talk. The wounded hero had to be authentic.

He passed the London Museum and then the Barbican Theatre, then right to Finsbury Square, and left up onto the New North Road. A satellite navigation system would have helped. They relied on him improvising like a Mujahadin. Still, he'd come this way before meeting with Stiles last time. He felt like he knew the locale. Finsbury Park had elegant terraces and detached properties and a busy high street with lots of Muslims in traditional dress. Yes, this was the perfect spot. He made his way after a few tentative wrong turns to Chillicot Road. The side street running alongside was empty. A network of alleyways on his left would provide a handy escape onto the High Street.

He turned off the ignition and sat, conscious of his breathing, the dry blood on his face and the cream chamois stained red. The phantom pain surged to a point a little beyond his left wrist. His right wrist ached too. There was a peal of thunder. He climbed out.

The sky was blacker than he'd appreciated in the van. He tightened the anorak's hood as far down his forehead as he could, brushed past the high wall protecting the property and opened the rear doors. The nurse's head tilted slightly towards the chassis rim, his faraway eyes not registering the daylight. Eskin grabbed his collar and swung him round, shoving the body against the bottom of the rug. Leaving the doors wide, he stepped over the nurse and dragged Rumissa from the chair, laying her aside and tipping the chair into the street. Unfurling the rug, he dragged her onto it and wrapped her snugly up. She'd had guts for such a lightweight. Fetching the twine, he knelt beside the nurse as he bound the rug around Rumissa's body. Then he dragged her by her feet over the nurse's inert form, before gathering her up in a fireman's lift and carrying her to the wall.

Eskin could hear helicopter engines and rotors above the surrounding streets. The wall was around ten feet high but the pain was killing him and he'd flooded himself with one adrenalin rush too many already. Besides, curls of barbed wire were visible over the wall's rim: the rug might become snagged. He swore to himself: if the corpse had been recognisable on Stiles' back doorstep, someone at Thames House might've been prepared to post the preening little English cocksucker to Siberia. But time was the enemy.

He caught sight of one of the helicopter's skis between the houses one street down. He dumped Rumissa's body back in the van and went about setting the timer on the bomb, a simple gelignite wrap with the charge wired to a digital stopwatch. He set the timer for two minutes fifteen seconds and activated the watch which he rested against the rug. Closing and locking the van doors behind him, blood and rainwater running down his wrist, he made his way towards the curb opposite in a near jog.

The noise from above was louder and he ducked into the network of back alleys that would lead him out onto the High Street. The first chopper swept only a few feet over the streaming terraced roofs ahead of him. His heel slipped on the wet cobbles as he made a bustling turn right, the second chopper pointing down like the long finger of fate

to his right. He could hear Stiles' obnoxious voice whinnying at him through the electronic hailer's painful feedback. Again, phantom pain from his missing digits shot up to his wrist. The other chopper circled back as he veered left, slipping on some sodden cardboard, biting his lip but just catching his balance in time to leap over a dead magpie. The wet whizzes of traffic reached him from the street a hundred and fifty metres away.

He turned right into another peal of thunder, his stride uneven now. By his watch, there was a little over a minute until the explosion. The chopper on his left had made a surge, hovering about thirty-feet ahead directly above a skylight. He dashed for the cover of the near wall, although it was unlikely he'd be shot at from the pilot's side. Stamping down pieces of timber, weeds and mud, he made it down to the last wall running adjacent to the High Street and turned left again. The chopper angled its huge coruscating navy-blue eyes and mean-spiked snout towards him like a giant robotic hornet.

He could hear Stiles still whinnying and crackling behind him, warning the pedestrians in the street below. Eskin ran to the L-blocked wall leading into the final stretch of alleyway and hunkered down. There was enough shelter to take a moment's stock. His chest heaved with the exertion and his left hand felt numb against his knee. There was just over half-a-minute left by his watch now. A broken brick lay against the opposite wall.

The Russian knew he could be boxed in here until the police arrived. He spat out some heavy phlegm, the kind that only usually collected after he'd been smoking cigars. He wanted that damned device to go off. *Ten – nine – eight – seven...waiting...*

The explosion's initial boom and clatter were magnified by the proximity of high concrete. Serious damage to MI5 premises, surely. And there were delayed ruptures. Possibly the drainage system had been hit. Drifting smoke began to appear. Eskin forced a smile, sliding the Beretta out of the anorak's inner pocket and into its right outer pocket with his working hand.

The chopper behind him swept over the row of terraces. Eskin staggered towards the loose brick, which he stuffed into his left outer pocket. There were now multiple police sirens from where he'd come, and two choppers ready to co-ordinate a stand-off when he reached the High Street. They were ready to come down amidst the traffic and head off their target. Let's see if they've the guts of one invalid Chechen girl, he thought.

The chopper on his left ushered him down to the street, hovering and wavering in a kind of semi-pirouette. A lorry now blocked the High Street from view and the rain sprayed into Eskin's face as he bobbed and weaved like a drunk. Nerves tingled in his ruined hand again. His mechanical foe pulled itself up over the rear of some shops as he turned right into a charmless English shopping thoroughfare. A banal place to take his last breath. What else could be expected in this country?

The Russian darted round the rear of the lorry, into the middle of the road and onto a traffic island. The vehicles behind the lorry had backed up some distance away and the chopper to his rear lowered itself into the unoccupied lane. An abrupt alien reprimand of police sirens came from the right. Stiles' chopper was swinging down over the heads of traffic and into the lane facing its companion.

Eskin hurried back onto the pavement and ran forward, scattering two female shoppers, grabbing their heaviest looking carrier bag and lobbing it over a taxi towards Stiles' rotor blades. The bag caught the tail instead as the machine jerked upwards.

The chopper reversed as it rose. The vehicles weren't moving anywhere for now. There were raised voices and civilians plastered back against the store fronts. A solitary marksman took up the lead shooting position fifty metres ahead. The Russian staggered back onto the road. The two choppers faced each other across the lanes, hemming him in.

Eskin slid his numb hand into the left pocket. He managed to grip the half-brick and pulled it slowly out, his attention fixed on Stiles cowering in the cockpit. The lower bodies of a cluster of marksmen moved across the width of road behind. The second

helicopter moved forward, ready to nudge him with its ski. Like a pig prodded into the abattoir, he thought. *Fuck* them!

He ran at the chopper in front, left arm with brick outstretched, screaming in pain, approximating some nonsense in Arabic, slinging the brick at the windscreen. The shield cracked in front of Stiles' face. Then Eskin moved back, left hand raised to placate the marksmen approaching him through the traffic. One final chance to surrender. Instead, he slid the Beretta out from his right pocket and fired five bullets through the cracked screen into the MI5 agent's head and body.

The marksmen's bullets tore into Eskin's lower body almost instantaneously. He fell backwards, his now empty hand outstretching for the void, the machine behind him dislodging his right eyeball with its right ski-tip as he went to ground. Stiles' chopper reversed and ascended, the other doing likewise as a hooded marksman knelt down on the Russian's back and fired three bullets upward through the base of the skull.





15.

1pm. Kasir had said the parade was scheduled for two. There were around a dozen clowns gathered in back of the main circus truck at a long table, eating sandwiches and drinking coca-cola. Buckets, joke squeeze sponges, squirty flowers, and a pair of stilts were scattered on the floor. The perverse banality of the circus entertainer's life, Bel thought; these people didn't tumble down like acrobats from some heavenly gene pool after all.

She was already fully suited: with Kasir's help that had taken fifteen minutes. A couple of the clowns smiled and saluted with their coke bottles. Bel thought of Kasir's assurance that the headless corpse was just another circus trick like the contortionists and glass eaters. Big deal: she'd a DNA chip hidden in her smock. She smiled back.

Now it was time to clear her mind of everything but Kasir's escape plan.

Bel's make-up artiste was a petite girl dressed as a cat. She waited by her trailer steps, blowing her nails dry and hopping from foot to foot. Her eyes were outlined with violet love hearts and she had a fetching set of whiskers. Her name was Mila.

Her trailer's interior was a marshmallow confection of pink mattresses and pillows, no more than twelve feet by six. Bel sat down on a little fluffy swivel-chair at the dresser. Two semi-circles of make-up sticks of every hue were pitted in front of the mirror. She smiled up at Mila. "Don't make me a black and white minstrel, please."

Mila gave a polite frown. "No, no. We keep you white as a ghost. And some black lips and eyes for matching your hair."

Mila dragged Bel's hair back from her ears and applied some gel with darting fingers. "I use make-up on the neck and red caps for your nose and ears, since you are outside in sun. You stay here after *today*?"

"No, I'll be living in Venice."

"*Oooh*. Romantic!"

“Hmm, we’ll see,” Bel sighed. The thought of rolling forever in crisp white sheets with Rian drifted in. She closed her eyes and let it run for a few moments.

Mila leant over her, lifting out a block of black greasepaint. She angled Bel’s head back and started around the left eye, drawing a neat undulating panda pattern. “S’ funny. You got ice cool grey-blue eyes and black hair. Is it dyed?”

“Yes. I’m a natural blonde, but I wanted to look more Italian. How old are you Mila?”

“Six-teen. Just one month ago.” She started work on the other eye, her breath warm on Bel’s cheek. “I work for Belenescu learning trapeze when I was eight. My mother trapeze artist, but – she have accident, an’ in hospital she make me promise not to do trapeze. So I clown now. An’ *sexy little assistant* to fire eater, magic act, and elephants, chimps, more animals.”

“Sounds like you can turn your hand to anything. How would you like to earn some extra money?”

Mila switched the black stick of greasepaint for the white. She smiled at Bel, simpatico, the nose and whiskers twitching in unison. “Extra money, *huh?*”

“Yes. During the parade I’d like you to watch that man outside, if you can. The Egyptian man. If he’s on the street, just to make sure nothing happens to him. Okay?”

Mila thought it over. “Okay. But, you know, maybe I do it for free. *If –*” she wiggled her finger “– you and me go to shops together? Tomorrow? I really like what you wear when you come today. An’ maybe you show me somewhere not so rich?”

“Expensive?”

“Yeah. *Expensive*. It is Bel, yes?”

“Yes, Bel. And I’d love to Mila. And if it’s okay, how’d you like to walk beside me in the parade today?”

“Oh – should say already. You are at front. I smallest girl as clown and got to be on stilts in *middle*. Looks funny that way. We not allowed animals in city, so I biggest thing today – *ha!*”

A measured dose of Mila was enough, Bel decided. “Okay. You can look out for me and our friend outside, then.”

Mila angled the head back again and began work on the face and neck. “Okay, *Bel*. I be your lucky charm today.”

Mila talked about her family in Budapest and her mother who lived in Genoa, selling prints and painting visitors’ portraits. Mila’s dream was to earn enough to help her mother buy a nicer apartment. Bel asked her about Amphul the pygmy and the freak show.

“*Pygmy*? Oh, little man who died, no?”

Mila slid on the nose and ears, effectively parts of the same type of split lightweight plastic ball.

“Hmm. Not so sure about the ears, Mila.”

“Ah, but these are important part. So you don’t blush and no-one see ears go red.”

The makeover took about twenty minutes. Outside, Kasir stood watching a unicyclist and looking glum. He led Bel back through the shooting galleries, fortune tellers and hammer trials to the limo. Bel let the nose hang free around her neck, but kept the ears on. She could feel more rain in the air. The housing project overlooking the fairground had a touch of Italian verve, with cantilevered balcony railings and wing-tipped outer walls on each block, but they appeared like menacing alien structures in the leaden light. As she climbed into the limo, she caught Kasir checking his left lapel.

The procession consisted of two trucks with the limo following. Birch sat opposite Bel reading a road map. Kasir crouched at the partition and passed a message through the intercom, before taking his seat. The bucket was boxed and wedged in the corner beside Birch. Rain began pitter-pattering on the windows as they drove past factories on Milan’s outskirts. Kasir reached over, lifting her left ear.

“You are now at home with your sanction? You’re certain of your safety?”

Bel shook her head. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“I apologise. ‘Sanctuary’, that was the word I meant. The chapel.”

“Oh right – *sanctuary*.” Bel thought for a moment. She glanced at Birch. “Back home, I sometimes go into churches from time to time when it’s raining.”

Kasir indicated the bucket with his thumb. “You know we are safe in this car?”

His look was almost sepulchral in its austerity. “You *know*, Bel?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No I don’t.”

He shook his head sagely. “Trust me. Think of the clown’s face and the colour yellow, Bel. And think of the *small* crowd.”

“Counting sheep works better for me,” she shrugged.

Birch folded away his map. “Living with Georgy, I’d have thought you’d know that the work of MI6 is to serve British interests abroad. First, last and always.”

Birch tugged the sleeve of his jacket. “The Americans killed your husband, Miss Andreus. They wanted him to double-cross his colleagues. He wouldn’t. Let’s just say that our priorities here have recently changed. For now, Washington and London have fallen out of love.”

Bel squinted, her forefinger supporting her lip, while her palm massaged the elbow. “So I’m supposed to be impressed you’re not goose-stepping along in Uncle Sam’s ticker-tape parade?”

Birch looked non-plussed. “Alright. I’ll give it to you straight. We now need to reach Evelyn Morgan, and Professor Kasir has gone to great pains – well beyond the call of duty, in fact – to convince me you might come in useful.”

“I take it this is the Evelyn who’s still got her head?” Bel said sarcastically.

Birch gave Kasir a ‘told you so’ look. “That was more for your benefit than ours.”

Bel shrugged lightly. “Well couldn’t you have busted her, or whatever, in England?”

Birch exhaled through clenched teeth. “As I’ve said, we’ve revised priorities.”

Bel scratched at a diamond on her harlequin pants. “Okay, well I want to see her too. By the way, there’s something I’d meant to ask you. Do you know a Charles Cloistermouth back in Vauxhall Cross? He witnessed my marriage to Georgy. Tall, stooped, no sense of humour?”

“I know a lot of people who fit that description, Miss Andreas,” Birch said, looking bored. “I’ve never met *anyone* called ‘Cloister Mouth’.”

Exposing Georgy’s lie felt like a tiny victory. But why had Signora Sebastio told the truth about the marriage?

They headed into the city proper, taking several right turns in succession into a tightly built-up area. The limousine stopped. The street’s shadow was claustrophobic and Bel couldn’t see what awaited them. She closed her eyes. Her little fantasy about Rian that had been drifting in and out was replaced abruptly by the image of his bloated drowned corpse. She breathed in sharply. The car moved forward then stopped again.

After a further minute or so, they moved forward and turned off the street. Uniformed and armed security guards lined a barrier as the limo entered a multi-storey car park. As they found a slot on the second floor and climbed out, Bel saw the trucks already parked and men in black suits and shades standing around the garage’s circumference with their radio mics. Several started trailing the performers, already on their way down the out ramp. Bel looked for Mila, but the clowns and crew were already moving out of sight.

“The chapel is several blocks away, Bel,” Kasir said. “Hopefully, these boots are comfortable.”

“They’re flat, so they’re comfortable enough.”

Bel and Kasir were flanked by olive-skinned automatons: Italian agents, she guessed. They had twice as much security as the circus performers, and it had to look odd, her separation from the others. They tramped a couple of blocks, slightly downhill, the weather having improved. Pedestrians and tram passengers seemed no more than naturally curious.

Floating high above a line of trees opposite, Bel saw a box kite painted like a dragon. Her eyes followed the rectangular body. It was the perfect place to hide a camera, its glaring hypnotic eyes maybe fitted with miniature ones. Their detail rudely redirected a couple of electric wheelchair drivers to the outer pavement, radios crackling, brusque replies delivered in staccato rhythm. Some patrons of an Internet café and bar en route gave the procession some muted applause for God knew what.

As they tended left past the station and waterway at Porta Genova, she could see scarves and batons being tossed in the air up ahead. Trumpet noise cascaded down from some lofty cypresses just beyond the next junction, which was cordoned for pedestrian access only. Loudspeaker salutations ricocheted across from somewhere to Bel's right, and a segugio eyed them warily from the kerb. She tried to track the sleek hound between the strutting limbs in between. The dog had slowed. She could make out his trailing leg, one of the goons in front kicking him clear, his boot bringing a metallic ring from a flyer-plastered lamppost.

Kasir spoke, but she didn't catch the words. Instead she caught a whiff of stale sweat. He'd tucked his suede jacket underarm and was walking in his shirt sleeves.

They walked about a quarter mile further, following the procession to the square in front of a park. A group of violinists in carnival masks and costumes assailed passers-by with atonal flourishes by the railings. Five thoroughfares met at the square, like a hand with broken, splayed fingers. Each street had diverse entertainments: a beauty float, speciality food stalls, street plays with masked, black-clad actors, mime artists, exotic birds on display, mock religious pageants. The forefinger leading to the chapel was reserved for the innocent slapstick of the circus. Bel wished they'd brought the freak show and Signora Sebatio's head on a stick.

The mayor bellowed into a loudspeaker through the open roof of a vehicle like a small Pope Mobile. In front, a box holding floating balloons half-wrapped in aluminium foil blocked out part of his upper body.

Little Mila sat on the shoulders of two clowns as they slid her into a pair of loon-panted stilts. A stilt-walker was the most natural diversion in a circus procession, Bel thought. Still, she mightn't need a diversion. She knew what she had to do.

She looked round to catch Birch striding towards the chapel, a section of its outer façade just visible beyond the street of modern apartments and the cordoned-off crowd. The crowd was static and casually expectant: fathers with children, couples and singles, and the odd stray pedestrian passing through to another destination.

An arm jerked her shoulder. Kasir had brought her balloon. She felt the butterflies.

“Just move around and stay at the front of the procession.”

He grabbed her arm. His look betrayed the burden of words that would remain unsaid.

He inclined his head, as though talking to his chest. “This is it – this is it now, *Slim Slow Slider...*”

...

Giordano Manchiatti felt like a tail-gunner bearing down on San Agostino with his zoom binoculars. From the top floor of the corner apartment block near the chapel, he watched the estimated two-hundred-and-fifty *Milanese* outside. Manchiatti tried to imagine 70-80 square metres worth of devastation, and the instant mass casualties. That had been the original plan, at least.

With Manchiatti was Tommaso Livi, a leading Field Research Analyst with the Service. The pellet on the detonator was electronically coded, and Livi stood waiting to transmit the activating code via mobile phone. A technical assistant named Lenzi manned the stereo. Three more agents sat on storage boxes by the living room wall, managing communications from the street, Field HQ, and the commander of a siege unit parked several streets away.



Kasir had spoken the trigger phrase into the mic on his shirt. Manchietti watched one of the circus helpers approach Bel Andreus with the bowler hat, placing it carefully on her head before fitting her nose. She shuffled from foot to foot while the other clowns stretched and mimed. Privately, Manchietti had hoped his colleagues' scepticism about Kasir's program was just the product of the cantina. However, Andreus looked lost and unfit to handle dangerous explosives. The other performers were like drunks with a shared destination and no clear idea of the route. Officially, the procession was scheduled to end around three kilometres east at Porta Romana.

Suddenly, there was a drum roll courtesy of the clown at the procession's rear. "The march of the lemmings commences," Manchietti said to the room. "Await your cues."

Two clowns moved either side of Andreus, nudging her to move. Manchietti scanned the children standing solemnly under their balloons moored to the allocated lampposts on the far kerbside. Andreus's CIA shadow was on her right. He squirted a bow-tie and flower's worth of water at a young girl absently wrapping the cordon around her lamppost. Damned fool, Manchietti thought; the girl was upset. The stilt-walker began to juggle three grapefruits. Circuses weren't much without elephants and trapeze girls.

Manchietti's focus shifted to the Egyptian, who skirted behind the cordon with his pail and threaded his way towards the chapel. As Kasir drew near, two SISMI agents unclipped one end of the cordon from a steel pole on the last stretch of pavement nearest the chapel. The Egyptian walked into the road, setting his pail down between two larger ones already in place.

The pails were colour coded. The one nearest the apartment and furthest from the crowd had the secret compartment and explosives and was coloured red. Andreus had, the Egyptian had assured Manchietti, been programmed to select a red pail. Kasir had used the yellow pail when rehearsing Bel's program. The third, blue pail was nearest the crowd.

At least the Egyptian had been fairly discreet. No-one paid attention as he put on his jacket and crossed the street. He'd walk a few blocks north and double back via side streets to join them.

Manchietti zoomed in on the subject again. She'd started walking backwards. She seemed to be watching the stilt-walker. Was this part of the Egyptian's program?

Livi, Manchietti's young protégé, had been seated on a canary-yellow stool at the window, flicking through snaps of Andreus on his smartphone. He was wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and a drainpipe suit. Manchietti grunted, turning toward the slight, blonde-haired Lenzi.

"The music from *Dr. Zhivago*? Ready?"

The CD was inserted, the stereo's volume set to max. The sound of the lush orchestra frothed over into the square ahead as Andreus stopped marching ten feet or so from the three pails, letting her balloon drift away. Manchietti covered his ear with his free hand and cursed the music and the added din of a helicopter hovering above the square. Could the noise interfere with the musical signal and Andreus's behaviour?

Manchietti watched her stumble into the CIA agent as she walked towards the pail left by Kasir. Removing her hat, she felt inside the rim for the detonator. Manchietti muttered to himself. She was looking skywards, distracted by the Americans' damned chopper!

Manchietti turned to the Communications Team. "Make sure security keeps our terrorist from bouts of wanderlust."

The order was relayed by the tallest of the three who wore dark glasses and a tailored suit. Andreus had palmed the detonator, but she still seemed unsure which pail to choose. The Egyptian's yellow pail, placed dead centre of the three, still seemed her preferred choice. Zooming in further, Manchietti made out the print of the clown's face for the first time. Two members of the security detail closed in and nudged her towards the red pail with the explosives.

“And tell them not to be so obvious,” Manchietti shouted back to Communications.

The procession had slowed to a near crawl, and the CIA man and four SISMI agents were clustered around Andreus, arguing. Fortunately, the crowd seemed more taken by the desultory stilt-walker and the other clowns improvising kerbside. The World’s Press would have pictures and testimony aplenty, nonetheless.

Pictures of *what*, though? Andreus squatted at Kasir’s pail *again*, ready to insert the detonator. Suddenly, the CIA man pushed two of Manchietti’s detail backwards, knelt to grab the woman’s forearm, and dragged her to the red pail.

Manchietti moved from the window and turned to the Communications Team again. “Okay – get on to Field HQ. Tell Borringer his man needs to cool it.”

He returned to his spot. Andreus was struggling with the CIA man. She seemed strong. The American had been caught off guard, but Andreus had lost her balance, her trailing arm upsetting the yellow pail, clear liquid spilling from the slot. Manchietti knew the liquid explosive was light pink in colour, so Kasir’s contained nothing, as expected. Then again, the liquid had been diluted to no more than a small Evian bottle’s worth of Astrolite G. What the hell was going on, though? Had the Egyptian used this distinctive pail to orchestrate a bluff?

Manchietti made a snap decision. He turned and gestured to Lenzi to switch the music off. “Stage One is suspended.”

There was a moment of solemn silence, before the tallest Communications man relayed the message to Field HQ.

Manchietti turned back to the street. Andreus had struggled up and managed to grasp the upended yellow pail, which was emptying fast. SISMI were cajoling the CIA man forward towards the mayor’s now stationary vehicle. Mayor Pardo briefly glanced up at the apartment.

“Don’t draw attention!” Manchietti snapped.

Andreas kneeled, lifted off the lid, and explored inside. The pail's lack of liquid confused and annoyed her. She stood up and kicked it down the street.

"Okay. Now bring me the police radio. Idiots! They're not staying close enough," Manchietti shouted. Another of the Communications Team handed Manchietti the radio. He turned the volume up.

"Senta. Activate OHS Stage Two now. Over."

On receiving the affirmative, Manchietti handed the radio back. The noise of the procession would mask the sound of gunshots nearby.

...

She ran after her grandfather's bucket, turned, and kicked it under the front wheels of the car. They were trying to escape, the idiots! The bucket was wedged fast between the front wheels. Then there was a loud crack. *Maybe this was her chance?* The one in charge screamed through his hailer at his thugs. The vein on his nose looked like a baby slug.

It was obvious now. These bastards had to be the ones behind everything! *Had* to be. *The small crowd*. Her grandfather wouldn't lie. But it was confusing. Nothing was going right. The clown on her case swore at her again in an American accent. Yes, she needed to make them *all* pay; she needed another bucket.

The red bucket, maybe? She pushed the automaton-like thugs aside, threw herself down by the bucket, and prized off the lid. Her arm felt sore and swollen but she wouldn't quit. She slid the wire and pellet into the compartment at the base. It was a miracle nothing had spilled. Then again, this was a day for miracles.

*Now, remember:* the voice in her head repeated, *don't replace the lid...!*

The American clown had done his damndest to trip her up and make her look a fool. He'd be the first to fall. He was arguing with the one in charge, not paying attention to her, jumping back as the hailer landed at his feet. Maybe they'd self-

destruct? Maybe this bastard in charge was no longer fit to give commands? Was he the one who gave *her* the commands? Yes – just maybe. There was a squall like a bird’s shriek. The thugs were drawing their weapons, the others on their radios muscling the clown aside to protect their pathetic master!

The automatons were still in her way. She’d dodge them; they’d be doused if they didn’t move. This little Boy’s Club could burn and the world would be better off. Yes – they weren’t even men, just scared little boys. The sound of sirens was growing louder, but now they were backing away, hesitant, eyes darting nervously, faltering in mid-step, and there was just enough of a gap. She threw the red pail and the stinking liquid inside at Number One Bastard’s twisted upper body. He screamed like a trapped animal, but she didn’t give him another look. No – she turned and ran, scrambling to the barriers and the aisle leading to the chapel steps and the beautiful font of life-giving water beyond.

...

Manchietti turned to a visibly puzzled room. “Where’s the *Egyptian*?!”

One of the Communications Team was talking into his mic. Around ten seconds later he said, “He’s heading towards the chapel, sir. Should they follow?”

Manchietti let the binoculars hang round his neck, watching the crowd of onlookers, those at the fringes dispersing. He could feel the bewilderment. Or perhaps they just felt short-changed.

“Yes, of course. The panic’s over, though, and MI6 have the interior covered. The detonator’s somewhere on the ground down there. Tell them to collect it and then proceed calmly. We have our evidence, at least. She tried to kill Mayor Pardo. The Americans will have to accept this outcome.”

Manchietti pulled his vibrating phone from his suit pocket. “I’ll speak to them in another room.”

Livi held his own mobile phone up for the others. “Anyone know which department disposes of these?”

...

Bel rested her head against one of the chapel’s monumental black wooden doors, gasping for breath. She heard the clamour outside as though she was underwater or far away. She tried to scrape the door shut, but it only closed halfway. She staggered further inside, eyes straining to take in the stone interior until they settled on an ornate wrought iron balcony and a figure gazing down on the magnificent font. The face was indistinct, yet she recognised the bald head, the height and taut physique. She’d so wanted it to be her grandfather.

Her right arm felt raw. Still, she’d done it! Nearly free. Now the font of holy water. Steady, steady. Suddenly, there was a burst of sound like collective, unpunctuated breathing and she slowed. Curling round either side of the raised marble and gold trimmed font were pincers of fire...

When she looked up at the balcony, the tall man had disappeared. The stained-glass windows above the altar had kaleidoscopic tinges of scarlet and blue. Her footsteps on the mosaic floor grew quieter and quieter and her blood ran cold. This was the purest terror she’d ever felt. Could she really burn? Would her soft skin, pale body, all her back pages of mystery be destroyed by the flames...?

The circle of fire had engulfed the font and there was the illusion of a figure shimmering amidst the flames. Her grandfather’s words were her only guide: it was still the font she had to embrace to quell the fire. She was nearing the end.

The windows shattered above as she ascended the podium. She spread her arms, her upper body brushing the font as it encompassed the perfect nakedness of her face, surging water saturating every pore. The mythical fluid swelled her belly, coursing

through every artery. When she finally looked heavenward, her eyes and face were protected from the searing heat.

§

One block north-west of San Agostino, the six-man siege unit from the Special Operations Brigade armed with assault rifles, light machine guns and smoke masks, took their positions on the balcony and stairwell outside a top-floor apartment. Unit Commander Senta didn't need the mask. He adjusted his earplugs and took aim with his rifle at the lock. Four bullets splintered the wood, warping the metal plate around the handle. It wasn't quite loose enough. Two more shots and the metal jerked out of position. Two *carabinieri* briskly kicked the door open. A third and fourth immediately took their places and discharged four smoke canisters inside the apartment. The stench of hydrogen sulphide and methane indicated their targets were home.

The five *carabinieri* entered, weapons ready, in two rows of two with one flanking. The Commander removed his earplugs and relayed a message to Field HQ via his headset radio.

“Targets eliminated. Time 14.28. Over.”

Senta let the smoke settle, before walking through the hallway with its Arabic décor and into the living room, its mustiness competing valiantly with the smell of death. The five marksmen surrounded a small sofa in the room's centre and a torn leather armchair against the window, a corpse propped upright on each.

The faces were bloated and green-tinged. The bloating may have been more severe than usual on account of the deadly snake bites. Flies hopped and circled between the seating and the bookcase behind the sofa.

“Alright,” the Commander said. “One at a time.”

The first rush of light machine gun fire sounded as he turned left in the hallway to the bedroom. He opened the wardrobe and crouched to pull out a cardboard box on

the floor. Inside was an industrial blue plastic Ziploc bag with eight kilos of anhydrous hydrazine. Senta waited until there was no more noise from the adjoining room before using the radio.

“We’ve found our evidence. They must have planned more attacks.”

“Good,” Manchietti’s voice replied. “My agents will be there presently to remove it to headquarters. We have a forensic team on hand for the bodies. There will be no press briefing about Stage Two just yet. Inform your men they have the rest of the day to themselves. Over and out.”

As he ordered his team out, Senta thought how the average Italian would struggle to tell a Libyan from a Turk, Yemeni or Palestinian. Scene-of-crime officers secured the apartment and the SISMI forensics team drew up outside as the siege squad exited. The commander followed his unit into their van in a side street nearby. They drove off in relieved silence through clusters of parade watchers heading home.



16.

Kasir pressed the chapel doors shut with his full weight. Kneeling, he forced the lock bolts into the ground. Then he unfolded his jacket on the alcove floor and pulled out two medium-sized smoke canisters from the inside pockets. Picking up the jacket, he threw it towards the pews. Then, stepping back, he discharged the canisters in turn, the smoke swirling up to zero visibility in a matter of moments. Stooping to sweep up his jacket, he ran towards the figure at the font.

*“Bellissima! Bellissima!”*

He climbed the steps, clasping her head, forcing her to look at him. *“Bellissima!”*

She seemed dazed. Did she recognise him?

“What? Where –?”

“– Look, we haven’t time. You need something else to wear.”

He unbuttoned her smock and pulled it roughly over her head, before dropping it with the concealed microchip into the font.

“Lucky I wore a t-shirt underneath!”

He noticed the rash on her right hand and forearm. He put his jacket around her shoulders. More alert, she twisted her arms into the sleeves. Activity at the chapel door was now audible. Would they pursue Bel or resort to some contingency plan? It was safest to assume the worst.

Anxiously eyeing the entrance, he urged her towards the vestry.

“We have to hurry, Bel.”

“Right...”

They rushed through the vestry into a small theological library. A rear wall stacked with books was pulled back halfway revealing an inner room. They bustled inside. He pushed down a lever behind the wall, sliding it back into place. In the middle of the room was an open trapdoor. From the gallery in the main chapel, Birch had

operated a spring levered handle which gave access to the chapel's sprawling underground chambers.

"Kasir?" Birch's voice called from below.

Kasir peered down. The Englishman shone a small beam up into his eyes. The stepladder down looked solid. Kasir drew close to Bel.

"We're taking you to Evelyn, but you must..."

She massaged either side of the bridge of her nose with forefinger and thumb. "I've got the picture. That's Birch, yes?"

"Yes."

Bel stepped onto the ladder and climbed down slowly. Kasir followed.

"Step aside and I'll seal this up," Birch ordered. Kasir noticed the gun in the MI6 man's hand. A thick black cable disappeared into the wall adjacent to the steps, and Birch activated a draw switch in a panel beside it. The metal-plated trapdoor closed over.

Birch turned to Bel with the gun. "Let's get one thing straight, Miss Andreus. Your involvement in our plans was *not* my idea. I hope you're happy to serve your country from this point on. However, if not, there's a tranquiliser dart in this, and if you don't follow our route out of here voluntarily, I'll be forced to carry you unconscious. Understand?"

"Why would I want to hang around here?"

"Fine. Now I'll lead, you next, and Kasir will be right behind you. Let's move."

§

Having given his associate fifteen minutes grace, 'Mexican Radio' Vince Parnell left the delivery truck on the strip parking lot behind an open-air textiles market. Sewed onto the inside of his waterproof jacket was a Velcro pouch containing a rivet gun, two levers

and four blaster caps. In his other pocket was a .38 semi-automatic. He wore rubber gloves and carried wire-cutters.

He crossed the street, passing a mosque, a thrift store and a trade union building, before turning a corner and walking across the short stretch of waste ground towards the A7 motorway. There was no sign of surveillance above the steady flow of traffic, but beneath the deck there were problems. The entrances to the underpass were fenced across and electrified. His MI6 contacts hadn't confirmed this obstacle until last night. The whole job was double rushed, and there'd been no time to seal the area with fake road works. All he had was one cut-out on the scene: a guy having an adventure with his metal detector.

The guy was in his fifties, shaven-headed and anoraked, and a stone or more overweight for a field man. He was ex-services, though, an Ulsterman named Kilvey: en route from the airport, Mex had figured him for the sort who wouldn't spill his guts after a few beers. He was sweeping the ground near one of the bridge's piers, his back to Mex, headphones in place. The cover was sound enough, Mex thought. A real treasure hunter used headphones to identify variations in signal according to metal density and other factors.

Mex crossed a gravel path, pausing at the underpass's concrete verge to adjust his mic.

"Keep the block behind me covered. Signs of life back there."

"Affirmative," Kilvey replied, moving towards the waste ground.

Mex checked his watch. He had five or six minutes. This was the start of the two longest days of his professional life. 350K was fine and good, if he lived to spend it. And these fucking Europeans didn't have the numbers in the field the Americans had. Eight jobs for British Intelligence in five months had brought that home. Before now, the bread hadn't always been great: he'd been a bit player on the hits on Swain and Zal Tunney. Still, since getting the call in Germany some fifteen hours earlier, he'd begun to believe this could be his glory shot.

The cutters were foam-insulated and fibre-glass handled. His boots were rubber soled. Luckily, the area was dry. Still, he'd been shocked once or twice before, right?

Using one hand, Mex started cutting away the fencing. Just a few sad sparks and then nothing. It hadn't even been wired correctly. Still, if this was civic authority work, it was bound to be cheap. He cut all the way up with both hands, freeing the fence of its brackets and then the underpass roof, pulling the flap inwards until the entrance was half-open. Then he walked into the underpass towards the large square grate ten inches or so out from the wall. Taking out the larger of the two levers from his jacket, he set to work prizing the grate loose. It took three minutes of hard effort, the sound of metal on metal muted by the progress of tonnes of heavier metal overhead. Pushing the grate aside, he peered down the shaft. The ladder ran the full length down. He thought he heard an echo somewhere. According to Birch's last message, they'd be on schedule.

Mex walked to the wall, leaned against it, and waited.

§

The wall lighting in San Agostino's underground warren was relatively modern and spaced at regular intervals, revealing the walls to be vented and yellowish brown. Only a small part of the chambers was taken up by crypts and catacombs; there were storage basements, study alcoves and even tiny grottoes in an area stretching four kilometres south and two-and-a half north of the chapel itself. Kasir had read the history on one of Birch's DVDs. The 'secret city' was built between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and used to shelter priests, noblemen and others in fear of their lives. It also played host to illicit encounters between priests and women, other priests or boys and, it was rumoured, the corpses of those murdered by some of the chapel's powerful benefactors.

"We're heading south. These chambers lead to a tunnel which will take us out near the motorway," Birch said. "It's around two-and-a-half miles on the map, which

would mean thirty minutes at normal walking pace. But my intel says it should take us no more than twenty-five.”

“Jogging, sprinting or what?” Bel snapped. “And where are we actually *headed?*”

“Lugano, Bel,” Kasir explained. “Evelyn lives nearby.”

“More to the point,” Birch interrupted, “before we reach the tunnel we have to descend one level. I want you to keep your wits sharp and not break your neck.”

“If you’re below me, I’ll more likely break yours,” Bel retorted. “And more to the point, won’t we be followed?”

“No-one knows where we intend to exit, and I’ve men on the ground. Best I can do.”

After five minutes, the straight passageway leading through the chambers began to widen out, before splitting in two directions. Birch took the route to the right. The walls were adobe here, and the passage began to twist and turn. The smell of the place was more elemental, reminding Kasir of the desert at night. They passed a small grotto behind a low wall and the passage began to dip. Kasir peered through an iron grate on the wall to his right. He thought he caught a spot of daylight, at a guess about one-hundred-and-fifty metres in the distance. Did daylight get in down here?

He checked his watch. Another three minutes gone. The ceiling had become lower and the wall lighting less regular. They continued for a further two minutes before reaching a cavernous, muralled chamber that depicted a biblical feast. Through an archway they came to a vertical shaft with a single hand rail, the hole easily large enough for a single figure. Birch placed his torch between his teeth and climbed down the ladder.

“Come on. It’s easy,” Birch encouraged Bel.

Bel stood rubbing her inflamed forearm. “Obviously...”

Kasir followed Bel, certain he was the least comfortable of the three. He found them waiting in the tunnel. They headed right. The sound of water meant they were near

a waterway, or maybe sewers. Kasir touched the wall, finding it damp. He realised his mental map of Milan was irrelevant here. The slender beam from Birch's torch aside, the tunnel's walkway was in darkness. From ahead, there came the rattle of chains.

"What's this? A dungeon?!" Bel said.

"Just a chain hanging from the roof," Birch called back, as Kasir felt it brush his face.

"I thought I heard some squeaking," Bel said after a few minutes. "Rats? Or maybe your MI6 issue brogues, Birch?"

"If anything," Birch's voice echoed back.

The trek through the tunnel took longer than another five minutes, before the passageway widened. They emerged between two grottoes bounded on either side by low walls with supporting pillars. Checking his watch again, Kasir realised they had been a full twelve minutes in the tunnel. The wall to their left had an archway beyond the second pillar, leading to a bridge over the grotto. They reached the far walkway and a wooden door not unlike the chapel's. Birch lifted the latch. Kasir heard sounds from somewhere above and behind them.

"Hurry," said Birch.

Beyond the door, they turned right along yet another stone-walled corridor, which led this time to a latticed metal gate. Kasir could hear traffic.

"Right. Keep back," Birch warned.

He lit a blaster cap with a lighter and took several steps back himself. There was a spark, hiss and shriek of metal as the lock blew. He kicked the gate open and they ran to another shaft.

Birch looked up. "Parnell? Are you there?"

A recognisably North American voice came down faintly from above.

"We have a couple of men waiting. Driver, manual duties," Birch explained.

"For a moment I feared CIA," Kasir admitted.

Birch looked unimpressed. "He's Canadian."

Both men looked at Bel.

“Enough with the chivalry!” she groaned. “I can do this stuff.” Again, she rubbed her arm, grimacing. “But I’ll need some clothes, y’know? And some calamine lotion.”

“We have some clothes and disinfectant in the truck,” Birch promised.

Each climbed the ladder in turn. Kasir joined the others in the underpass. The Canadian stood in a waterproof shooting jacket and trousers, chewing a matchstick.

Kasir breathed more easily, but Bel looked tense. His reassurances now might cause more harm than good.

“Hey, Miss Cyprus,” the Canadian grinned.

Bel looked at Kasir accusingly. “What’s *he* doing here?”

Kasir couldn’t answer, but Birch’s colleague was the type of help they needed.

“We met before,” the Canadian explained to Kasir. “On the Swain job.”

“Seal it up and let’s get to the van,” Birch snapped.

The Canadian pulled out the riveter. Kneeling, he closed the grate, positioned the tool at right angles and drove the rivets expertly through the corners and then along the sides.

“They’ll have police on the scene in minutes after they find themselves blocked in,” warned Birch. “Hopefully we’ve five to ten minutes start. Where’s the truck, Parnell?”

The Canadian stood and led them out. “Five hundred yards. The route’s planned.”

...

They’d been driving for nearly two hours. Kasir sat with Bel and Birch in the truck’s storage area. Birch’s support team was up front. Kasir had read the electronic dossiers of Vincent Parnell and Brian Kilvey. Both had Special Forces backgrounds and experience of classified missions and mercenary work. Kilvey was a demolitions expert. Neither

seemed unapproachable, but Parnell, in particular, required careful handling. That Birch had employed mercenaries was proof that they were all out in the cold.

Kasir and Bel sat on a sofa. She had been reading files on a laptop since they'd left Milan. Birch sat in front of two flat screen monitors checking the truck's position and progress. Four MANPADS, four machine guns and two grenade launchers lay at the truck's rear, and there were boxes of assorted hardware and tools beside the sofa and several hold-alls slotted behind it.

They'd taken mainly back roads to Vasolda near the Swiss border, traveling South out of Milan, doubling back via Monza, then heading North West to Como. Now they were on the E35 round Lake Lugano. The route had been a calculated risk. Birch's updates had disclosed aerial activity to the west, but no tail. Their destination was a safehouse between Monte Brè and Monte Boglia overlooking the lake. Two helicopters were on hand to fly them to Evelyn Morgan.

The MI6 files on Evelyn seemed to have steeled Bel. She'd been smart enough to ask after the original documentation, but she'd read what Kasir had fretted over disclosing since Birch first showed him the files. And then there was Bel's bona fide medical report. She hadn't mentioned motherhood, or abortion.

She laughed bitterly. "So the bitch is a war criminal, aside from everything else?"

She was reading a report from a team of UN investigators connecting Evelyn to a group wanted for assisting or participating in war crimes in the Congo in the early nineties.

"I would not anticipate a show trial," Kasir said.

She shifted between files, expressionless. Then she handed him her headphones. "Give this a listen, Kasir. From '93, just before I learned I couldn't have kids. How does she sound to you?"

Kasir listened to the file for the fourth time.



FIRST AGENT: So, does she want to settle down and start a family?

EVELYN: Hard to say. That'd be a problem?

SECOND AGENT: Perhaps. Motherhood might interfere with her lifestyle too much. We need continuity for a program like this.

FIRST AGENT: If she wanted a family, and couldn't have it, how do you think she'd react?

EVELYN: [Sighing] She might take it hard. She tends to think the world's against her much of the time. [Pause] You want me to help?

FIRST AGENT: You can't have children yourself. Good medical reasons. Perhaps your friend would believe the same?

SECOND AGENT: A womb infection, wasn't it?

EVELYN: [Long pause] I suppose it might be easy for me to remember that. [Pause] If she gets pregnant, though...?

SECOND AGENT: Our doctors follow the usual procedures.

FIRST AGENT: She doesn't have to remember a thing about it...

Kasir handed the headphones back. "She sounds compromised. Also the purpose of the recording. But I wouldn't read too much into her pauses, Bel."

Birch interrupted him with a semaphore style gesture, before speaking into his mic. "Parnell – activity at seven o'clock. Range sixteen kilometres. Height five thousand feet. Rate of approach, one hundred and fifty kilometres an hour."

"Okay, the main road's best for now," Birch confirmed. "We'll continue monitoring. There's only one, so far. At worst, it might be a straight tail. An ambush is unlikely. We might have to turn off, though."

Birch turned to his co-passengers. "There's no point panicking. Just remember, be prepared to move according to instructions at any time."

"Birch?" Bel said, clicking her fingers for his attention. "Your business with Evelyn. You'll kill her, right?"

Birch didn't look at her. "As you should know, MI6 is in the business of intelligence gathering. Her secrets are ours, not anyone else's."

“Sure – you’re just following orders. But what did she *do*?”

Birch sat back in his chair, switching glances between Bel and Kasir. “Ever heard of Menwith Hill? It’s the US National Security Agency’s base in the UK, near Harrogate. Part of their work involves intercepting satellite communications, usually in the Middle East, but potentially anywhere...

“...However,” Birch continued, “recently even some MI6 internal communiqués started feeding back to the NSA and beyond. For example, the specs of the Russian vacuum bombs and information on your ‘husband’ we had withheld from the CIA after he went rogue. Aliases, contacts in Eastern Europe and so forth. We only verified the source of the problem less than forty-eight hours ago. Malware was actually unleashed into one of our systems months ago. Restricted data spread to servers operated by the CIA and NSA. That’s when the Americans decided they wanted the Russian prototypes for their own R&D.”

“And Evelyn was your Typhoid Mary, spreading this virus?” Bel said, with the hint of a smile.

Birch eyed her coldly. “We’re sure Menwith Hill is the operational hub. But the rogue program was activated in one of our Italian offices, yes.”

“Whew,” Bel whistled. “If it’s true, she screwed *you*! No wonder –”

“– And to answer your original *point*,” Birch interrupted, “she *won’t* make her flight.”

The MI6 man shot Kasir a look suggesting some gratitude was in order, before returning to his monitors.

Bel smiled at Kasir incredulously, folding her arms and digesting it all in silence. The truck had slowed. They were turning off the road. Kasir had studied the route, and he guessed they were doubling back through the high terrain to cross the lake at the SS340.

“We’re flying tonight, Kasir?” Bel asked, dropping the laptop at her feet.

The green and brown sweater Parnell had brought for her was fine rural camouflage, Kasir thought. “Probably.”

“Good.” Her stare chilled him. “I’ll know when I meet her face to face. I just didn’t know which questions to ask before. But if you’re right. Hear me Birch?”

Birch seemed puzzled: whether by Bel or information onscreen, Kasir couldn’t tell.

Bel picked at the bandage Kasir had applied to her arm. “Something spilled on me in that chapel, didn’t it? Or was it earlier?”

Kasir hesitated. “You don’t remember?”

“What I remember doesn’t make sense,” she said.

Kasir wanted to explain about the explosives, the trick with the buckets and the fact she *might* now be hunted for the attempted murder of the Mayor of Milan. Then the truck braked suddenly, sending him tilting sideways into her. They accelerated, braked again, then accelerated. This was repeated twice, until Birch jumped from his seat and slid the cab’s panel back.

“What the hell is going on?!”

“Geriatric farmer in front,” the Canadian answered. “Trying to make him jump.”

Birch returned to his monitor, leaving the panel half-open. He typed something on his keyboard.

“Okay, we might have a situation,” he said to Parnell. “I want you to pull in at a petrol station down nearer the SS340. There’s one before the bridge.”

“Good,” Bel said. “I think I still need to wipe some of that gunk off my face, and I could do with the loo and a smoke. A coffee, too.”

The truck had picked up pace, the farmer having let them pass. Kasir stood to view the monitor. He could see why Birch was being cautious. The helicopter was much closer now, although it was flying over the lake, not the mountain roads. Meanwhile, the truck had turned and was making its way back towards the lakeside.

“We’ll let her have a short break. We need to talk, Professor,” Birch said quietly.

It wasn't long before they pulled in at the gas station. Parnell climbed down to fill up.

"I take it I get a chaperone?" Bel asked.

"Kilvey will take you," Birch said. "I'll get Parnell to bring some food and drink."

Kilvey's shaven head appeared in the gap. He beckoned Bel out via the cab and climbed down on the driver's side after her. Kasir hadn't heard this pale, flinty-eyed man utter a single word.

Birch closed the panel door. "How good are you with firearms?"

Kasir smiled. "Comprehensive handgun training. Some rifle training. No machine guns." He nodded towards the five foot long olive green MANPADS, "and certainly no surface-to-air missiles."

"Well, that's fine. That's why Parnell's here. Now look at the monitor."

Birch switched to satellite view, pointing out a highlighted cross near Monte Brè on the map. "For you, one air ambulance with pilot and two personnel. Now," he pointed to Alpe Bolla, a fraction east, "our armour-plated Colibri is there. Plenty of woodland around. We'll take you to the ambulance. Our team will lead in the Colibri with the weapons. Your pilot tails us."

"Yes," Kasir agreed.

Birch panned right and zoomed into a series of mountain villages in Vasolda. He zoomed further into Dasio, the highest in the vicinity, until the satellite photo of four grounded helicopters appeared, encircled. "Mountain Rescue. What do you think? Potential opposition, Professor Kasir?"

Kasir stooped, hands on knees. "Aren't these always on standby? Or do you think they plan an ambush?"

"It looks natural, as you suggest, so there's no way of knowing," Birch said, thumbing his chin. "However, this is the main lookout point in the region. I'm still certain any information SISMI has is sketchy at best, but so is ours regarding their

intentions. I'd rather skip Alpa Bolla. We'll travel round past Mount Brè instead. Kilvey will go alone on the original route in case we need a diversion."

Kasir straightened up. "What are the early media reports like?"

"Just the bare bones, last time I looked. That someone tried to assassinate Mayor Pardo while disguised as a clown." Birch switched screens for an update. "That said, the focus is shifting onto the two supposed Libyans shot dead at an apartment nearby. Suits us fine."

Kasir read the threads intently. "Manchietti mentioned other suspects."

"Yes – the two killed in Sofia with George Morgan. One Palestinian, the other Turkish. Both Jihadist sympathisers the Italians hoped to turn."

Kasir remembered Manchietti's arrangement with the morgue proprietress the day before. "Yes. It would make sense. But what has been arranged at the chapel? Do you know?"

"Personally, I suspect they'll bring out a body," Birch said matter-of-factly. "Or at least *pretend* to. Someone they can identify as Baranyi. That's what we'd do."

Kasir straightened, his chest taut. In the circumstances, it might be convenient for everyone if Bel was allowed to disappear. "It is alright if I step out for some air?"

Birch glanced at his watch. "Until they rejoin us, fine."

The service station had six petrol lanes with eight customers. There were around two dozen cars in a car park by the cafeteria. Kasir saw Kilvey standing alongside a grey family saloon. Deactivating the central locking with an electromagnetic device, he stepped into the driver's seat. After two minutes, Bel and Parnell exited the rest area. Clearly the two men had swapped the role of chaperone. Bel had freshened up. Her casual clothes reminded Kasir of one of his students in London.

Kasir climbed back into the truck. When Bel returned, she seemed irritated. "Look, I want the sofa to myself, Kasir. I need a lie down for this backache."

Parnell followed into the cab with a handful of sandwiches and three bottles of cola. He handed out the sandwiches and drinks and gave Kasir a semi-automatic and Bel's pack of cigarettes.

"The gun's Kilvey's. If he's busted, he doesn't want it on him. He's about to wire the car. Belongs to a couple with kids who just pulled in. He'll need the flares, though. He's got a story for those."

Birch nodded, and Parnell fetched a small hold-all from behind the sofa. "I'll be a few minutes. Need to pay for the gas after I see Kilvey on his way," he said, exiting the cab.

Birch contacted Kilvey via his radio. "Head up to Santa Rosso. The farmhouse there is in contact range of the safehouse."

Birch got his affirmative. "Listen, it might be best, Professor, if you sit up front. You can scout for aircraft while Parnell concentrates on the road."

That made sense. Besides, Kasir wasn't keen to put all his trust in a mercenary. He threw the cigarettes to Bel.

"Great," she said emptily. "I suppose you guys only carry real guns, no pistol lighters?"

"You can't smoke in here, anyway," Birch said offhandedly.

"Fucking hell!" Bel threw the packet at the panel. "Give me a sandwich, at least."

Kasir tossed her the food before taking his seat in front. The right-sided driving arrangements felt strange. He watched Kilvey tear out of the car park and head towards the lake.

Minutes later, Parnell climbed back into the driver's seat. "Good," he grinned at Kasir. "I was gonna ask for an extra pair of eyes."

They moved off, headlights on, following the SS35. Kasir watched the mountains over Vasolda under darkening sky and tried to forget the threat of pursuit. Still, he admired Birch's thoroughness in arranging their escape.

The dramatic view from the toll-free bridge over Lugano drew few comments. Reaching Via Statale on the lakeside opposite, the truck turned left. After a mile or so they turned off right, and headed upwards on a twisting mountain road until they passed the cable railway at the foot of Monte Brè. The light was still good on the higher ground. Beyond the shoulder of the mountain, the asphalt road became pebbled and sloped downhill.

“Gotta take it easy here. Don’t want one of those MANPADS going off in back,” Parnell grinned.

Kasir noticed a nicotine patch on the Canadian’s right wrist. “Is that likely?”

Parnell didn’t answer. Birch was on the radio. “Two of the rescue choppers are airborne and moving our way. I’ll contact Kilvey, but I doubt he’s able to intervene directly. We’ve about twenty minutes driving, yes?”

“Affirmative,” Parnell said. “If you contact ahead and get bupkis back, I can do it in fifteen.”

“I wasn’t serious about the MANPADS,” he explained to Kasir. “But, if we’re forced to use them, having Kilvey around would give us more edge.”

After ten minutes, a signpost announced the village of Brè. Heading uphill, they passed a church with its interior frescoes photographed on a display outside. The corners of the village square were decorated with sculptures and there was a fountain at the centre. The road beyond the village was asphalted. To Kasir’s left, on the other side of a field, he thought he made out the rotor blade of a helicopter, possibly the air ambulance. Parnell accelerated until they reached a steep ascent, the whole truck shuddering as he geared down.

Birch opened the panel wider. “Last update. Kilvey is following them at Alpe Bolla. They’re cruising, and he thinks they’re unmarked. Could be police, could be anybody. If they’re coming for us first, he’ll turn off into the property and get ready for them. They should be in view on the other side of this stretch of road.”

“Okay,” Parnell said. “We’ll force our way in, whatever they try.”

At the road's summit, Kasir caught his first view of the long stretch of woodland which included their destination. The rescue helicopters were still out of sight. On the newly level ground through the woods, Parnell put the pedal to the floor, braking abruptly to handle the narrowing road which twisted for maybe half-a-mile.

Birch leaned forward into the cab, about to speak as the truck turned sharply and headed full throttle to the left. There was the sound of a helicopter motoring above, then a downward rush of noise. Suddenly, the truck swerved violently, sending Birch hurtling into the cab. Kasir grabbed the dashboard for balance as Parnell swore and pushed the MI6 man's head away from the gears. Parnell geared down, only just managing to keep the truck moving. Kasir forced himself upright, Birch scrambling to do likewise. Bel's voice from the storage area sounded muffled. There was the sound of an obstacle splintering and being driven over, as Parnell turned right, Kasir hearing the noise of tyres driving fast over gravel before he saw the road itself. And then the machine gun rounds hit them like hail...

Instinctively, Kasir dropped to the floor of the cab. Ricochets sounded from the storage area as more bullets tore through the chassis. Birch threw himself down in the back as Bel screamed, streams of light now filtering in from the van's far side. Hunched at the wheel, Parnell had been hit in the left shoulder. He jolted backwards as bullets cracked the windscreen.

"Get ready to help them load up," Parnell shouted at Kasir. "Kilvey got here before us."

Kasir climbed into his seat, the edge of his hand stinging as the truck plunged into darkness. Seconds later, it thudded to a halt. Parnell switched on the interior lighting and moved to the back. Kasir could hear the rear door rattling open, and Bel's voice strident amidst those of the two men. He opened the passenger side door, dropping down onto a bed of straw.

He heard helicopter noise outside and moments later a loud wheezing and whining sound. He was shaking as he moved to join the others.



He saw Bel first, crouching out of sight behind the barn door. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, nodding at his hand which was dripping blood. Surprised, Kasir pulled out his handkerchief and wrapped his hand tightly. It seemed no more than a graze. Birch was shouting into his radio just inside the barn. Parnell crouched down by a MANPAD and applied a tourniquet to his left shoulder.

The helicopter's engine was labouring noisily. Kasir looked out. The property was arranged around a large square courtyard. To Kasir's left, the helicopter had descended, its tail burning, its right ski snagged between the roof's guttering and one of the pillars in front of the rooms and covered walkway. A machine gun had fallen from the cockpit. In front of the rooms on the courtyard's far side, Kasir saw the stolen silvery grey saloon with Kilvey crouched alongside, reloading his flare gun and taking position. A second flare tore into the helicopter's trapped body, hitting the fuselage around the fuel tank. The aircraft exploded, chunks of metal flying into the courtyard as Kilvey turned and threw himself face down on the ground.

Even inside the barn, Kasir felt the dry heat on his face and eyes. Then more loud droning rotor blades, and a second helicopter appeared above the far rooftop. It hovered briefly, then swooped down over the flames and rotated one hundred and twenty degrees to its left, machine gun fire from the passenger side tearing into Kilvey and the saloon. The chopper rose again and swept around to face the barn just as Parnell mounted the MANPAD on his right shoulder. Taking aim, he locked on the target, pulled the trigger and launched the missile head on into the craft. The chopper was blasted backwards, tail-ending and crashing in a fireball through the property's roof. Its crescendo of anguish ended as it shuddered and sputtered like a gigantic pneumatic drill sinking into concrete. Finally trapped, the burning carcass tilted sideways as the brickwork crumbled.

"Grab the girl, Professor," Birch said. "Our transport is down past the stables. Take the machine guns, we'll get the rest."

Parnell gathered up the remaining MANPADS and his jacket. "You want me to torch the truck?" he asked Birch.

“No time,” the MI6 man replied. “I’ll bring everything necessary.”

Bel was already at Kasir’s side. “I don’t need *grabbing*. What’s happening out there?”

Kasir fetched the guns from the truck, giving her a nod. “Did they have an escort, Birch?”

“No sign – not yet,” shouted Birch. He slipped one of the hold-alls over his shoulder and gathered the two grenade launchers underarm. “The Italians aren’t behind this. More likely the Americans.”

“With AK-47s?” Parnell scoffed. “These guys were hired guns.”

Birch gave the Canadian an anxious look. “Let’s move.”

Birch led them out right, past an empty row of stables, shrapnel from the aircraft burning to their left. The smell of smoke was overpowering. Kasir saw that either the blast or the machine gun fire had torn the back of Kilvey’s skull apart. The melted control stick lay closer by, a crisp black hand soldered on by the heat of the blast. They headed quickly through a loggia and into a clearing overlooked by high trees. The Colibri waited with headlights on and engine running. The pilot threw the last bundles of foliage used to camouflage it on the ground, before climbing into the cockpit.

“Never used an infrared seeker at that range before,” Parnell shouted in Kasir’s ear. “CIA, my ragged ass! These guys came underdressed.”

“You need a hospital?” Kasir shouted back, Birch and Bel boarding ahead.

“First Aid on board’ll do me fine,” Parnell grimaced.

The Canadian boarded the four-seater last, sliding the hatch shut and placing the MANPADs in a khaki cloth bag on the floor behind the pilot. A First Aid kit lay alongside. He picked it up along with one of the machine guns. “Just as well Kilvey bought it. He’d have been swingin’ from the skis.”

“Stop off as planned?” the pilot asked Birch.

“Yes,” the MI6 man shouted.

The pilot flipped his switches. Kasir took his seat and looked across at Bel. She was shaking and biting her nails, a new bruise forming at her cheekbone. He reached over to clasp her arm, before taking her hand. “We’ll get through this. I promise.”

“It’s like war,” Bel said, composing herself. “God, I must really want to see Eve suffer!”

A minute or so later they were banking sharply left over the forest back towards Brè. It was growing dark. The skies and roads looked trouble-free.

Birch opened his hold-all. He stood and handed three wallets to the others. “Your new IDs, passports, backup credit cards, etcetera. All goes well, we should be in Switzerland within a couple of hours.”

The wallets also contained PDAs and a packet of 20 euro notes. Kasir had been assigned the identity of a Dr. Yinon Teo Maggid.

“Freja Gilder. Dutch, *forty?!?*” Bel slid out the PDA. “And why not smartphones?”

“These have 168-bit encryption,” Birch said. “Besides, Kasir’s has audio capability. That’s all *you’ll* need.”

Kasir watched Bel stuff the PDA into the holder in front of her. She was breathing heavily. “Parnell?” he said loudly over the noise of the blades. “You are suggesting a private contract behind the ambush. Who might have known about our escape?”

No answer. Kasir peered round at the Canadian, who had stripped to his chest armour to disinfect his shoulder. He was now heating a scalpel and forceps, preparing to remove the bullet.

“A bit of an angle.” Parnell paused to pass Kasir a roll of bandages and disinfectant for his hand. “But horizontal entry. No biggie.”

Kasir persevered. “Mr. Birch?”

“Obviously, someone connected with MI6,” Birch said. “I can vouch for my back-up team, but it’s possible we still have a security problem. Even without that,

Evelyn Morgan has her own contacts. Nothing's ever airtight. We'll shake it out of her, though."

"This is the same girl who couldn't bear looking at her dad's collection of dead butterflies!" Bel pitched in. "You people! Do you ever stop to think about the monsters you're creating?"

Birch adjusted his radio mic, sipping some mineral water. "No – *never*. But my first thought was wrong. CIA wouldn't handle things this way. Not for Evelyn alone. She knows it and she's panicking. The bombs are all the Americans care about. *Our* bombs."

"Once they test them, develop them, I reckon they'll cut you a deal," Parnell said, making small incisions either side of the bullet wound with the scalpel.

"No doubt," Birch conceded. "But we execute traitors when we can, just like they do."

Birch relayed a message to his waiting back-up team. Kasir sat back in his seat and removed his handkerchief to dab disinfectant on his hand. He flinched at the astringent, leaving it to dry. After several minutes, they reached the landing strip behind the field and touched down around one hundred metres from the air ambulance. "You're traveling with me, Bel."

Her look was both sour and scared. "Good. And I could kill for some bloody morphine!"

Kasir thought of the wounds on Georgy Morgan's corpse. "Unfortunate choice of words."

He finished applying the adhesive bandage. "When this is over, Bel, I promise what's happened to you will not seem as bad."

Her look was defensive.

Kasir sighed. "You know ...I think that –"

Birch leant into the gap. "– Save the fond remembrances. It's time to move."

...

In the Colibri, Parnell stitched up the hole in his shoulder. He opened a flask of bourbon, offering it to Birch.

Birch shook his head absently, stroking his chin as he gazed at a spare laptop, checking the official updates. In central Milan the authorities had cleared San Agostino with urban tanks and military fire engines. The operation had taken an hour-and-a-half. A commando unit with bomb disposal experts had forced their way into the chapel after the area was secured.

“They’ve stormed the chapel. They’ve just brought out a body they say they found locked in the library. Supposedly our girl burned herself to death. They’ll probably sell it as some religious statement.”

Parnell took a long swig, the machine gun across his knees. “They took their time. The worst she could’ve done in there *was* top herself. The stiff they’re using – it’s for real?”

“No idea. It’s been stretchered out under a blanket,” Birch said. “No reason it should be. No-one can see a damned thing. There was nothing in the library, in any case. It could be a dummy, or a pile of charred bones.”

Parnell checked his watch, and swigged some more bourbon. “So you think they’ll be any more like these *goombahs* back there?”

Birch closed the notebook. “No idea.”

“And it’s the same number of SISMI guards?”

Birch rummaged in his hold-all for a GPS keypad, checking their position relative to the destination. “Yes. Six or eight tops.”

The Colibri’s blades stuttered. Parnell closed his flask. “We got our approach, the firepower, balls of steel. We need the fakir and Dolly Daydream back there tagging along?”

“Well, we can’t arrange another safehouse or just let them head off on their own. And at least she hates Evelyn Morgan. The Egyptian might be working on her as we speak.”

Parnell stroked his palm across his weapon. “Lucky little man.”

17.

The ambulance flew westward above the Alpine Forest in darkness. Two of Birch's MI6 colleagues were on board dressed in white coats. Bel understood they'd be taking Evelyn across the border to a Swiss clinic. The way MI6 worked, Eve wouldn't know much about it. This really wasn't what Bel would have wanted.

She sat on the patient's bed, while Kasir toyed with his PDA in the emergency doctor's seat alongside. The past few days had really stretched him: dark hollows under his eyes, limp posture, inward-looking expressions, conversations that barely scratched at what their situation really meant. A lot of the time she felt like slapping him. Now they had a project, though. They'd nail every one of these bastards. Maybe Kasir planned to record something tonight. Eve's capture?

Bel eyed the MI6 men and the weapons evident under their coats. One sat behind the cockpit. He was strongly-built, hirsute, in his late thirties. His eyes were puffy but slitted, their colour hidden. The other was the same age, but fairer, lightly freckled, clean-cut and taller. She'd caught a whiff of Brylcreem. He sat on green plastic seating at the aircraft's rear. All spine and guts, they'd have made better mortuary assistants than medics.

"How about some painkillers?" she asked the bearded agent. "What have you got?"

He shrugged, checking a tall metallic supply cabinet behind the cockpit panel. "Everything – morphine, demerol, hydromorphone, fentanyl..."

Bel gave a rasping laugh. Maybe they didn't want her to wake up? "Yay, fentanyl! No, over-the-counter will do."

"Prescription codeine will be perfect," Kasir said.

She smiled at him. "Being overprotective?"

He massaged his temples. "No, I meant for myself. I seem to be developing a weakness for your aches and pains."

The agent threw her an Evian and a pill bottle. She rinsed down the tablets, and passed Kasir the bottles.

There was no sign of Birch and company. God only knew what they were up to. Kasir had mentioned Eve's property was across a stretch of water from a village. There was a faint vertical outline in the darkness; a church bell tower, maybe. The vista shifted lightly from side to side as they began to descend. Her vertigo was back. Since the hallucination at the party, genuine physical ailments were almost reassuring. She closed her eyes as the air ambulance swung right, hovered, and then touched ground.

...

The last two members of Birch's unit and the drone were waiting by an inlet on the quiet stretch of Lake Lugano near Lavena Ponte Tresa, the Colibri having touched down by the forest minutes earlier. The engine was still running.

They'd approach Morgan's property by air and water. The house was boxed in by hills and trees. With as many as eight SISMI bodyguards, a head-on attack with full firepower was the only way. If Morgan survived the initial blast, Birch would instruct they take her alive. Today's traitors made Burgess, Maclean and their ilk look like simpletons, and at Vauxhall Cross they'd use the bone and gristle of Evelyn Morgan.

Birch sat in the Colibri's cockpit passenger seat with the tracking and command equipment: a black console fitted alongside the Colibri's own control panel. He ran his thumbs over the instruments and small monitors, aware of his pulse in his throat and left wrist. Parnell had made a joking reference to the A-Team, but MI6 had to stem the haemorrhaging of information from their Italian stations at any cost.

The drone was a floatplane, 6.5 by 9 metres. It was remote controlled by the satellite navigation system on the Colibri. A missile launcher with an adapted eight-foot land attack missile was attached above the right float. There were five kilos of detonator-readied C4 explosive in the cabin in case the missile malfunctioned.



Drones were often flown from distant ground stations using satellite signals from onboard cameras and radar, but this was line of sight work. MI6 aviation technician Bonsignore activated the start-up and autopilot, flexing his knees to jump clear of the left float onto dry land as the engine growled into life. The floatplane moved off, rising in a backrush of spray. Birch checked the altimeter on his console: the drone reached the required eighteen foot altitude in seconds. Both disguised in balaclavas and night camouflage, Birch's MI6 colleagues dashed on board the helicopter.

The Colibri was airborne only twenty seconds, before Birch steered the floatplane around a wide sixty degree turn left towards its destination. The drone was a small grey shape on his radar screen. The house as seen by infrared camera was more clearly defined. He rapped the pilot's upper arm with the back of his hand. "Remember, we approach from the right, in as close as you can."

Collision course set, Birch activated the two minute countdown clock on the console, his finger resting on the red ARM button. Parnell sat to the left, the MANPAD on his shoulder extending through an opened window. Bonsignore sat behind with the C4 detonator and a machine gun. His colleague Quine sat opposite with a MANPAD across his lap. A rush of cool evening air filtered into the cockpit.

Birch began counting down silently.

...

The floatplane passed the first of the village's few brick residences at precisely 32.5 kilometres per hour. The mountains spread behind the village to the left, while Lake Lugano continued beyond the hills to the right. The Colibri tracked the floatplane, maintaining a position close to the hills. Birch hadn't expected to see any boats below them on this stretch of lake, but their absence came as a relief nonetheless.

Morgan's house sat in front of a curve on the shoreline. The floatplane was within six-hundred yards. Birch saw three rooms lit downstairs, three cars parked on a

circular front drive, and two speedboats moored by a miniature pier. And something else: an arcing and flashing q-beam from one of the speedboats...

*Fourteen seconds...*

The floatplane coasted clear of the lake's edge and some fencing...5-4-3, over the main gates, into a spray of machine gun fire...3-2-1...

The missile tore into the front of the house. The brickwork between the entrance and the central upper windows disintegrated, a streak of fire illuminating the aftermath, the building's maw rupturing, casting household debris into the driveway. Crashing into an upper bedroom window and adjoining wall, the drone began to screech and wheeze, before it tilted backwards and slid down, its rear fuselage pummeling the car hood and windscreen beneath.

Birch saw a figure struggling through the flames in the doorway. The floatplane toppled onto its side, blocking the man's path. If the fire spread to the cars, an explosion would detonate the C4. Birch could taste hot copper in his mouth, as the Colibri drifted wide above the hillside. It turned in towards the house's rear, dipping and hovering over an embankment of bushes. Smoke drifted high from the missile in the scorched grass and figures hurried from the back of the house to an armoured truck. Three men, one woman. The private dirt road tunnelled through the rear embankment would take them out near a main road, although none of the vehicles parked in the front drive could now follow them. SISMI had kept this route well-guarded for days.

Birch turned to his team. Parnell had angled the MANPAD down at the truck. From the window behind, Bonsignore trained his machine gun on the fleeing bodies.

"Just the men!" Birch shouted.

"Fuck it!" Parnell groaned, pulling in the MANPAD and seizing the machine-gun at his feet, as Bonsignore unleashed a slew of bullets at the male targets, hitting two in the legs and chest. Parnell fired a round at the woman and the third man as they dived for cover by the house's rear wall.

"Take us back thirty feet," Parnell yelled. "And a thirty degree dip."

The chopper reversed sharply, and then hovered at the required angle. Sighting the truck with the MANPAD, Parnell locked the target and activated the launch. From the ground one of the wounded men fired a handgun, and the bullet ricocheted with a tinny pop off the steel fuselage as the missile strike melted truck and man together in a fireball.

“Get after the woman!” Birch directed the pilot.

The Colibri swooped between the fire and the eaves, turning into the house’s side garden, a narrow right-angled triangle. Headlights streamed down on the two figures scrambling to escape by the front gates. The pilot pulled the Colibri over a stretch of poplars, following the lake round to the chaos in front.

“They’re making for the speedboat,” Birch shouted.

Birch watched the couple clumsily skirting the burning debris covering the driveway. Two bodies, surely SISMI, lay amongst the metal, wood and brickwork; a third was pinned under the drone’s tail.

“Time to detonate the drone?” Bonsignore shouted.

“Not yet!” Birch yelled over his mic.

The chopper accelerated, before rotating and facing the two speedboats side-on. One was already moving off slowly. Its engine stalled, a black clad figure making desperate, repeat pulls on the motor cord. Parnell took aim with his machine gun. Bullets rattled off the motor and hull, and the figure jerked in spasm as it dived overboard.

As the chopper angled towards the house, Birch saw Evelyn Morgan run through the connecting gate onto the mini-pier and dive into the water, before swimming round behind the second speedboat. Her male companion limped through the gate behind her, arms raised in surrender.

“Do we follow her?” the pilot asked Birch.

A visceral crashing noise prevented him from answering. An explosion from one of the burning cars or the floatplane ripped the house’s whole front area apart. The C4 had detonated. The rush of fire sent eviscerated trees, metal, fencing and cement

cascading into the water and over the pier. The Colibri backed up rapidly through smoke billowing up from the seared water. Then a loud, crunching sound, as its tail connected with something. The chopper jerked violently, its engine labouring, the pilot raising the collective pitch stick fully with his left hand.

“We’ve pitched into a goddamn tree!” Parnell shouted. “The rotor’s gone!”

The Colibri swayed from side to side as the engine struggled to drive the blades. Looking back, Birch saw one of the poplars formerly lining the house now hanging like a damaged port crane over the water.

“I can’t raise her! We’re going to take a bath!” the pilot shouted above the irregular thundering of the blades.

Birch looked towards the speedboats. “Christ!”

Evelyn Morgan had unmoored the rope and slipped on board the second speedboat. It started up and headed over the lake, cutting up the water as it approached top speed.

“I can still nail her with the MANPAD,” Parnell shouted, grabbing the last missile from Quine.

“No!” Birch adjusted his headset, and speed-dialled a number on his phone, the chopper swaying and lurching downwards. “We’ve one chance left to take her alive – yes, Birch here. Morgan’s headed your way by speedboat. You know what to do!”

The Colibri jolted to its right. The engine stalled. The pilot hit the switches frantically, as the machine began to roll sideways, and down.

...

Birch punched away a soft, limp object on reaching the opposite side of the lake. He’d spotted the undergrowth just before the helicopter submerged. A teenage diving champion, his instincts underwater were still sharp. The cat must have fallen in and throttled itself on the reeds.

He watched its paws drifting behind its body. The air was still close and the smell of burning strong this far from the house. He flexed numb fingers like stalks of dead wood. The cold was expected; the intense roar and din of the police helicopters overhead, however, was unrelenting. Underwater, he was sure he'd heard gunshots, but the helicopter beams had spared him. Parnell was a born attack dog; he'd have clung on to the last MANPAD and swum for the remaining speedboat. Birch wasn't sure about his own men.

Crouching in the water up to his chin, he squeezed his body carefully between the bulrushes, the humming of insects amplifying around him. He needed more cover before making for the trees and the road beyond. Just a fraction more. He was around two kilometres from the rendezvous point, with one wet mobile phone and no weapons. Pulling himself onto the grass, he ducked through the trees. He'd lost his shoes underwater. His waterlogged socks made his feet leaden. Beyond the trees was a brief line of one-storey houses. Only one had curtains still open, the lower-half of window space filled by a fully-lit glass swan candle boat. The road right led to the mountains.

He pulled his mobile from his belt. Both battery and bars seemed okay. He crossed the road towards the first of three cars, a small Fiat. Looking round, there was no sign of a blunt object, but the nearest doorstep had a loose red tile. Bending down, he slid the tile free and smashed the Fiat's rear-side window with the sharp edge. There was a spider web of fine cracks. Birch thrust his elbow into its centre and the glass splintered onto the rear seats. Reaching in to unlock the front door, he quickly got behind the wheel. Then he locked the door again and felt under the dashboard. He touched the wires together, once, twice, three times, the engine turning on the fourth attempt, just as a hand rattled the driver's door handle. Then a fist slammed down on the roof. The car screamed away from the kerb, one furious owner's boot connecting with the bodywork.

Birch contacted the unit at the clearing. "She can't get far. Stay in your target positions. If you bring her in before I arrive, get her prepared as soon as you can. And wait for me!"

...

Evelyn Morgan silenced the speedboat and let it drift to a stop beside a patch of forest. She removed the loaded Beretta and the dispenser of toxic spray from the compartment and climbed out carefully. The water up to her knees, she held onto the side rail, directing the boat as far under the overhanging foliage as she could. Crawling onto the bank, she scanned the gaps between the trees for the crosshairs from a laser-sighted rifle. She guessed MI6 wanted her alive, but they'd be happy enough about a wound from a sniper. There was a gap in the forest and open space by the lakeside just ahead; she'd remembered just in time. If Birch had a second ambush planned, that's where it would take place. Glancing back, she saw helicopter beams criss-crossing in the sky. Hopefully Birch and his soldiers had been swept up by the police. Somehow she doubted it.

She headed into the forest, reeking of diesel, gun in hand. The shock-and-awe style tactics at the house meant they'd stop at nothing. With what she could pass on concerning GB PLC's aggressive trade expansion in the Middle East, that was no surprise. But why hadn't the Americans gone all out to protect her? Maybe they doubted the information she'd already sent, or that she could deliver all they needed? If so, what double-deal had taken place with London?

In her wet shirt, trousers and stocking feet, she headed through the trees at jogging pace, following what might have been a deer track. Her nose was running and her throat raw. She'd lost her light slip-ons moments after diving to the speedboat and her scalp was cut from contact below the bow. Not a deep wound, but the diesel in the water made it sting. She knew the road from the village was her only option. If she had to car-jack the first passer-by, she'd head out of the sticks back to Milan or Venice. The plan would improve en route.

Her hands brushed against mossy bark in the darkness. Ferns and tall grass kissed her shoulders and waist. The fresh water nearby and her diesel-fumed clothes masked the raw smell of vegetation, but she felt the foul mesh of leaves and froth of

bugs and berries staining her feet. Unseen wings rustled close above. There was some ornament, some filthy broken fountain ahead to her left. A sharp twig or nettle cut into her right sole, but she gritted her teeth, imagining herself a shadow. The emotions washing through her were no stronger than wayward light currents. She'd escaped the carnage at the house; she could do anything.

The forest ended at some tangled damp grass and a low stone wall. Tucking the gun in her waistband, she swung her legs over. Her stockings were ripped, her feet cut, a nail torn, but she crouched at the road's edge, listening.

The moonlit Alps had the quality of a huge watercolour, presenting nature at its most implacable and unresponsive. It was strange how even the most solid of earth's structures might seem unreal. She felt her whole body shivering. She ran fingers through her wet hair. To her disgust, they had yellowy-brown streaks and smelled of diesel, peat and rotten cabbage. Birds exchanged harsh squawks, which grew progressively more distant. After some minutes, she began walking back and forth across the road, bearing her weight on her heels. A minute passed. Then another. Then she heard a motor approaching fast to her right. Her stretch of road was slightly curved and on a dip. She felt the Beretta under her shirt. She might have to shoot the driver through the rear windshield. This was a quiet spot, after all.

She stood in the road, her right palm sliding between the gun at her waist and the deadly spray in her pocket, her left arm waving frantically. Headlights streamed into view behind some bushes at the curve. The small car sped towards her, the driver braking momentarily, preparing to swerve. Then the bastard changed his mind and accelerated.

Pulling out the gun, she threw herself towards the wall. Too late! The car caught her squarely on the left hip and upper leg, the crushing vice-like pain leaving her breathless. The gun flew from her hand, her left wrist twisting up under her shoulder blade as she landed. Tyres screeched. As she tried to struggle onto her back, the pain doubled. It wasn't long before rough hands made her cry out in agony.

The hands gripped her temples. She lashed out with her left forearm, but her wrist felt like a loose end, broken. The pain froze her entire arm. She felt digits under her armpits dragging her towards the car. Looking up through the tail-lights, she thought the head resembled a shiny red skull.

Sprawling on the ground once more, her shaking fingers sought the dispenser in her pocket. Exhaust smoke billowed around her nostrils, into her throat, the red glare nearly blinding. It was no good. She'd never get her aim right from this position. Trying to focus, she made out a rear bumper and a white license plate with red lettering. She heard a thud, and saw a sodden pair of socked feet in front of her face. She found herself wondering how he'd lost his shoes. The boot of the car was opened. Cold fingers slid under her shirt collar.

“Don't want you missing your flight, Mrs. Morgan.”

She was hoisted upright. The pain was duller. It felt as though she was leaving her left leg, a large part of her left side, on this forsaken, broken road to nowhere.

“And thanks for the gun,” said the voice. “Hope you're not claustrophobic.”

...

Kasir and Bel stood near some trees, watching the MI6 men lying flat in the long grass with their rifles, alert as cobras by the woodland on opposite sides of the clearing, medical overcoats gone. The commotion further down the lake had dimmed, but Bel could see helicopter beams in the distance. The sky nearby had purple patches which revealed a fuller outline to the hills across the lake.

She lightly puffed a cigarette. Kasir seemed relatively calm, but then surely he knew more about Birch's plans. She'd been feeling mild withdrawal symptoms from the morphine. Light but insistent gut cramps, itching ankles, shivers and flushes playing tag, bitter breath. And flash headaches. Stress probably. But like the vertigo and the rash on her forearm from the chapel, at least these symptoms were physical and real.



“If they capture Evelyn, are you going to record it?” she said quietly. “Or what are we going to do?”

Kasir puffed his cheeks, exasperated, almost whispering. “They may have dealt with Evelyn already. But I’ve been recording everything important wherever possible since the fourth. Add our testimony, and the evidence will be overwhelming.”

“We’re hardly eye-witnesses right now, are we?” she said huskily. “Look, I know all about the gunpowder, treason and plot bit, that she’s a traitorous cow. But why are they going to *these* lengths?”

Kasir’s mouth was downturned, anxious. “*Trade*, in a word. Business is no less a priority than terrorism. Birch told me that Evelyn promised the Americans information that could jeopardise British trade deals with the Middle-East. Bidding strategies, contacts, officials and even entire commissions who could be bribed, and who the British intended to approach. Details about illegal monies that might be used, secret venture capital sources –”

“– Okay, stupid question! I’ve a problem facing this up close, though. The flambé back at the farmhouse was already way too much!”

“That’s unnecessary, Bel.”

She wasn’t trying to invite sympathy, and a slur was a slur. “Yeah? I take it an Egyptian woman wouldn’t have these thoughts?”

“She might not wish to appear glib. But, no, it is not about culture. Culture can stimulate the human heart. It won’t consume it entirely.”

“I’m British, remember?”

“Yes. Yours is a cold country,” Kasir agreed.

“We can debate it later, Kasir, if we’re still alive. I saw you poking about in that drugs cabinet before.”

“Induced amnesia,” Kasir said solemnly.

Bel scraped two fingers worth of hair back from her forehead. “Come again...?!”

“Amnesia. That’s the solution. Premedicants and other compounds. They have everything – pills and solutions to induce catatonia, extract the truth and anything in between. And not just for short-term amnesia. If MI6 believes Evelyn knows nothing, and she can remember nothing for months, even years, it is her best chance.”

She found herself sputtering some smoke from her cigarette. Catching her breath, eyes wide, she rubbed her hands on her slacks. “Is that really your *plan*? How do you imagine you’ll pull it off?”

He fingered his dark two-day stubble. Shyness, awkwardness and a need to hide still defined him.

“Thought so.” She tugged at his wrist. “You know, if we have the proof we need already, the road’s just up there. *Kasir*?!”

“Trying to escape here is not practical,” he said, gently moving her arm. In the darkness, he looked slighter, more vulnerable. “It looks as though they have laser-guided rifles. But we have nothing. And the pilot...”

Right then, the beams from the air ambulance lit up the clearing. The bearded agent nearest them was talking into his head-set. Jackknifing to his feet, he jogged back to the aircraft.

Kasir glanced up at the ridge of tree-tops. “It’s starting to rain. Let’s get back inside.”

Bel shut her eyes and shook her head, crushing the last glow from her cigarette stub. Talk of inducing amnesia was too clever by half, like something Georgy would have cooked up. Georgy *and* Eve. Just like they’d effectively caused her *own* blackouts and blocked memories. Now things seemed to be turning full circle. Would the madness never stop?

...

Minutes later, a car crashed through the strip fencing separating the clearing from the road. It bounded over the bumpy terrain, its chassis rattling and squealing. One of the MI6 men stood outside by the cockpit, talking to the pilot, the other adjusting the sight on his rifle in the aircraft. Clearly, the job wasn't done; placing it on the seating, he pulled out a handgun, heading to meet the arrival with his colleague.

Bel picked up the rifle. "Kasir?"

Kasir stood at the medical cabinet, his jacket back on. She saw him adjust the buttons at his left sleeve and lapel. She'd have thought it a tic, had he not mentioned the cameras.

He looked blankly at the rifle. "There's no light. I'm sure he's disabled it. Sorry, but I can't use it. Leave things to me, though."

He removed a hypodermic and small plastic bottle. Out of sight of the pilot, he filled the syringe. "Have they brought her back?"

Bel laid the rifle back on the rear seating, moving to the window. Birch looked frayed and skeletal in the moonlight. She couldn't hear his words, but his fingers jabbed the air and his thumbs jerked orders. Maybe his plans were falling apart?

"Not sure. There's only Birch. The macho man's missing. Wait a minute though...?"

Birch pulled out a handgun and gestured toward the car boot, before walking to the aircraft looking sodden and sick to the teeth.

The rear of the car was in shadow, but Bel saw the boot being raised. Suddenly she heard a terrified yell, and the taller of the two agents staggered backwards as though he'd been invisibly body-checked. Dropping his weapon, he started coughing violently into his fist, choking, panicking, and then swaying lightly before crumpling to the ground. The bearded colleague scrambled to close the boot, but...too slow. White powder sprayed into his face.

Was this really *Evelyn*? Bel hurried to the rear window for a better view. This pane of glass was slightly smaller and fly-specked. She peered through it at closer range.

Now the bearded agent was stumbling, his arms outstretched for balance, before he fell to his knees and collapsed face down.

Birch had turned on the steps; he stood as though tethered. Bel watched his chest heaving rapidly, grimacing as though he was focusing on breathing.

An arm appeared from the open boot. Then a body, trying to hoist itself out of the cramped space...

“Kasir – follow me!” Birch shouted, motioning with his gun. Kasir followed. Outside he glanced anxiously back to Bel. She saw the hypodermic slide from his sleeve into his right hand.

She wasn't sure what to focus on, but she could just make out Evelyn's face, her eyes squeezed together in pain and effort, and a small dark object being tossed to the ground. Birch stood shouting, as Kasir raised his arm and thrust the needle into the MI6 man's neck, depressing the plunger. Birch swung round, face contorted, his left hand flailing over his shoulder, his gun aiming up at Bel's window, Kasir having ducked behind him. The Englishman slumped to his knees, his whole body shuddering, the gun drifting left and right as his aim grew vague. Then he toppled forward, convulsing until his body finally stiffened. Unconscious? Dead? Bel couldn't tell.

Kasir darted to the boot to help Evelyn, his handkerchief at his nose and mouth. Suddenly the air ambulance's engine started up. Bel turned to see the pilot standing in the cockpit, giving her an 'I dare you!' look. She made a dash for the rifle, grabbed it underarm, and aimed at his chest until he raised his arms.

“Just don't try anything. Listen – I'll shoot you if you don't do what I say! Go and help him bring the woman on board. Hear me? We're going to Switzerland as planned. Just leave everything running and move!”

“I can do that, signora. Please, don't fire.” The accent was thick Italian. He patted himself down. “I am not armed. It will be okay.”

She motioned again with the rifle and he walked out through the cabin. Bel moved to the hatch, the rifle trained on the man's back. *Was* it disabled? The trigger felt

rigid under her finger. Even if it was readied, could she do it? She tried to guess the pilot's intentions. The way he acted didn't suggest bravery. He was a man paid to do a non-violent job. Why would he risk getting killed?

Kasir had picked up Birch's handgun. Evelyn was propping herself up against the car, as though her spine might break without support. Bel noticed her stockings torn and mangled at her feet. Her hair looked filthy. What the hell had *happened* to her? The two MI6 agents lay motionless, their limbs twisted, their postures awkward.

Bel stepped down as the pilot helped Kasir. Evelyn's eyes were dull and rheumy. She didn't register an old friend, or else didn't care. Bel gave the clearing a quick scan. She could hear engines and see lights in the sky some distance to her left, but there was nothing closer-by. Climbing back into the cabin, she felt her spirit of confrontation drain away. She was in *control*. Evelyn was helped up the steps, sweating, teeth bared and clenched in agony.

"I'll take you into Switzerland," the pilot said, his eyes darting between Bel and Kasir. "You don't need the rifle."

"I'll keep it for now," Bel said.

The men lifted Evelyn onto the bed, gently placing her on her right side. Bel was reminded of a stranded animal, something pitiful and pitiable. She remembered her teenage friend prone to migraines, forced to spend hours curled up in the dark. Now Eve's isolation seemed so final. Bearing witness seemed a violation of her dignity. They no longer had a relationship where one might destroy the other. All Bel could feel was a mixture of apprehension and misery at the waste of a life she'd once treasured.

"The left hip and leg seem to be fractured, or broken," Kasir explained. "Her arm also."

Bel held the rifle like a low-slung guitar. She clucked her tongue. "Must be painful. Is she bleeding?"

Kasir brushed his hand over her trousers. Her breathing seemed laboured.

"It is not serious." He nodded to the pilot. "You know what you've to do?"

“Yes. I must deliver the woman. It’s not a problem if you have papers and Medical ID.”

“Everything’s in order,” Kasir confirmed. “We will be cleared at the border?”

“They expect us, yes.”

The pilot tried to placate them with a smile before closing the hatch and returning to the cockpit. Bel checked her own pulse. It was fast. A minute later, they were airborne.

Kasir sat by Evelyn, angling his chair to direct the buttonhole camera in his sleeve at her head. He’d already recorded the video of her mock beheading back in Milan. What would the Human Rights lawyers he knew make of Evelyn’s part in this story?

Kasir leant close to Eve’s left ear. “One thing. The two men at the car. What was in the spray you used?”

At first it seemed Evelyn couldn’t answer or move at all. Her chest rose and dipped, and she made little sucking noises. Then she tilted back her head. Bel saw the tears on her cheeks. “It was a painkiller for large animals and a nerve agent. Concentrated doses.”

Bel ran a hand along the rifle’s barrel. “They’re dead then?”

Evelyn gave a strangled laugh. “And still doing better than me!”

Her musty, acrid smell was thick close up. Bel saw blood on the exposed line of her scalp.

“Lucky for you there wasn’t a strong breeze out there,” Kasir said coolly. “You would be dead as well.”

Evelyn coughed at the cabin wall. “And what about *you*? I wouldn’t have expected the heroics. What did you inject Birch with?”

“Concentrated liquid nicotine. Fastest acting thing,” Kasir said flatly. “And they might have used it on us,” he added, heading to the cabinet.

Bel said nothing. Maybe he was right.

Evelyn pressed her head back into the pillow. “While you’re in the mood for questions – where are you taking me? Anybody...?”

“Hospital,” Bel said. “Where do you think?”

Kasir returned with a small blister pack and some water. He looked sincere and sorrowful in the cabin’s streaked blue-black light, like an administering priest.

“I shouldn’t believe you, should I, Bel?” Evelyn said. “I hope you haven’t sold out? Look – I’d like to see you clearly. Didn’t think I ever would again. Come closer.”

Bel laid the rifle gently on the floor. “No. I think I’ll stand here with my new best friend, and my gun.”

“Well – we’re running out of time, and I’ve things to say...”

“Maybe she knows already,” Kasir interrupted. He popped loose two pills and unscrewed the water bottle. “Here. This is for the journey.”

“Painkillers?” Evelyn asked weakly. “When I’m still, I can’t feel my left leg, my side, but any movement...My arm’s worse just now.”

“The strongest painkillers we have and a mild sedative. And a local anaesthetic for your arm.”

Bel watched as Eve raised her forefinger, blindly tracing her initials on the window above her head.

18.

Fifty minutes later, they reached the private hospital at Chamonix, a small campus of hexagonal buildings forming two larger, diagonally joined hexagons. The air ambulance alighted on one of three helipads at the front. From the outside, the place was misleadingly genteel. It was easy to forget the crevices, ravines and cornices they'd just flown past no more than a minute or two before. Even if it was safer, returning Evelyn to MI6 in these circumstances struck Bel as a betrayal. Standing at the bed, she placed her fingers on Evelyn's forehead. It was clammy. Kasir's drugs had left the patient unconscious.

He was making arrangements with the pilot. Uncomfortable, no doubt, but no hand-wringing. Was he struggling with his own motives for saving her as well? He was a good man, yes, but she wasn't a child. There was more to it. Loneliness and guilt, probably. Guilt was his real issue.

Their arrival was expected. Two medics from the nearest building approached the ambulance with a stretcher. The chopper's blades whirred and droned. She knew she'd hear the noise in her sleep for weeks. Maybe she'd imagine furniture and glass shaking. Right now, though, the noise promised escape.

Sitting at the ambulance's rear, Bel watched the medics lift Evelyn onto the stretcher. Burly and unenthusiastic: not having to register emotion certainly made life simpler. But right now, some way to say goodbye to Eve would have been nice. Even just to scribble a note and slip it into her pocket. The interrogation would be hard-going. Had Kasir made Eve's prospects better or worse? Wouldn't they just reverse the amnesia?

Watching the stretcher disappear from view, Bel had a memory of herself in hospital. A rushed admittance. Doors, corridors, a small private ward. Then a sense of traveling far away. Sunshine. Receptiveness: her muscles relaxing, a vague feeling of contentment. Then, an uneasy awakening. A late taxi home in darkness to a flat in



London Georgy used. A small party. Guests. Unease again. Going to bed without eating, without talking...

Kasir stood in the half-lit cabin. "Bel?"

She sat on the bed, propping up the pillows, Evelyn's outline still warm beneath. That the memory of a mysterious stay in hospital had returned with less intensity than flashbacks about Rian's death or ritual blood sacrifices maybe meant something.

In the cabin's crescent shadow, her eyes narrowed at him. "You could have given her brain damage, Kasir. The state she was in. I mean, couldn't we have taken her somewhere else, at least?"

He gave her a semi-frustrated, semi-pitying look. "She has medium-term amnesia. She'll remember who she is, who you are. But the secrets she stole will be forgotten for some time. *We* have to keep things compact, think small. Otherwise we will be hunted down."

"You're saying we won't anyway?"

Kasir took the seat by the bed. "I'm sorry. Truly. But you can't afford to withdraw into old friendships. Or into a past that didn't actually exist."

She knew. She was some cocktail waiting to be poured into a jar labelled Freja Gilder, aged forty. Who'd want to take a sip, let alone drink it all down?

Kasir adjusted his watch strap. "We have new identities, new locations. I can arrange an address quickly."

"In Switzerland?"

"In Basel, yes. But when we get there, I want to solve one thing that has maybe troubled you for a long time."

She gave the clinic's squat symmetrical buildings a last look before they flew high over the gated entrance. "You want to tell me I'm not a killer? Well, I never felt anything *primal* to convince me I was."

The helicopter rose over a hillside of chalets, lit gardens and serpentine drives and headed north. Kasir went to the cabinet and selected another plastic bottle and syringe.

“Do you want to know what happened to Rian? What do you know about your baby?”

Bel believed the flashbacks. She was sure she had Rian’s story up to a point.

“You’re very sure it was his. Any number of bastards could have tried something when I was going through the worst of this thing. There’s a disgusting thought, one I’m stuck with. As for the baby, it’s a case of not *feeling* it. Whatever documents you have Kasir, if I don’t feel it, then I never have to think of it.”

“We are seldom rational about those things that mean the most.”

“Really? Where do you stand on demure, dark-eyed virgins, then?”

Kasir flinched, looking baffled. Then he shook his head. “If you *do* need more proof, it wouldn’t take long. But maybe you should focus on the fact that it would be potent evidence. Rian was Dutch, and he was killed on Dutch soil. A reopened investigation will be given high priority. You fought before he died, yes? I think your memory of these hours may have been repressed. Truth serum may help. If you *need* to know.”

Bel thought about the photographs she’d once kept of the mother she’d never known, all now lost forever.

“When we get to Basel, I’ll let you know what I need.”

§

7<sup>th</sup> November, 2010. 8am. Manchietti, Livi and CIA agent Borringer arrived by limousine at the CIA station four miles outside Geneva. Manchietti led the way into the modern three-storey building. After the carnage at Lake Lugano, SISMI had struck an agreement for information with one of the mercenaries involved, a Canadian. With two bullets in the back and prompt medical attention required, he’d been quick to forget his

price. The infection of MI6 computer systems in Venice and Brescia had been of equal value. In the event, however, MI6 had simply handed Evelyn Morgan over to the Americans. Perhaps they'd had their fill of drama, with five agents dead or missing on one operation.

"They'll have wiped her, take my word," said Borringer. "She won't even remember the names in MI6 and MI5, if her information is worth anything at all."

"We'll see," Manchietti said. Privately, he cared little about the Americans being able to undercut pending British arms and oil deals in the Middle-East. "She has just undergone an operation. We simply ask questions first. No violence. If we have to use drugs later, I will oversee that."

Borringer bristled. "I don't relish working over some female either. Losing billions of Uncle Sam's greenbacks even less. So we've a nice little euthanasia clinic on standby as a last resort. But, sure – this is more your territory than mine."

The American plastered some chewed gum on the automatic door. "You know what's happened to that little prick Kasir, don't you? He's fallen for the blonde, just like Miss Libya before. Must have the hots for suicide bombers. A lovelorn middle-aged guy is a bigger security risk than a fag these days."

They entered the compound. Livi nudged his right spectacle side with a forefinger. "Surely, he is not so emotional?"

Borringer thrust his fists into his suede jacket pockets. "Corruptible. A sucker for Western hospitality, like Prince *Andrew* in reverse!"

Manchietti and Borringer showed their wallets to security at the third set of double doors.

"Our patient?" Borringer asked.

"Her room's on the third floor," the guard said.

Borringer peeled off some Euros from a money clip. "Something for your wife's birthday, Frank."

The jowly, moustachioed guard was surprised, but he took the money. “Thank you, sir.”

“And no messages for a couple of hours, at least. Okay?”

“Certainly sir.”

“Let’s go,” Borringer grimaced, shaking his head and jostling Livi aside as they made for the elevator. “She’ll be a vegetable in cooking foil already, though.”

Manchietti nodded to Livi. “We’ll do what we can.”

...

Some kind of monitor lay on a small table at the end of the bed’s rail on her right. Her arm was strapped to that rail. She was attached to a drip with four bags of fluid, and there were two catheters in the right forearm. Now her head felt as though it was burning. Her bones felt as though her skin couldn’t contain them, her shoulders drifting loose from her spine. Even her jaw, teeth and gums burned. When she closed her eyes, she felt the pulsing capillaries tenderising them inside her skull.

These sensations didn’t last long, before her body became cooler, then cold enough to make her shiver. This had been happening for around ten minutes. Maybe she was feverish? When she opened her eyes, her right forearm was flushed scarlet below the sleeve of her hospital gown. Her left arm was in a stookie. Her Donegal grandmother used to say ‘stookie’. Why had she thought of that? All her childhood memories the past day or two! Her mother’s cancer. Her uncle in prison for supplying guns to the IRA. Her sneak-and-tell antics with her sisters...

The *capo* stood watching her, expressionless. “Signora Sebatio?”

“No – who?” she rasped.

“Signora...Sebatio...,” the voice repeated.

Evelyn tried shaking her head, but the tendons at her neck were stiff and sore.

“I’m Evelyn. My name –”

A river of heat ran up her spine, liquid rippling in the drip. Some pressure gathered at a certain point, making her head tilt backwards. Saliva filled her throat. She choked once, twice, before spitting it clear.

The *capo* held his dark glasses, wiping one lens with a cloth. Taking out a handkerchief, he moved close and wiped her mouth.

“Very well. *Evelyn*. As you wish. You remember me, Evelyn. I know. We met many years ago. We have to ask you some more questions. The first time, it was not a success. We have concerns over some information you’ve given the Americans and ourselves.”

“What’s in the drip?” Her words felt ridiculous.

A sudden twinge in the forearm, then more burning in her veins, powerful tingling sensations on fingertips and toes, invisible snakes crawling round her chest and waist, burning all over. Ten seconds or so. Then the discomfort stopped.

The *capo* put his glasses on. There was a scimitar-shaped scar on the bridge of his nose. “Medication. I’m afraid your colleagues in MI6 poisoned you and robbed you of your recent memory. This is a detoxification program. A fast-acting and radical treatment. It is unpleasant, I know, but the only way we can help you help us. We are also using a truth serum. I regret your discomfort. Truly. How is your hip?”

“I – I can’t remember what happened. I know I had an operation.”

A doctor had mentioned this drug treatment that morning. A cold stethoscope was the worst discomfort she’d felt then, though.

“And it was a success. Good.” The *capo* took his seat again, leaning back comfortably. She briefly caught sight of a white disc in the palm of his left hand. Thin leads connected it to the drip. Could he operate the release valve that way?

“So – back to our concerns. First the basics. What did you learn about deals between London and Tripoli? What did you tell us you’d learned, and *would* learn?”

She thought frantically. *London? Libya?* “PAN-AM disaster. I remember it as a child.”

The fire made her arms stiffen, shudder and ripple, ready to burst. It spread to the underside of her jaw. She stared at the catheters, willing them loose. Oh, Christ – for a free hand!

“No. Wrong answer. The information you were to give your American friends?”

There was a long pause as she tried to control her breathing.

The *capo* briefly lowered his chin to his breastbone. “Very well. What about bombs? Stolen bombs? Your countrymen and Russian criminals?”

“Bombs? I don’t remember any bombs.”

“You must try. You helped transfer very useful information about these bombs to your American friends.” His tone was sharper. “However, you were detected as the source of the leak. Strangely, no-one else has been identified. The British chose to pursue you. It may mean you are important to them. Or else, that you are a scapegoat, a necessary sacrifice, and someone not very important to anyone. The Americans would have given you refuge. But it has become awkward. Their confidence is weakened.”

Evelyn tried to focus. A woman’s body was strong, designed for extremes of pain and pleasure. She’d also learned pain was something you grew into. *When* she’d learned this, or from *whom* she couldn’t recall. Yet this pain visited different places and didn’t stay long, migrating like a sprite inside her. With all the drugs, maybe her mind was just playing tricks?

The *capo* stood again, pacing across the small ward. There was a reflection from the glass behind him. “You do know where you are? You do know that you live in Italy?”

Evelyn nodded slowly. “Yes – I moved here. Invited my girlfriend to stay.”

Poor Bel. Heartbroken, childless forever. No reason, really. When had she last seen Bel?

“I wanted to see her again. To make things right between us. After a very close friend of hers died.”

“Good. That memory does not seem so old. You told us about her before. You helped bring her here. You assured us she was perfect for our requirements. This, I’m afraid, turned out to be far from true. Where is she now?”

Evelyn took a deep breath. *Focus, focus*. “I can’t remember...”

“Try. Was Signora Andreus working for your MI6 colleagues willingly all along? If you can’t say, which of your contacts *could* tell us? Here in Italy or back in England?”

“Names...you mean names? I can’t remember any names. I only remember working for you...here in Italy...”

Heat rushed through her arms, her skull, her chest, the yell in her throat somehow stifled.

“Evelyn,” the *capo* continued. “Who are the members of your cell? Who can *we* establish contact with in MI6? Mrs. Morgan!”

“Yes?” Evelyn gasped. “Morgan. Eve...”

Her head and mouth were growing hot, too hot. Cranial heat could deceive the touch. She knew such facts. So couldn’t it deceive the mind? She tried to will her temperature down. She felt herself gagging, bile spilling free of her mouth. Some flowed back inside, then down over her chin. She coughed repeatedly, her gums and mouth burning.

Then, once more, the heat grew less intense, and her entire body cooled.

“What work did you have to do that made staying with your friend impossible?”

Now she had a clear memory. “Bookselling – I sell rare books.”

The *capo* removed his glasses, walking slowly around the end of her bed. His look was open, compassionate even. “At a guess, I’d say you need a different course of drugs. More conventional, this time. The doctor will return presently and you can get some rest.”

The door alarm gave a short burst as the *capo* left the room. Evelyn spat several times to clear her throat, before wiping her mouth on her upper sleeve. The lights went

out. Then a light came on behind the glass. The *capo's* face was pressed close, watching her sternly.

Closing her eyes, she tried desperately to remember more. Names. Instructions. Any fragments of her recent life.

What had the *capo* wanted to know that might save her now?



19.

In Bel's dream, there was no secret passage out of the chapel. When it exploded, her soul was borne away. She surveyed the scene from on high, her mind clear, feeling some resolution was imminent.

The chapel's stained glass shattered outwards. The people outside ignited en masse as if trapped in an infernal censer, while those fleeing in panic just beyond the barriers were torn to pieces by the force of the flying hot metal. The exodus of souls caused several blinding flashes in the sky. A helicopter hovering just below her was sucked downwards and concussed into fragments and the mayor's marooned open-top car disappeared into churned-up earth. This manifestation of Hell was inevitable.

The first explosion was followed by a second, churning up what remained of San Agostino's cruciform streets. The street where the parade had begun was an infernal jumble. Buildings sunk into their foundations, burst water mains and sewage pipes flooding the street with flotsam, jetsam and viscera. For several blocks the waves spread out from the chapel in an inverted heart shape. When they subsided, San Agostino was waste ground, unevenly bleached, scorched and cindered. Only scraps of flame still burned. There was a new fall of rain. The waste ground was in the shape of a huge circle.

As she tried to imagine the circle's size, she found herself isolated in space, as though a film projector had been shut down while she wasn't paying attention. Her legs were giving way and yet she wasn't falling...

She understood. She was returning to her own body and her core identity, she felt sure; but her perception began to change, as she was transported somewhere in a different body entirely...

She woke up and kicked down the covers, swinging her legs out onto the floor and staggering across the room. Dizzy, she clutched the doorpost. Deep, regular breaths and into the bathroom, the light cord left swinging. She grabbed the sleeping pill bottle

Kasir had given her and clattered down on the toilet seat to unscrew the safety lock. She thought she might be sick. She paused a minute, lowering her head towards her knees. It took an effort to pop out the pill into her palm. She stood up, the tablet's dryness unpleasant on her tongue, and stared at her blonde hair in the mirror. Yes – at least she'd washed away the stain of disguise and deception. She filled a glass with tap water and washed down the pill. Then she made her way back to the bed, willing herself to sleep as she collapsed face down into the imagined comfort of darkness...

The alarm woke her hours later. It was 9.15. The date on the clock was the 9<sup>th</sup> November. She lay for five minutes trying to remember who once said that a person's dreams might represent the epitome of their life? Kasir had said it was a quirk of her subconscious that she might still dream of Sorceresses, Ancient Worlds and apocalyptic disasters. Even if the program was over, healing could take time. Well, there seemed a lot of work to do yet. First, she had to get up and shower. Things could only improve day by day. Running water might help her relax.

The hotel room had a full-length standing mirror. She dried herself, expecting the Wreck of the Hesperus as she had the past two mornings. Still tip-top. Her hips and belly hadn't changed much since her twenties. She ran her palms and fingers round, down and wide, her body firm under her fingertips.

There were no tell-tale signs of drugs, of damage. A hint of nicotine yellow between two fingers didn't count. Only her ankles itched. Her hair and nails were a touch lustreless, maybe. There was no bloating, and her piss had been the right colour. What would Kasir think of a woman preoccupied with her bodily fluids? Pressing a leg against the mirror, she noticed the blue veins at her ankles, a small red spidery thread above her left knee; her thighs were supple if a little dimpled at the back; her hip was still tender but unmarked; her faint aroma was still pleasing under the light citrus tang of the shower gel. This was how she'd try to start her days now, by creating a portable image that no-one around her would shatter. Satisfied, she got dressed.

The hotel opposite the Dutch embassy in Basel was overheated, but perfect otherwise. She'd checked in under her new name, Kasir separately under his. The MI6 assigned identities made him nervous, even though Birch was no more. Kasir's contact in Bruges would have professional passports ready in two weeks. These tricky optical images, laser-cut photos and watermarks weren't cooked up overnight. However, 'Freja' was growing on her, not least because it was an easy fit for her old look of choice. Blonde hair, clear-blue eyes, slim: a young 'forty' in shirt and jeans.

They'd spent yesterday morning at the Embassy across the street, arranging a meeting in The Hague for three days time. Kasir had already sent files of Bel's programming to a pair of lawyers, Van Merkel and Krause, working on behalf of the International Court of Justice. He'd included footage from the parade in Milan and details of Evelyn's abduction and hospitalisation. The fates of the MI6 agents aside, he'd been fastidious. A legal team at the European Court of Human Rights and Amnesty International also had copies. Kasir had warned this could be big. She was scared, sure; but going public was a hell of a lot better than waiting to join 'the disappeared'.

Then again, there was the matter of Evelyn. Bel had amazed herself by suggesting they inform the Swiss authorities. They'd argued, Kasir talking about returning to poisoned wells, victim fantasies and other things beside the point. Finally she'd worn him down, although he'd only agreed to make calls via his 128-bit encrypted PDA. He'd contacted the Hospital in Chamonix first. As expected, Eve had been discharged. Then he'd contacted the British Embassy in Bern to alert them to a missing British citizen. Problem was, as she held joint Italian citizenship and lived in Italy, 'Signora Daniella Sebatio' was judged by the Embassy's mouthpiece to be primarily his Italian counterparts' concern. There was no chance they'd make *that* call. So, using a payphone at Central Station this time, Kasir had called Police Missing Persons as a concerned family friend. He'd been directed to the Kantonspolizei. No information back, so far.

There was one positive, though, courtesy of the web browser on Kasir's PDA. The Swiss and Italian media were explaining the operation at Evelyn's Lugano safehouse as a house fire during a party. Four known casualties. No official warrant out for the capture of others involved: no manhunt, no alerts of any kind, no unflattering 'Wanted' photos that would scare her to death in the street. Kasir had said such cover-ups were the norm with black operations.

He gave the door a succession of little knocks before entering. They'd both shopped for new clothes after visiting the Embassy, and he was transformed in white sweatshirt, denims, moleskin boots and tinted glasses; as far from his familiar ensemble as possible. Now that he was no longer her instructor, he somehow seemed younger. The de-programming had taken a while. He'd used a drug, and she remembered none of it. Well, not strictly. Rian's death had played a central part. And she wasn't responsible for it...

Otherwise they'd been able to talk like equals. A *lot* of talking.

His eyes flickered toward her. "Are we ready?"

If the shyness was incurable, at least he was no longer withdrawn, as though apologetic for existing. She felt quietly triumphant.

She smiled, tapping the cigarette packet on the dresser: a last farewell to the coffin nails. "The appointment's at eleven. It's just ten, and the clinic's only three miles away. Weren't you going to tell me more about my new apartment?"

He sat on the bed. His aftershave was a touch heavy and he gave her a reluctant, boyish smile. "It will be ready when we return from the Netherlands, if the Swiss authorities can ensure your anonymity. I am optimistic, so tomorrow I will drive you there for a look. But I'm more excited about today. You know, I was really struggling about what to give you, or help you find for yourself. But it was what you said not long after we met, at the manor house in England. About your mother, about children?"

Bel perched on the dresser. "I can't recall. Seems like another lifetime."

“I know. I know. But whole lifetimes should be made of such moments. When I thought back over the moments I shared with Alessandra Baranyi, not knowing how much they meant until it was too late – well, I began to realise that I could not let our situation continue. Bel, we’ve *both* been enslaved by our homelands for many years. And I’d begun to see similarities with Alessandra in you. I was beginning to think about us that way.”

Bel twisted her mouth in mock uncertainty, but she was unsure what to say.

“Yes. Guilt was inspiring other feelings. But guilt can’t just disappear. Which is why –” Kasir hesitated at the emotion in his voice “– which is why this is something I need to support you in.”

She approached and flicked a knotted black thread from his shoulder. “A boy. Like I told you, whenever I thought of a child, I always thought of a boy.”

Kasir moved his head away slightly. “It would always be a girl for me. I believe that you can imagine your future and your family’s more magically with a child of a different gender. Everything cannot just be imagined in terms of your own destiny.”

“Do you still think of your daughter as she was, or imagine how she’d be now?”

“As she was. Forever, as she was. The other way would be too painful, too frustrating. And such anger makes it impossible to live correctly.”

Her vision went momentarily blurry. Something filmy in her eye. She blinked it away. “I’m not sure I’d think that way. I’d lose the anger, but I’d still be curious.”

“These situations always control you. You can’t predict how you would think.” Kasir used his fists to propel himself upright. “But you have an appointment that could give you a new life’s worth of real moments. So after he’s born, think of it – freedom!”

That was exactly it. She’d been abject for so many years. Girl interrupted, woman shredded into cut-outs. “It’s a preliminary check-up, Kasir.”

As she watched him take in every detail of the room, she wondered how he’d remember their time together.

“Do you think it takes a type, though? To be a mother? I don’t. Millions of women still *have* to do it.”

Kasir clasped her hand. His eyes were sparkling. “You will know when you hold your child for the first time. And *I* know you will be the best mother your child could wish for.”

She smiled, but he was already heading for the door.

Putting on a light blue jacket, she followed him down to the restaurant. The glass ceiling resembled a gigantic blue diamond. There was a bitter odour of ground coffee mingling with light honey. They took a seat at the far side of the room, away from the windows and the two occupied tables near the door. She drank tea, but couldn’t eat. They’d do tests, and she wasn’t hungry.

So they talked about imagined futures, about shedding their pasts. How both were suited to it, the identities of both spy and sleeper being fluid, situational and conditional. Being free to start living all over again was like rewriting the flawed rough draft of an unrealisable novel. One day she might recognise those things for now unrecognisable, or remember other things differently. It was daunting, even frightening; but she could no longer let someone tell her who to be.

He talked about Cairo, about politics, and an educated youth movement using social networking to stoke dissent and organise against a tired regime. He dreamed of a big historic tipping point, of his people emerging unscathed, rejuvenated. When he smiled, laughed, or encouraged, she didn’t mistake it for assurance. Only time would tell if new lives were possible.

She took a sip of the breakfast tea. There were fairies on the border of her saucer. “So you plan to turn your back on the spy world? Will they let you?”

He pushed aside his plate of uneaten cereal. “As long as I don’t implicate them more widely in Milan, I think it’s possible. I’ve contacted them to explain the recent behaviour of MI6. Agent Birch turned psychotic; *I* followed my brief. Switzerland is as

safe as anywhere in Europe. In the short term, I plan to look for a post as a visiting lecturer here, or perhaps in Germany, under a new name. I have contacts.”

A light ringing started in her ears. “And Egypt? What about the revolution your lady wanted? She might rejoin you in spirit at the barricades.”

Kasir looked to the ceiling, his expression shifting, as though unsure which emotion to register. “I *am* impatient, Bel. For changes accepted as the normal way in other places. I want democracy for my country, not change at any cost. I fear if Alessandra came to believe that the Islamists had the only practical chance of seizing power, many amongst the intelligentsia and middle class will think likewise. The Democratic Movement is very young, and older Egyptians are loathe to trust the young.”

She pulled her jacket’s hem clear of the slatted chair. “One thing I learned in England,” she smiled stiffly, “is that the State can live with activism, dissent, even terrorism. Any real threat of revolution, that’s the only way to scare your masters shitless. The state will bring itself down before it’ll allow the people that privilege.”

Kasir smiled. “More change at any cost. You still hold these values?”

Bel jiggled her teaspoon handle against her saucer. “Well, look what’s happened to *me*?”

Her throat was dry, her eyes hot. She gave herself a few moments.

“It’s not about values, though. Anyone can adopt or manipulate other people’s. MI5 proved that with me, and all the other losers who hoped the English public wouldn’t always be passive and lazy and just fall in line with the state. You’ve got to narrow your focus. Even if there’s one less Birch or Stiles, or one less Evelyn. And one less *me*.”

He finished his tea, reflecting, then leaned slightly closer. “Your question about the barricades – to quote Mr Oscar Wilde, I’d suggest ‘when liberty comes with hands dabbled in blood it is hard to shake hands with her.’ Mubarak is a corrupt, arrogant fool. But such self-interest is dangerous. The lives it may cost will guarantee nothing. There are never any certainties.”

They made their move. Outside, Basel's streets with its smart but discreet shops were pristine. No modern city, by rights, should feel so safe. Kasir had described it as a nexus point, offering easy access – or escape – to several European countries. But with a child and money in the bank, she could imagine it as home.

He'd hired an Audi. It was parked in front of the hotel. From the pavement corner, she watched his routine of the past mornings: one scanning device to detect bugs, another for explosives. In a bridal shop opposite, some bridesmaids stood laughing and titivating in tangerine dresses. The smell of hot bread wafted over from the bakery next door. She stood growing hungrier for a full ten minutes.

They drove out past the square and over the Rhine towards the suburbs. The engine was smooth and quiet, the stream of air immediately warm and comfortable, all you'd wish for in a bright new car. She didn't even want to turn on the radio. She just lowered the electric window halfway down. Her head and neck felt tender.

Regularly appointed traffic lights on Swiss Precision Time meant even busy roads stayed logjam free. The city's fairy-tale quality and surgical cleanliness made her feel like a test-tube baby being brought into the world. The refreshing air, quaint suburbs like confectionary, and gentle hills like pillows all breathed comfort and security. There was no need to speak.

The Höffler & Schaldenbrand clinic was four kilometres away. The road they took out of Basel curved slightly uphill, the residences situated well back from it. Some were ranch-style, others had a Mediterranean quality or a free design. They indicated serious money.

They passed a metallic blue van parked at the roadside by some wide-girthed shrubbery. Suddenly, Bel heard noise like a car backfiring. Or a gunshot? Kasir coughed twice, forcefully, momentarily losing control of the steering, the Audi swerving onto a verge. Again out of nowhere, there was a sharp cracking sound, this time to Bel's right.

“What the hell...?!” she yelled.



Kasir's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The Audi slowed, just as a lighter contact noise like suction force reverberated from the car's rear. Kasir said something abrupt in his own language.

Bel clutched at her seatbelt. "Are we pulling over or what? What about that van?"

Kasir was absorbed in the rear-view mirror. "There's no-one following. Still, it's best, perhaps. When we can."

Kasir drove at speed for another minute, passing a wildlife park with bison and zebra on their left, before pulling into a siding under some trees. He left the engine running, remotely angling Bel's cracked side mirror inward. The glass had been blown out and the frame was badly warped.

"It could be stones, or even a child with an airgun or catapult," he said.

"Look, the one near me sounded like a gunshot..."

He heaved a sigh, then swallowed. "Okay – I want you to drive the rest of the way."

He reached over, disengaging the glove compartment and pulling out a pistol.

"A woman's gun?" she said doubtfully.

"Yes. I was keeping it for you."

Climbing out, he crossed to the passenger's side, eyeing the direction they'd come. He paused to run his fingers around the mirror as Bel hoisted herself into the driver's seat. Finding the lever behind her right ankle, she edged the seat forward. Kasir climbed in and wound the window fully down, resting the pistol's barrel on the frame as she accelerated out into the middle of the road. A Suchard truck bearing down from the other direction blared its horn, as she swerved the Audi fully into the correct lane. No way was she slowing down!

"So – what hit us? I saw you checking."

"There's no sign of bullet entry. Or the van. I still can't say."

"What about...oh, forget it! Just keep your eyes skinned."

The road was densely lined with poplars on both sides, the sunlight just splinters and threads on the concrete. There was a boating lake on their right. It sounded busy. A voice over a megaphone reached the road.

“What’s the shouting –?”

She heard the insistent helicopter blades before she could finish. Closer, chewing up her nerves, hovering above to her right.

Kasir had stretched out, his feet against the gearbox, twisting his body, his face upturned through the open window.

“It sounds directly overhead,” she shouted, telling herself not to panic.

Kasir slid back into his seat. “I can’t see for the trees. But there is a silver helicopter flying over the other side of the lake. No markings. Small, for two passengers.”

“So what does *that* tell us?!”

Kasir shook his head, but the sound of the blades had grown more distant. “Look, we can stop before the road gets more exposed.”

She didn’t look at him, the pedal staying fully down. “We can’t be far away now. I’m not hiding up any trees or running anywhere on foot!”

The trees ended at an undulating embankment, which concealed the lake for a few seconds. Kasir leaned out to check behind them as soon as the lake’s edge reappeared. “I see it. It’s heading over to...wait –”

Bel checked her rear-view mirror, catching sight of a black helicopter hovering beside a silver-gray one near the lake’s centre. Like the prelude to a tango, she thought. “Wait for what?”

“I think this may be a rescue exercise,” he shouted back. “There is a winch down, I think for a man in a frog suit. Yes I see him. Maybe someone has drowned and they are looking for a body?”

“Christ –!” She eased up on the pedal.

Kasir relaxed in his seat, holding the gun on his knee. He closed his eyes and his voice cracked into a dry laugh.

Personally, she felt laughter was too much of a stretch. Her chest and ribs ached from the adrenalin rush. “We’re getting hooked on this cloak and dagger. Who knows, maybe we’ll miss it!”

Kasir released the compartment and replaced the gun. “Acting like frightened rabbits, yes! I’ve a permit in your name for this.”

She gave him a relieved smile. The gun didn’t please her, though.

Bel slowed to allow a Porsche overtaking from the other direction more time to pull in. “So who’d *be* most likely to follow us now? Or are all bets even?”

Kasir scratched his earlobe. “I’m least certain about the ones at the farmhouse. The men may have been Mafia.”

“Hell, don’t say that...!”

His elbow nudged hers. “No. Not the most plausible explanation.”

There was a stream of cars emerging from a valley on the A-road to their right. A vast business park traversed the immediate horizon, and the sunlight gave the office windows a reddish glow. To get to the clinic, they’d join the traffic heading to the German border.

The clinic came into view five minutes later, a glistening black sentinel surrounded by manicured grass. There was a still pond at the front, a model sailboat lightly wavering at the centre. Some imported redwoods lined the parking bay. She pulled in close to the roofed entrance.

“Did you bring your statement?”

She gave him a mock-horrified stare, before pulling the clinic’s Statement of Purpose, Policy and Confirmation from a money belt, waving it in his face, making him wince.

She whirled the car-key around her pinkie finger. “Too much gravitas will kill you. Coming in?”

Kasir crossed his arms. “No. I’ll wait here. I’ll check the car for damage. Not much, I think. I’m sure it was only stones in the road. And it will save, well...”

She tossed him the key. “Very proper.”

She patted his arm and climbed out. Maybe too quick: a rush of blood and flash of neuralgia. She’d imagined this a threshold moment, a bold step forward on her own, not a shove into the unknown courtesy of bloody men! Now the images assailed her like antagonised insects in her brain. A fox outside a henhouse. Holding a tiny hand and guiding tiny feet through their first steps. A peripatetic life driving to new towns, crossing borders. A hospital bed. A girl’s face, young yet old, unable to meet her mother’s gaze. Had she ever done *anything* this terrifying?

She counted down from ten. The foyer was minty-blue and smelled of antiseptic. The wall panels bore the clinic’s insignia, a ribboned fountainhead. A young couple sitting on a U-shaped arrangement of sofas gazed at each other like innocent fauns. The three blonde receptionists had matching tops. Bel looked at five sets of folders for different treatments in sheathed pockets along the desk front.

“Guten Morgen, Frau. Wie kann ich Ihnen helfen?”

Bel’s receptionist was the homeliest, the most maternal looking. She was a Noelle. “Yes. I’m Freja Gilder. I have an appointment with a consultant at eleven.”

Noelle smiled. “Yes, I remember your booking. I think I spoke to you before.”

“Yes, I think you did.”

Noelle typed fluidly, confirming some detail softly into her mic. “Now, Miss Gilder. Have you thought a little more about the treatments? Consulted with your own doctor? We always ask new clients this.”

“Hmm.” Bel laughed. “Yes I’ve been taking advice from a friendly doctor.”

Her eyes scanned the folders. Each treatment was listed in different languages. The one for In-Vitro Fertilisation had the smiling photo of a blond, blue-eyed little boy, backlit by pale yellow sunshine. The eyes were bold and wide, ready for the world. The one for Donor Insemination had the photo of an Arab boy under an orange-red sky. His

eyes were tranquil, his smile autumnal. Bel lifted the folders out and placed them on the desk.

“Yes?” Noelle smiled inquisitively.

Bel touched the jacket’s fabric over her heart with two fingers. “By donor, I think. Yes, a donor would suit me best.”

...

He felt like a fool. Their observers knew him only too well, that he’d never set out on a journey in the field without taking all precautions. They’d sent one single, final warning, as professionals to another in their field. No phone call, no paperwork, nothing official. Swiss counterespionage had their own particular way of telling you not to get yourself killed on their home soil.

Kasir set his PDA’s Media Player for audio playback only. The conviction in Bel’s words would seem greater, uncomfortably so, without video; but he didn’t want the visual cues from his hotel room, with its pleasant days promising a life that had grown impossible just minutes ago. He stared over at the snow striped mountains far to his right. Was there no crevice in this country or on this continent where Bel could be free of her past?

“Wind and rain, the streets of Amsterdam. Is that your first memory?”

“Along with the fact I was only wearing t-shirt and jeans...”

“Why were you looking for him, dressed like that?”

“It is important...?”

“Yes, Bel. Please, help me fill in the gaps.”

“[Pause] When I met the contact from London in the Vondelpark that morning, he gave me a gun, and told me not to trust Rian. There were men looking for him – spivs, profiteers – the criminals he did business with. They’d put the whole operation in jeopardy, I was told, but I was never told why. I can’t remember the details of the operation at all. I don’t think I was ever told that...”

“But you *were* told you might have to use the gun?”

“Yes. [Pause] I was told they’d arranged a meeting that night in the old quarter of the city. A street I thought I recognised the name of. Can’t remember it now.”

“That’s fine. Small details like that. You can’t remember everything from so many years before. But that night. What were your orders?”

“[Pause] Well, I was left to improvise. I tried to get him to miss his meeting. I got him to buy drugs. Heroin for us to smoke. I wasn’t proud of it, but it was all I could think of to kill the time. But the stuff he bought was this mottled grey colour. I didn’t think it was safe. And he wanted to leave me to take it alone. That’s when we fought.”

“When he assaulted you?”

“[Pause] Yes. On the stairs. I should have reported it myself. I knew how important it was that I stopped his meeting, but I put it off. I didn’t even get fully dressed. *She* phoned me. She got me to wait in the apartment.”

“That’s Evelyn, Bel?”

“Yes, Evelyn. She could hear how worried I was and...she stopped me leaving. She just stopped me!”

“Fine. Relax. But you did leave?”

“Much later. I got scared for him again. I remember I couldn’t find my boots. I just put on a pair of slip-ons, grabbed the pistol from under the sink in the apartment and stuffed it down the back of my jeans. The t-shirt was quite long and I pulled it down to hide the bulge. Then I just ran out into the streets after him.”

“And how did you find him?”

“Well, I was wolf-whistled by some drunks, and it was teeming down, but I managed to fight my way through to this little pub that specialised in fondue and fill-up bags under the counter. That was where Rian always scored before, but there was no sign of him.

“[Pause] But...there was this guy in the street waiting for me outside. I looked more closely at him, and I realised it was my contact from that morning. He called me by a name I didn’t recognise, not right away. Then we crossed into a deserted street taken up by warehouses, took a block left, and ended up in a street bounded by canals. There were voices coming from an alleyway nearby. He had a gun and he crept into the alley

before me. There was a light about halfway along coming from a storage unit. That's where the voices were coming from too."

"And you followed this contact of your own freewill?"

"[Pause] I just had to. I was worried."

"Of course. So what did you do?"

"Well, he gestured me to stay quiet and I followed along the near wall. I pulled the gun out...I tried to remember the firearms course Georgy had put me on before I left England. Six weeks training. It was fresh in my mind."

"Okay, Bel. You are there. In the alleyway. Tell me exactly what happens."

"[Pause] I'm peering into the unit. My contact has gone ahead of me. There are stairs to a higher level and he is talking to another man. They see me and the other man beckons me in. He is speaking Dutch. My contact tells me to put the gun away and we walk upstairs to a storeroom that has an area fenced off at the far end. [Pause] My contact is talking about me to the other man, who suddenly looks serious. I sense he thinks I am MI6, but I can't be sure. Two other men come out of a door beyond the fenced off area and unlock a door in the fence. The Dutchman speaks to them and they look at me as well. I begin to get more worried..."

"What about the injury? Can you remember being attacked? Something of that nature?"

"No. I know I am about to collapse, but this happens after I follow my contact and the men into the room. My contact has his gun out again and ushers me into the fenced off area and then through a door with the others. It's cold. A freezer room. I feel light-headed..."

"Continue, Bel. You are doing well."

"[Pause] I hear loud voices, the lights go out, I'm being pushed to the floor. There's a gunshot. I feel for my gun again and pull it out. After a time, the lights come on in an adjacent room. I can see my contact running through the connecting rooms. I think he is chasing the other men. I follow through this plastic curtain into a freezer room with hanging carcasses of beef and lamb. The overhead lighting is flickering. I keep moving to the next freezer room. The lights go out again. I can hear the freezers

humming and see a small red dash of light in the darkness. I feel along the wall for a switch, and the overhead strip lighting ripples into life, crackling and hissing..."

"That's very good, Bel. Very vivid. What happens next?"

"[Pause] In front of me there's an inverted 'U' of five deep freezers. I test the first two on my right. They are either jammed or locked. The two facing them are the same, only the one against the back wall is working. I study the lid for a few seconds. It is a sliding panel lid. I slide the freezer open... [Pause] There is ice inside."

"Continue, Bel. What do you see?"

"[Pause] Rian. His head is the only part not covered. His hair...his hair is beaded white. He's got the same expression, somehow sad and angry at the same time. I stare and stare. I feel terrible, but I can't pull away. I touch him. I'm sick down the front of the freezer...But, I know I have to get him out of there...And then nothing until..."

"Were you taken back out to the streets and the canal?"

"Yes, but first I...[Pause] No, I try and get him out of the freezer...Pulling and tugging...But I can't remember what happens...I can't remember what happens until the canal...I can feel him freezing cold and lifeless across me...His head in my lap...There is blood on his arm...I notice powder around his lips, and inside his mouth...My right ankle is a dead weight...dead weight...and...and...sirens...Rian's face, ghost-white...and sirens...ambulance...I pull free...I get up to work out the cramp and wander off...I don't know where I am when they draw up canal side..."

"Bel – it's very important you remember. You were there in place of Evelyn, weren't you? She knew Rian would be killed. She made sure you'd be there, that you couldn't save him. She used you Bel. She used you to set up Rian."

"[Pause] Yes. Perhaps."

"[Long Pause] But now, Bel. It is time for you to get ready, to prepare yourself. Remember your training. I will be at your side. I am your contact now."

"[Pause] Yes – you are."

Kasir switched the device off. Yesterday, desperate to escape his world, he'd tried to ignore the significance: if Bel could be tied this closely to an old MI6 operation, it would



be easy to exaggerate her part in a recent one. Feeling the scrap in his hand, he wished he'd had the foresight to give Evelyn Morgan an overdose on the plane. She'd remember 1998 in Amsterdam, working with Bel in the field. She'd have to. Bel would become MI6's I.O.U. and SISMI would call it in as a way of settling the score for their lost agents. Realpolitik at its most hateful; but this was how enemies continued working together.

He stared into his right palm: the shards of blank cartridge he'd scraped free from the wing mirror, the tracking device fired onto the chassis by a crack marksman. That made two crack marksmen. The round black disc was stamped with a white Helvetica Man in danger of falling. They had hours starting right now: Mannheim by car, then Frankfurt on the high-speed line, then a flight to The Hague.

From the road, reflected sunlight dazzled his eyes. In the rear-view mirror, crates of used laundry were wheeled out to the clinic's entrance by an orderly. He remembered years before, arriving at the hospital just in time for his daughter's birth. Pocketing the pistol, he climbed out of the car. The seconds passed in heartbeats, growing louder as he walked into the shadow of the main entrance, the tracking device slipping from his fingers down amongst the linen. The first set of doors slid open, and he could feel his wife's kiss, trusting him with their gift to the world.

In the reception area, Bel was already walking towards him. She was smiling.

"Baby can wait awhile. We need to be prepared," she said gently.

"Yes. It is best."

As they headed back to the car, Kasir wondered when their escape roads might become ones like healthy veins leading to a child's heart, and whether that thought might come to haunt him forever.

University Of Strathclyde  
Graduate School of Humanities

Critical Commentary

## 1: Introduction

### 1.1: Methodology

This exegesis follows the Context Model and consists of a Literature Review. The methodology is based on the definition given by Milech and Schilo (2004):

In this format the student submits a written document that rehearses the historical, social and/or disciplinary context(s) within which the student developed the creative or production component of her or his thesis. (“Exit Jesus”)

Additionally, the survey will illuminate some key creative decisions taken during the writing of *Call Her Slim*, drawing comparisons or contrasts with the other works surveyed.

### 1.2: Research question

“What defines the post-9/11 novel and how does *Call Her Slim* conform to or reconfigure such characteristics?”

Although much critical work has been done on post-9/11 literary fiction, and most specifically on the American ‘9/11 novel’, studies have neither focused on nor incorporated post-9/11 thriller novels. In so doing, this commentary extends the focus of the debate to the literary field of utopianism, as I seek to establish how examples of different types of fiction classifiable as ‘post-9/11 novels’ may be interpreted in terms of dystopian discourse. A discussion in this context may inform why and how post-9/11 thrillers (and certain thematically compatible works of literary fiction) employ, vary or

extend pre-existing thriller conventions, such as characteristic themes, types of character and story patterns.

## 2: Literature Review: The post-9/11 novel as dystopian discourse.

### 2.1: Criteria for survey

As yet, there are no formal criteria for defining post-9/11 fiction. The aim of the survey, therefore, is to identify predominant characteristics in novels that I will argue belong within this category. Nonetheless, the most basic requirements for a novel to be described as post-9/11 fiction would inevitably include it having been written and set after the relevant date, and the subject matter bearing some relation to either the event itself or the political and cultural consequences of the event. The novels in this survey fall into the latter category.

A key purpose of this review is to locate a reading of the post-9/11 thriller within a broader context of post-9/11 fiction. I would argue that the post-9/11 thriller serves as an effective vehicle in conveying both the era's mood and its politics. In this important respect, post-9/11 thrillers and some contemporary works of literary fiction are comparable. I will argue that the relevant works merit such comparison in their exploration of dystopian discourse.

There have been many articles on the impact of 9/11 in literary studies, their focus being literary fiction rather than conventional thrillers. By incorporating thriller fiction into a discussion of the post-9/11 novel, I wish to add a refreshed perspective to a critical debate that has tended to be negative in recent years.

Approaches such as Richard Gray's essay "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis" ([2008] 2009) tend to contextualise the American '9/11 novel' as trauma narrative, while suggesting such an approach is too insular to address the subject of international terrorism satisfactorily. Gray offers the context of critical multiculturalism for attacking novels by Don DeLillo (*Falling Man* 2007) and John Updike (*Terrorist* 2006) on the grounds of the authors' limited engagement with the question of otherness in American society, and the parochialism

such an artistic choice implies.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, the post-9/11 novel's depiction of existential and emotional struggles in the wake of the attacks is judged to have led to what Pankaj Mishra writing in *The Guardian* describes as a "narrowed focus" amongst Western novelists. Discussing *Saturday* by British author Ian McEwan, Mishra complains:

McEwan, one of the novelists who after 9/11 had resolved to learn about the 'great changes' in the world, prefers in *Saturday* to describe a day in the life of a London based neurosurgeon, who seems incapable of grappling with these great changes his creator speaks of. (*Guardian*, 19.5.07)

With this perspective in mind, I would suggest that the term 'post-9/11 novel' breeds different expectations in different commentators. As another example, again with reference to *Saturday*, Pitt (2009) claims the geographical distance from the event should disqualify McEwan's novel from being considered a 9/11 novel at all. Pitt's criticism highlights a distinction that is central to this survey, that between the American '9/11 novel' concerned with events in New York on the day and their specific consequences for America and Americans, and the 'post-9/11' novels under discussion here. I would define fictional narratives taking place in the shadow of 9/11 and consequent events as post-9/11 novels.

The reading list encompasses the espionage thriller genre and post-9/11 literary fiction with a thriller element: novels in this latter category include *Saturday* (2005), John Le Carré's *Absolute Friends* (2003), and John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006). Because of their proximity to the event of 9/11, and given the political instability and cultural antagonisms in its wake, I will conclude the commentary by suggesting that these works contribute to a broader cultural critique in reflecting the mood of the times, as Cold War

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<sup>1</sup> Gray criticises DeLillo's and Updike's novels in the following terms: "many of the texts that try to bear witness to contemporary events vacillate...between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail. The link between the two is tenuous, reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education" (133).

thrillers did in the 1950s and 1960s and spy thrillers prior to that.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, it seems appropriate to accommodate post-9/11 espionage thrillers alongside literary fiction in considering ‘post-9/11 novels’.

I have imposed one final criterion on the following survey. As a British citizen writing a thriller which addresses the topic of terrorism, I chose to hypothesise upon the impact of 9/11 on the democratic freedoms in my own country in creating the background to the protagonist’s story. More specifically, I wished to posit an untested scenario for the post-9/11 novel, that of Western intelligence services grooming a native, non-Muslim British subject to carry out a suicide bombing as part of a false flag operation on European soil. Therefore, the primary political context for Bel’s story in *Call Her Slim* is not terrorism per se, but the unchecked abuses of Western Intelligence services in the post-9/11 era taken to a hypothetical extreme. In editing a reading list, I chose to mainly focus upon works depicting the transgression of law and erosion of civil liberties in democratic countries by those charged with protecting the security of their citizens.

## 2.2: Theoretical background

I will argue that the following examples of post-9/11 thrillers and post-9/11 literary fiction invite a single mode of analysis in terms of dystopian discourse. This analysis will draw from theory in the literary field of utopianism.

First, it is important to draw a distinction between dystopian discourse and dystopian fiction. The phrase “dystopian discourse” refers to a discussion about themes and ideas common to dystopian narratives. The phrase incorporates the general meaning of the term “discourse” to denote the use of spoken or written language in a social context. While there are many distinctions to be drawn between canonical dystopian

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<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, see Michael Denning (1987) for a discussion of how ideology functions covertly in the British “Popular Front” thrillers of Eric Ambler and later works.

fiction and post-9/11 novels, some core components of dystopian discourse are relevant to both types of fiction. In considering the salient characteristics of Western dystopian fiction, Gottlieb isolates the following characteristics which will be referred to throughout this survey: “The Push and Pull between Utopian and Dystopian Perspectives”; “The Deliberate Miscarriage of Justice”; “A Barbaric State Religion”; “The Destruction of the Individual’s Private World”; “The Protagonist’s Pursuit of History: The Vital Importance of a Record of the Past”; “Dystopia as a No-Man’s Land between Satire and Tragedy”; “The Protagonist’s Window on the Past” (2001, 8-17). Although Gottlieb published her study on the eve of 9/11, I will argue that each of these characteristics can be identified to varying degrees in the post-9/11 novels I have chosen to survey.

More generally, the political definition of a “dystopic society” that Gottlieb provides may be extended to fictional portrayals of many “dysfunctional” societies, democratic or totalitarian:

In searching for a definition of a dystopic society, dystopian fiction looks at totalitarian dictatorship as its prototype, a society that puts its whole population continuously on trial, a society that finds its essence in concentration camps, that is, in disenfranchising and enslaving entire classes of its own citizens, a society that, by glorifying and justifying violence by law, preys upon itself. [...] dystopian society is what we would today call dysfunctional; it reveals the lack of the very qualities that traditionally justify or set the *raison d’être* for a community. (40)

With this focus on the contemporary in mind, the use of the phrase “dystopian discourse” in this survey does not encompass the concept of futurity, which is not essential to the definition of a dystopia.<sup>3</sup> Peter Firchow, for example, suggests in *Modern*

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<sup>3</sup> The OED defines “dystopia” thus: “an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one. The opposite of Utopia.” An alternative dictionary definition is: “An imaginary place where people lead dehumanised and often fearful lives.” (Merriam-Webster's On-line)



*Utopia Fictions: from H.G. Wells to Iris Murdoch*, that “most of the memorable utopian fictions of our time are largely pessimistic – not of course about the future, but really about the present” (5). Some famous canonical dystopian novels bear this out. Huxley wrote *Brave New World* (1932) in the midst of a global economic crisis, and with the knowledge of renewed political instability in Europe; Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as a response to totalitarianism, in both the advent of Nazism and the brutality of Stalin’s betrayal of the political Left.

Given that Huxley’s and Orwell’s fictional worlds depict imaginary societies, it is necessary to qualify the present usage of the adjective “dystopian” further in the case of the post-9/11 novel. A dystopia, whether belonging to the present or the future, is conventionally an imagined world (albeit with some connection to the real <sup>4</sup>), whereas the post-9/11 novel is set in a contemporary world the reader can recognise. I would argue, however, that the core function of dystopian discourse is evident in both canonical dystopian fiction and the post-9/11 novel, and is unaffected by any distinction between imaginary and real societies. This core function is to query the potential for totalitarian state control in societies that view their citizenry with suspicion, where the hegemony’s utopia may create a relative dystopia for the citizenry.

With these points in mind, in interpreting how the concept of “dystopia” is qualified in the post-9/11 novel, I will consider Tom Moylan’s distinction between the “utopian dystopia” and the “anti-utopian dystopia”. In the former, the narrative concludes on a note of hope; in the latter, “the best that can happen is a recognition of the integrity of the individual even when the hegemonic power coercively and ideologically closes in” (Moylan 2000, xiii). It will be argued that these are the two best case outcomes in the post-9/11 novels surveyed here.

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<sup>4</sup> An example is Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972), which is set in a sleepy Connecticut suburb, unique only in that women are programmed to obey their husband’s every whim.

Dystopian discourse and the post-9/11 context are treated as interdependent in the following survey. In exploring how dystopian discourse pervades many post-9/11 novels, I will focus primarily on its consequences for the characterisation and story patterns of these novels.

### 2.3: Critical survey of post-9/11 novels

#### 2.3.1: Dystopian environments, existential crises

Two critical viewpoints inform my own interpretation of Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. According to Versluys, the questions that *Saturday* poses are "what, in the aftermath of September 11, one owns, how tight one's grip on life is, and how quickly one can lose it" (2009, 188). Carpenter reads the home invasion scenario central to *Saturday* as an analogy of the 9/11 attacks, the danger faced by Perowne and family mirroring "what the United States experienced on September 11, 2001, on a microcosmic level" (quoted in Keniston 2008, 150).

*Saturday* is set up as a dystopian narrative, with the novel's setting offering itself as cultural critique. The events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq loom large in the background and intrude into the protagonist's life. There is dissent on the streets of London in the form of the anti-Iraq war rally, and the uneasy sense of shifting social norms in a changed society. After first witnessing what he assumes to be a terrorist plane attack, then his car smash with the menacing Baxter (who is in the early stages of Huntingdon's Disease), Henry Perowne is overwhelmed on the squash court by the complex associations of the word "crash" (105). If we accept Carpenter's point about the events of *Saturday* representing a microcosm of those on 9/11, then Perowne's delayed response to the first of his two confrontations with Baxter in the novel establishes a parallel with the confusion over whether the collision of the first plane was accidental or intended.

As a neurosurgeon, Perowne is trained and conditioned to engage with reality rather than the world of the imagination. However, making sense of the post-9/11 world defeats him. He follows every relevant news article and television programme, which is explained in McEwan's narrative as "a condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world, and be joined to the generality, to a community of anxiety" (176). While his wide reading on the subject of 9/11 reflects his instinct about "the vital importance of a record of the past" in Gottlieb's terms, he cannot trust what he reads. Learning that the pilots of the plane he has witnessed apparently crashing that morning are Russians with no connection to international terrorist plots, he reflects:

He's lost the habits of skepticism, he's becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn't thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn't thinking independently. (181)

The implication is that the media coverage obfuscates the event of 9/11 and frustrates meaningful debate about its ramifications. In this sense, the prevailing media coverage in Britain of 9/11 and its fall out is as oppressive to Perowne as the physical environment of London on the day of the anti-war demonstrations. Such environmental factors contribute directly to the protagonist's existential malaise.

A further measure of the significance of the media reporting of 9/11 and its aftermath in *Saturday* is that the characterisations of Perowne and his children are largely defined by their attitudes towards the atrocity. Perowne's daughter and son, Daisy and Theo, perceive the implications of 9/11 differently to each other and to their father. Between them, the three characters perceive the dystopian implications of the West's various responses to 9/11 to differing degrees, reflecting "the push and pull between dystopian and utopian perspectives" that Gottlieb identifies as one characteristic of dystopian narratives: in effect, "that each dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream" (8), and the extent to which this remains evident to its citizens may vary according to individual beliefs and dispositions. Perowne

considers how Theo responded to 9/11, accepting “that events beyond friends, home and the music scene had bearing on his existence” (31). However, Theo as a laid-back musician is not vexed by the event the way his father is, merely taking the resulting national security measures and political responses in his stride:

As long as there’s nothing new, his mind is free. International terror, security cordons, preparations for war – these represent the steady state, the weather. Emerging into adult consciousness, this is the world he finds. (32)

Despite Theo’s youth and liberalism, he does not question the role of the state in curtailing civil liberties. Diversity, variation and freedom still apparently exist in his world, and so he is prepared to accept what might conceivably be a larger hegemonic pattern of an emergent totalitarianism in British society.<sup>5</sup>

Daisy, meanwhile, in the novel’s centrepiece debate (186-193), challenges Perowne on the legality and morality of the war in Iraq, to which he responds:

“No rational person is for war. But in five years we might not regret it. I’d love to see the end of Saddam. You’re right, it could be a disaster. But it could be the end of a disaster and the beginning of something better. It’s all about outcomes, and no-one knows what they’ll be. That’s why I can’t imagine marching in the streets.” (187)

Although Perowne is thinking things through to his own conclusion, he uses the difficulty of assigning meaning to the political events as an excuse for tolerating what Daisy argues is an illegal war, as long as the ends might justify the means. Daisy believes the West is culpable in the Middle-East’s political problems, that Saddam is “a creation of the Americans” (187) and such precedents make it all the more important for the West to resist rash actions in the region. Daisy’s argument foreshadows Perowne’s

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<sup>5</sup> See Tom Whitehead’s 2009 interview for *The Telegraph* with former spy chief-cum-novelist Dame Stella Rimington, regarding the incipient dangers to Britain’s democracy posed by aspects of the Labour government’s Anti-Terrorist legislation.

eventual consideration of the consequences of his own actions in sparking a confrontation with Baxter and his acquaintances:

He's responsible, after all; twenty hours ago he drove across a road officially closed to traffic, and set in train a sequence of events. (278)

McEwan has chosen to condense the thriller narrative of Baxter's violent home invasion into one and a half chapters of what is otherwise a work of literary fiction. Given that what happened prior and subsequent to the attacks on 9/11 sheds greater light on their political context, both the structure and story pattern of *Saturday* reinforce Carpenter's contention that the narrative may be read as a microcosm of the 9/11 attacks. The violence itself is a relatively small part of a bigger story.

The bigger story is addressed directly in the novel's central debate. Daisy's fear for the future and its plausible dangers is a clear example of dystopian discourse, and her position strikes the novel's salutary note, which is revisited in the final pages: in Perowne's consideration of Baxter's and his own precious hold on life, the point at which some identification with 'the Other' is finally achieved. Even after Baxter is overpowered and hospitalised, Perowne struggles to understand his family's ordeal. Nonetheless, his professional responsibility for Baxter's condition and survival aside, his feelings of guilt at having caused the car crash that set Baxter's retribution into effect, reflect a fresh understanding of the interdependence of the perpetrator and victim: Baxter and Perowne, and by Carpenter's analogy of the home invasion and the 9/11 attacks, radical Islam and the West. By attributing this understanding to Perowne, McEwan establishes the integrity of his protagonist.

Like the other post-9/11 novels in this survey, *Saturday* is not a conventional dystopian text, and establishing its relationship to my theme of dystopian discourse requires some care. Tom Moylan, in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), argues that the field of literary studies categorised as "utopianism" includes three subcategories:

“utopia”, “dystopia” and “anti-utopia”. These three terms, according to Moylan, can be compounded to highlight distinctions between novels of interest in this field. So, for example, some dystopian narratives offer the reader a utopian horizon at their conclusion, and Moylan labels these “utopian dystopias”. Other dystopias offer no solution or alternative to the dystopian discourse and may be termed “anti-utopian dystopias” (xiii). I would argue that the same compounds may be used to construct adjectives that describe a novel’s dominant discourse. Given the relatively positive ending to McEwan’s narrative, I would conclude that *Saturday* provides an example of utopian dystopian discourse.

Perowne is typical of protagonists in post-9/11 novels who find themselves, for different reasons, struggling to interpret the meaning of actions and events and to understand how these affect them personally. They suffer existential crises to varying degrees, their lives seeming incidental, purposeless, or unpredictable and uncertain. They feel isolated and the legitimacy of all they believe to be true is up for question. Such a crisis may be stimulated by a shocking event or evolve over a period of time. In the case of Perowne, his crisis is triggered by his confrontation with Baxter despite having actually evolved over time due to his sense of uncertainty about what to believe in the post-9/11 world. Bel Andreus in *Call Her Slim*, brainwashed and robbed of her identity, experiences the malaise in extreme form, and it is one aggravated by environmental constraints and the moral codes and dispositions of other people. It is an existential malaise that Walsh identifies as common to protagonists in classical dystopian narratives confronted by “the limits of the physical universe, the moral structure of reality, and human nature” (1962, 164).

In Adam Fawer’s thriller *Improbable* (2005), the very process of constructing meaning is interrogated in the narrative of a protagonist who can predict the future, a facility causing him nothing but trouble. At first, epileptic statistician-cum-gambler David Caine is assailed by visions so powerful he must act on them without understanding, such as in response to his premonition of a truck destroying a diner in

which he and his acquaintances are eating (125). These shocking events heighten his perception of public dangers and lead him to believe his fate is entirely dictated by bizarre coincidences. However, when he comes to terms with his power as a human incarnation of Laplace's Demon, capable of accessing the "everywhen", he is able to take actions and influence events in order to improve his predicament. For example, Caine's powers of premonition allow him to manipulate a train driver's sudden need to bypass stops on the line to Philadelphia to be at his child's birth, assisting Caine's own escape from the pursuing FBI. Nonetheless, these powers only allow him "to choose the path with the highest probability of success" (432). As such, success is never certain. As he tells his rescuer Nava Vaner, he could only predict her willingness to save his life based on his judgement of her integrity.

To apply Moylan's formulations again, the limitations upon Caine's judgement are imposed by the "anti-utopian dystopian" scenario that Fawer creates. In the narrative, it is suggested that having the power of omniscience prevents someone exercising their judgement regarding the relative value of knowledge, and such power is in that sense, worthless:

Caine shook his head. "I don't know *the* future, Nava. I know them all – which, because they are infinite, is tantamount to knowing nothing." (432)

Caine's problem is more substantial than a difficulty predicting the future. If the value of information and knowledge is compromised or negated, this potentially restricts independent thought and freedom, a perfect dystopian scenario. We may lose touch with history, being unable to preserve reliable records of the past: we may end up as traumatised as Winston Smith, forced to learn that two plus two equals five.

Beyond the characters' attempts to make sense of their situation, Fawer's novel is concerned with the quest for epistemological insight. However, in the case of Tversky

the depraved neuro-scientist, this quest involves destroying his subject's life in the name of science. In Tversky's story thread, the laboratory constitutes one of the novel's two dystopian environments, New York's dangerous streets being the other.

Tversky has to verify the meaning of his own research by following the dying instructions of his graduate assistant Julia, who he has first seduced then killed in the course of conducting his brainwave experiments. Tversky's work again reflects utopian and dystopian perspectives as relative; his belief in the incredible potential of his research does not accord with the hellish experiences of his subject:

Tversky watched Julia's EEG readout, his hands trembling. He had already been so close in his own research that it had taken him only a few hours to synthesize the necessary serum to stimulate simultaneous brain-wave maximization. He stared down at Julia's limp form, sprawled out on the table. (146)

His goal is to 'induce' omniscience in Julia, but he can neither verify nor experience this without following Julia's instruction to kill Caine, himself omniscient, an instruction the consequences of which will ultimately lead to Tversky's own demise. Effectively, Tversky has to destroy the only people who prove his hypothesis in order to prove it to himself. He fails to realise that by experiencing omniscience at the point of her death, Julia has been able to set her revenge against him in motion. Tversky will never experience the same and be able to save himself accordingly. Rather, his pursuit of knowledge becomes so convoluted that it is rendered meaningless.

Fawer's novel, in its concern with experimentation upon human guinea pigs, clearly reflects the dystopian theme of the dehumanisation of the individual. This theme is significant to Bel's characterisation in *Call Her Slim*, but my treatment differs from Fawer's. While Julia deteriorates rapidly under the experimentation, Bel's program is established over many years under the auspices of MI5 and has an explicit political dimension. Also, unlike Caine's and Julia's omniscience, Bel's 'powers' belonging to the Sorceress persona are no more than flashbacks from earlier programming, and at the



novel's conclusion she has survived her mistreatment, partly by escaping these delusions imposed upon her. In these respects, the 'guinea pig' aspect of Bel's story is to be read within my novel's larger utopian dystopian framework.

The tone of these two comparable plot elements also differs significantly in the two novels. Fawer undermines the sinister nature of Tversky's program by presenting Julia as Tversky's lovestruck assistant, her feelings seemingly blinding her to his intentions:

"Pill, fill, lil', nil," she said aloud, laughing at her senseless rhyme as she poured out two 50-milligram tablets. She found herself rhyming a lot lately. She wasn't quite sure why, but for whatever reason, she found it hysterically funny. Unfortunately, Petey [Tversky] didn't seem to share her amusement. (54)

This childlike, playful tone somewhat neutralises the menace of Fawer's guinea pig plotline. Even in the full throes of his brainwave experiments, Tversky still maintains a dialogue with his victim (61-66). By contrast, Bel's experience of the brainwashing program as observed by Kasir and Stiles is all the more harrowing due to her inability to communicate thoughts or feelings (59-61). Although elements of farce are evident later during the party and parade episodes when the program unravels, I sought to present Bel's intensive preliminary programming as an unequivocally nightmarish dystopian scenario.

Like McEwan, Fawer uses the physical environment to evoke a dystopian mood from the novel's outset: the novel's New York setting, with its grimy, polluted streets, and its subterranean gambling dens and clubs. The toxic atmosphere of the aptly named Chernobyl, the illegal gambling den that Caine frequents in a "cramped windowless basement fifteen feet below the East Village" (4), sets the scene. The peculiar olfactory symptom of Caine's idiopathic epilepsy might be described as distilled dystopia:

The smell was unlike anything he had experienced before – a perverse stew of rancid meat and rotten eggs floating in a vat of urine. He had read on the Internet that some people killed themselves because the smell got so bad. (3)

Fawer also uses the contemporary urban setting to depict the intelligence world's excesses spilling over into the regular world. This theme interlinks the stories of Caine and that of treble agent Nava Vaner. In broad terms, Caine's story follows a conventional story pattern for the thriller: the villain has discovered the hero's point of psychological weakness and is playing mind games with the hero. The hero has to overcome this psychological weakness in order to stop the villain from committing a crime.

The pattern of Vaner's story is the product of the post-9/11 context, however, since it emerges from the dystopian epidemic of security services and non-state authorised security personnel running amok. Vaner's plight at the outset, pursued in New York by North Korean agents after the photo sensitive disk with the information she has appropriated for them is corrupted, sets the scenario where danger lurks on every street. The novel's claustrophobic atmosphere is also enhanced with depictions of twenty-four hour surveillance, involving almost every currently available possible tool and technique: the society of *Improbable* is monitored by technology almost as efficiently as Ingsoc manage in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and paramilitary security forces are on hand to act on the information. Fawer has much of the fieldwork delegated to Martin Crowe's mercenaries, who Caine understands are "unwilling to back down in the face of impossible odds" (368), being even more ruthless than the agents of the state. In *Improbable* Fawer explores the horrifying potential of present realities at least partly explicable in terms of post-9/11 US national security measures.

At the outset of John Updike's *Terrorist*, the insomniac High School Guidance Counsellor Jack Levy struggles like Perowne and Caine to make sense of his world.

Levy believes the contemporary American way of life has been rendered meaningless both in itself and by the lack of a coherent ideological alternative:

As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tarbaby where we're all stuck. Even our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of, with the Commies out of the running; it just makes it easier for terrorists to move about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up Websites. (27)

While the narrator's perspective on Levy's outlook combines both satire and tragedy, the perception shared is that America with its privileges and products provides its enemies with the means of its potential destruction. After 9/11, unfettered consumerism and America's utopian dream of the individual's pursuit of happiness are at odds: citizens cannot live as they wish to under a system that champions the freedom of the individual while perpetuating a threat against the people it is supposed to protect. In short, American democracy as understood by Jack Levy fails to provide any standards for behaviour.

Again, the physical environment of the novel is perceived as oppressive, the analogy in Levy's mind from the above quotation that of a tarpit. Levy relates his feelings of purposelessness at the core of his existential malaise explicitly to the physical environment, recalling the despair Walsh attributes to the classical dystopian protagonist confronted with the "limits of the physical universe":

[His] sole remaining task is to die and thus contribute a little space, a little breathing room to this overburdened planet. (20)

With grim irony, the narrator reveals Levy's recognition that in dysfunctional post-9/11 America, the integrity of the individual is both more sorely tested and yet more essential to social harmony than ever before. Dying would be Levy's negligible contribution to making the living conditions of others more tolerable.

Levy understands the consequence of lost values and standards for the individual's "freedom": the autonomy of the individual over all aspects of his or her life becomes a form of isolationism. Lost in their own life circumstances, they fail to recognise how each person's life contributes to the greater society's hegemony. Levy's disillusionment with American individualism threatens to dehumanise him. His wife Beth recalls her husband's words concerning the attitude of failing students:

they refuse to grasp how bad off they are...It makes you seriously wonder if people deserve to live – if the massacre masterminds in Rwanda and Sudan and Iraq don't have the right idea. (136)

Levy perceives the tendency towards a self-deceiving isolationism in the free-spirited artist Teresa, who rejects him for renewed solitude after an affair, and more significantly in her alienated son Ahmad, who is drifting into Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and the life of uncertainty that decision implies.

For Ahmad, the purity of the martyr depends upon "his pride of isolation and willed identity", which is in turn "threatened by the masses of ordinary hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic identity" (177). Ahmad sees their "Godlessness" as no less damning than that manifest in the gang culture on the streets of his New Jersey slum, where "lost young men proclaim by means of property defacement, an identity" (13). His alienation from those who share his neighbourhood contributes to his own existential incoherence, his incongruity of self-image: his desire to be manipulated by his Imam "since it draws from him a sacred potential" (237); his sense of being disposable like "the ugly plain truck" (247) he is to drive through the Lincoln Tunnel loaded with ammonium nitrate and a detonator; his inability "to contemplate any such organic horror" as crushing a beetle (253). Ahmad is by no means inured to the violence of his environment, as his difficulty in coping with his casual bullying by fellow high school pupil Tylenol proves.

However, it is not Ahmad's salvation but Levy's that we recognise in the novel's ending. The reader may suspect Ahmad is right to perceive Levy's indifference to his own fate. However, having played his part in convincing Ahmad not to detonate the explosive, Levy is no longer the embittered sceptic; he has used his free time productively, and his interest in his student and recognition of his integrity has literally saved people's lives. As he says to Ahmad in the tunnel:

"I'm betting you won't set it off. You're too good a kid. Your mother used to tell me how you couldn't bear to step on a bug." (296)

The story of the bug and Ahmad's own reflections on bugs suggests that Levy and Ahmad's mother understand the teenager better than he does himself. However, while the avoidance of a catastrophe provides the novel's utopian horizon (thus creating an analogy with Moylan's utopian dystopia), it is not a cloudless one. Despite being unable to carry out an act of mass murder, Ahmad's final thought in the novel merely echoes his first: the American Devils have taken away his God. With his career choice of long distance truck driver, and his decision to suppress his feelings for his classmate-cum-prostitute Joryleen, Ahmad studiously avoids sharing in the culture of his immediate social environment. By extension, there seems little hope for Ahmad's spiritual reconciliation with the West.

Levy's rescuing of Ahmad in *Terrorist* has some parallels with Kasir's rescuing of Bel in *Call Her Slim*. The act of rescuing stimulates both characters out of personal crises. However, unlike Levy, Kasir's act of commission is preceded by one tragedy, one act of omission and a second omission resulting from the preceding one: the tragedy of his wife and daughter's death (109-110), his inability to ensure Alessandra Baranyi's safety (50-51) and his inability to recognise and express his love for Baranyi before it is too late (51). These events are either the cause or effect of his inertia, the characteristic that sees him continuing to serve the brutal, discredited Egyptian regime. However, the

second act of omission stimulates the vital act of commission, that of assisting Bel's escape and saving her life. As he explains:

“When I thought back over the moments I shared with Alessandra Baranyi, not knowing how much they meant until it was too late – well, I began to realise that I could not let our situation continue. Bel, we've *both* been enslaved by our homelands for many years.” (228-229)

This perceived escape from “enslavement” to their respective nations gives the story of the novel's two main characters a utopian-dystopian quality; like Ahmad's story in *Terrorist*, however, the utopian horizon is clouded by the lack of certainty regarding the characters' ultimate fate. Nonetheless, Kasir's act of commission represents the turning point in the narrative when his character becomes dynamic: rescuing Bel gives his existence renewed meaning. Therefore, while the ending reflects the uncertainty of Bel and Kasir's position, it also must reflect Kasir's ability to take decisive action to avoid being left feeling helpless as before. In the wake of saving Bel's life, Kasir has the confidence to act autonomously.

*Terrorist* is one of a number of novels in the survey that examines the classic dystopian theme from Orwell's Oceania onward of the state manufacturing the citizen's guilt through his or her association with others. In *Call Her Slim*, this process informs Bel's initiation into the world of MI5/ MI6. As Bel discovers, it is Evelyn who is compromised by her links to anarchist groups, and who in turn agrees to collude in Bel's deception and manipulation by the two agencies (184-185). This is an example of what Gottlieb means by “the destruction of the individual's private world,” whereby all privacy, friendships, family and work relationships are subverted by state interference.

In *Terrorist* it is Charlie the ill-fated CIA agent who probes Ahmad about his commitment to Jihad, and effectively places him at the heart of the intended terrorist operation. Charlie's questioning of Ahmad while looking across the Hudson at

Ground Zero echoes the stimulus-response experiments carried out on Alex de Large in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Charlie quizzes Ahmad on his emotional response to the spectacle of 9/11:

“I pitied them. Especially those that jumped. How terrible, to be so trapped by crushing heat that jumping to certain death is better. Think of the dizziness, looking down before you jump.” (184)

It is never made entirely clear whether Charlie recognises in Ahmad’s incongruent mix of humane intelligence and terrorist zeal the potential to do the harm asked of him or to resist it. He is not close to Ahmad in the way Evelyn is to Bel, and it is this sense of relative arbitrariness in the young man’s selection for grooming that makes *Terrorist* a disturbing reading experience.

The dystopian concern with “the destruction of the individual’s private world” as evident in the theme of the state manufacturing the citizen’s guilt through his or her association with others can also be traced in Lorraine Adams’ *Harbor* (2004). The novel focuses on the lives of Algerian exiles, stowaways who arrive for new lives in Boston. Aziz, Rafik (wanted in Tunisia for embezzlement), Mourad, Ghazi, Lahourai and their friends and associates become directly or indirectly involved firstly in receiving and storing stolen goods, then in a stolen credit card ring. Aziz and Ghazi, alarmed by the implications, break into the storage unit Rafik shares with his partner Kamal, suspecting that hashish and even terrorist materials might be involved. Ghazi only finds toys and Marlboro cigarettes. However, the FBI comes to believe the men may be part of a terrorist cell, the plot thread of *Harbor* illustrating the post-9/11 climate regarding Western suspicion of Muslims. Sure enough, agents later find explosives in the unit and timing devices in Kamal’s apartment. With no incriminating evidence beyond random fingerprints, Aziz and Ghazi are tried as chief suspects. Aziz is deported and Ghazi, who in the interim has drifted into terrorism, is sentenced to thirty-seven years in jail.

While *Harbor* has the plot of a thriller, Adams' narrative is primarily concerned with characters who cannot realise their goals and face utter defeat, a characteristic of canonical dystopian narratives: the immigrants can make as little sense of life in the New World as Bernard Marx and John Savage can of their lives in Mustapha Mond's World State in *Brave New World*. Like McEwan's London, Fawer's New York and America as characterised by Jack Levy, the physical environment in which Aziz and his friends survive has noticeably dystopian characteristics which have negative psychological consequences for them. Aziz's initial experience of life in the one bedroom slum apartment they share in Boston is characterised by misunderstandings and dissolute behaviour, rather than a sense of community. Later in New York, sharing a room and bathroom with two Nigerian and Chinese immigrants, the naturally sociable Aziz finds himself in a world defined purely in terms of transience, where people neither search for nor recognize each other:

The Chinese spoke no English. Every so often Aziz would look at him when they passed in the hall and try to say with his eyes how worried he was. But the Chinese never once looked up. Then one day he was gone. A little later the Nigerian was found dead outside the front door of the building. (144-145)

The modern American immigrant domicile is here presented as a drab environment that diminishes people, and where solidarity between those oppressed seems impossible. Their lives seem incidental, and in such an environment a suspicious death seems unremarkable.

For Aziz, it is his alienation in the New World, his feelings of being dehumanised by his living conditions, that triggers an existential crisis. With a false identity arranged for him by Rafik, his existence becomes ghost-like, his work in menial jobs (squeegee man, dish washer, janitor) rendering him "unseen...without a person speaking to him, and longer still, without someone's eyes meeting his own" (62). There is no prospect of socially-determined consciousness, neither the *bonhomie* nor *anomie* of



fellow workers. His life in America fails to open the window on his past: he is even forced to imagine America in an Algerian context, with roadside bombs and massacres, in order to make sense of his new world.

Ultimately, it is the post-9/11 domestic political climate in America that makes the options of exile and suicide for Adams' characters scarcely less appealing than for Huxley's characters in *Brave New World*. If America struggles to respond to the challenge of Islamic terrorism, those suspected of it have no defence against the official methods whereby it is to be frustrated. Homeland security measures impact directly on the immigrants' social and home environments: the authority of Federal Agents to blackmail outsiders, tear up their living quarters and effectively frame them for a terrorist plot (Mourad, Ghazi and Aziz's 'scheme' is in fact, to open a coffee stall) seems unchallengeable in Adams' novel.

That the hegemony's coercive powers are irresistible is a defining feature of Moylan's anti-utopian dystopian framework. With the exception of the character Bridges (who is reassigned away from Boston on suspicion of murdering an immigrant), Adams portrays the forces of law and homeland security as relatively sympathetic (the female FBI agent, April, comments on hearing Mourad's American girlfriend Heather via a wiretap, that it is clear how deeply they all care for each other). However, the dystopian control of establishing guilt through association is the law enforcers' endgame. In an echo of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), where the protagonist's wife is encouraged by the authorities to betray her husband for his transgressive actions, Heather's friend Linda Ricco is pressured into betraying Heather and the men. Linda has posed as Aziz's wife during the latter's stay in hospital, which is enough for the FBI to incriminate her in the alleged plot. Ghazi and Aziz's misfortune proves to be largely a consequence of the times and the procedures in place to intercept suspected terrorists after 9/11. In this respect the miscarriage of justice is predetermined by the state.

In *Call Her Slim* this latter theme is assimilated into the mind control process, specifically in MI5's methods to convince Bel she is a triple murderess under the effects

of drugs and hypnosis (59-61). It is also evident in MI5/ MI6's set-ups of the arms dealer Swain (9-21) and subsequently of Zal Tunney (85-97). The origin of the process of entrapment by the state is traced to Bel and Evelyn's involvement with anarchist Direct Action politics, as Kasir learns:

In the nineteen-eighties, Mangrave's wife Paula devoted the Circle's resources to a variety of Direct Action programs, including the Greenham Common encampment. MI5 infiltrated at this stage, and again later, when the Anti-Poll Tax Movement became a cause célèbre. Bel and Evelyn Morgan, Paula Mangrave's niece, became activists in the early nineties. Since then, the Circle had been an MI5 concern. Paula Mangrave, meanwhile, had been in prison for the past six months. (65)

In this story thread, the intelligence services are able to co-opt an extreme political group into their homeland security agenda after years of infiltration. Every operative in the Other Magic Circle, from its leader Paula Mangrave on down, becomes in thrall to MI5 and ultimately disposable in the post-9/11 climate where their value for inside information established during the Cold War period no longer applies.

### 2.3.2: The novel of the cultural insider/ outsider

While the depiction of environmental and existential malaise in the novels of McEwan, Fawer and Updike lends itself to dystopian cultural and political critique, the scope for such a critique is greater in a novel like *Harbor* that interrogates the status of the New World or Europe as a Promised Land for immigrants.

A number of post-9/11 novels deal with the political ramifications of 9/11 on Muslims, and their persecution or alienation in Western societies. Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) sets out to depict the narrator Changez's feelings of existential incoherence as the product of the political repercussions of 9/11 that he has

experienced as both cultural insider and outsider. Hamid's inspiration for writing the novel was explicitly political, although not specifically related to 9/11:

“Geo-politics is important to me as a writer,” Hamid explains. “The whole notion that politics should be separate from art, that it corrupts good writing, strikes me as problematic. The nuclear tests in 1999, the near war in 2001 between Pakistan and India - these were major exclamation marks in history for me personally...”

(*Guardian*, 13.7.11)

The dystopian element of the novel can be discerned in its warning about the propensity of Western culture to alienate young Muslims. Hamid achieves this to a great extent by allowing the narrative to be potentially read as a thriller: the novel culminates with a potential showdown between a Westerner and Pakistani Muslims, despite the fact that the narrative as a whole is almost totally devoid of action.

The novel takes the form of a spoken monologue, with brief instances of interpolated narratorial comment. The monologue is characterised by the regular evocation of the narratee, with narrator and narratee in a face-to-face situation, sitting in a Lahore café-restaurant. Changez recounts his time in America both prior and subsequent to the 9/11 attacks and his reasons for returning to Lahore. However, while his recounted life story takes up most of the narrative, the possibility of some sinister if undisclosed activity being imminent is repeatedly intimated.

Hamid prevents the reader from identifying with the narratee who, Changez hints at the outset, is an American security operative, possibly “on a mission” (1). Changez addresses the latter in a mock-hospitable manner, often asking rhetorical questions, projecting a narratee who has little understanding of or interest in Pakistan's culture. As a foreigner in a Muslim country, the American is compared by Changez to an animal “in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey” (31). Changez draws attention to the narratee's suspicious behaviour and suspect mannerisms: his insistence on sitting with his back to the wall, his suspicious looks at the locals, and his habit of

reaching into his pocket quickly when perceiving a threat, such as during an electricity blackout. At the very end of the novel, as Changez accompanies the American back to his hotel followed by seemingly hostile locals, he passes comment on the “glint of metal” being pulled from the American’s pocket.

The American remains an enigma (his voice is unheard throughout the narrative) but this does not hinder the reader from imagining the thriller scenario with its violent showdown and potential repercussions. It is the matter of agency that remains uncertain. The reader learns of Changez’s activism on the university campus where he works, of “intemperate” anti-American remarks he has made in front of a television camera during a demo, and of his friends’ concerns about American retaliation. This story thread both hints at Changez’s new Gramscian way of thinking (that radical social change will result from patient organizing inside and outside of key institutions) and his ready impatience with its demands.<sup>6</sup>

At the novel’s denouement, Hamid gives the thriller thread precedence over the Gramscian narrative. However, “the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives” evident in Changez’s narrative is not explicitly resolved. It is left ambiguous whether the American is there to shoot Changez or some other unspecified target, or whether the locals plan to kidnap or murder the American. Nonetheless, an alternative reading might afford greater significance to Changez’s admonition to the American that “you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (209). Although the preceding narrative clearly has a major influence, Hamid relies on the reader’s preconceptions about the political context to produce a particular interpretation of the story’s conclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Antonio Gramsci: “... the social life of the working class is rich with institutions, it articulates itself in multiple activities. Precisely these institutions and these activities need to be developed, organized together, connected in a vast and flexibly articulated system which absorbs and disciplines the whole working class.” ‘Workers’ Democracy’. *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 21 June 1919.

The bulk of the narrative, however, is devoted to exploring Changez's existential incoherence, his divided insider/ outsider status, and "the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives". A Princeton graduate with a successful career as a business analyst in New York, Changez has shared in the utopian 'American Dream', reaping the lifestyle rewards of American commerce. Nonetheless, he has been sufficiently alienated by what he perceives to be implicit American condescension towards his country and himself to find himself smiling at the media coverage of the 9/11 attacks while on a business trip to Manila. Before the flight back to New York, he is segregated from his colleagues and strip searched, indicating the shift in the political climate in the wake of the attacks. He returns to America, in his own words, "uncomfortable in my own face" (74).

The shift in the nation's mood perturbs and perplexes Changez: it seems to him that overnight Americans have retreated into hackneyed militarism, behaviour he imagined them scarcely capable of before. Hamid is warning the reader that knee-jerk responses to terrorist acts merely deepen a country's internal divisions. Later, in Chile, while absorbing the atmosphere of Valparaiso, Changez is attracted by its faded glory, considering it as another once proud culture now subject to American political hegemony. Juan-Bautista, the publisher whose business Changez's company is there to value, uses the example of the janissaries to illustrate to Changez how his sense of identity has been undermined by divided loyalty to homeland and host country:

"They were Christian boys," he explained, "captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to." (151)

The analogy proves revelatory for Changez. In fact, his position when considering the threat to his homeland in the post-9/11 world recalls Hamid's own concerns regarding Pakistan's potential showdown with India:

I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American Empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. (152)

This bleak assessment provides the measure of Changez's perception of the post-9/11 political stalemate regarding America's relationship with the Muslim world. The narrative suggests that the mistrust is both mutual and increasingly deep-seated.

The divided insider/ outsider status of the Muslim character in Western societies also informs Kasir's characterisation in *Call Her Slim*. In this instance, my intention was to locate "the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives" within dialogues on cultural difference and espionage ethics in the novel.

Regarding the former, Kasir is presented as torn between the heritage and customs of his native Egypt on the one hand, and his professional obligation to both his own GIS superiors and their Western partners on the other. Egypt's homeland security agenda in support of the West's political aims in the Middle-East has alienated him from his birthplace:

The historical shaping of regional identities, beliefs and institutions was scarcely debated now. Since the Sinai bombings, the war against Jihadists, infiltrators or outsiders, had become a political mantra for many. Mubarak's regime had been quick to capitalise. Egypt had become the country where foreigners would arrive and disappear after a few days; where thugs would seize political dissenters, often students, from sidestreets and dormitories. (54)

Kasir fears that the seed of democracy in Egypt, in the form of the utopian premise that a society should encourage free and constructive thought and discussion, has now been denied his countrymen. In addition, his insider/ outsider status regarding his homeland carries over into his professional life. While Changez is outwardly respected by his work

colleagues in New York, Kasir's work in Britain and Italy sees him cast as an outsider amongst his intelligence associates. Taken together, Stiles' off-handed attitude to questions about Bel's program ("I'm not an agent-runner, Professor. Just the overseer of certain programs, and occasionally the operator. I'm not the actual programmer or one of the shrinks. But she's yours" (60-61).) and Manchietti's impatience with Kasir's enquiries in Milan (111-116) create the impression that he is being slighted, if not sidelined. Manchietti's later thoughts confirm reservations about Kasir's status amongst his intelligence colleagues as something more than "just the product of the cantina" (169). Whether this is solely due to doubts about the program or whether it carries the suggestion of distrust of Muslims in the Western Intelligence world after 9/11 is left open to interpretation.

Unlike that of Changez in Hamid's novel, Kasir's development in my novel is not defined by greater allegiance to either East or West, but by his growing awareness of how such allegiances have eroded his own values. The death of Baranyi provides the catalyst for Kasir's self-analysis:

His forehead felt tender. Days of agitation, fear, unhappiness. He couldn't imagine her as Alessandra, yet time constraints meant she had to be. The Americans wanted no photos of Bel Andreus for the media; she (or her body) would disappear immediately after the bombing. But the careless damage to Baranyi's memory...Why hadn't the horror of it dawned before now? (64)

While the "divided loyalties and shifting priorities" integral to his profession have desensitised Kasir to his state of exile, in Italy, amidst painful recollections of his dead family, his concern for Bel's fate, and the revelation of his betrayal by Baranyi, he begins to feel "deprived of life's fundamentals" (117). In addition, he seems similarly alienated by his time spent in Britain (209). Whereas the visit to Chile and the story of the janissaries prompts Changez to prioritise his loyalty to his homeland, Kasir is caught in a milieu devoid of humanity or ethics where loyalty to his peers seems of little value.

He can only retain his integrity by rescuing Bel and scuppering a ruthless False Flag operation.

I tried to establish Kasir's integrity from an early stage in his narrative by making it dialogic regarding the work of intelligence agencies as portrayed in the novel. Kasir's manner of speaking contributes subtly to the development of a counter-narrative to the American-led operation and to his native Egypt's affiliation with that same operation. His conversation with Borringer reveals two very different personalities and views of the world. Borringer's speech is characterised by circumlocution, euphemism, interruptions and vulgarity, as below, when discussing the stolen vacuum bombs:

Borringer drummed his fingers on the table. "Sure – this Brit company Thermofare. A contract on the quiet. The Brits are up to their stiff uppers in shit as far as the theft goes, too. They've put the heat on some fucking rogue agent at MI6. A tad convenient, but maybe of interest since you've a post in London, *right?*" (55)

The register slips between what Martin Joos terms consultative and casual: on the one hand, Borringer's speech functions as a two-way communication where new information is provided to Kasir; on the other, Borringer is addressing an acquaintance, and there are incidences of ellipsis where knowledge is assumed, as well as incidences of slang and profanity.<sup>7</sup> However, Borringer's rapid fire style of delivery actually serves a rhetorical strategy to keep the discussion focused on the CIA's interests. Passages begin with embedded commands ("To business, then. *Right...*" (55); "Now here's the drill..." (56)) and the largely whispered conversation, despite its verbosity, only tells Kasir the minimum he needs to know. Borringer's speech is tailored to the needs of the professional situation: it serves the aims of the hegemony and their intelligence enforcers.

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<sup>7</sup> See Martin Joos (1961). Joos presents five registers on a scale ranging from archaic and unchanging to intimate: 'Frozen', 'Formal', 'Consultative', 'Casual', and 'Intimate'.



Unusual linguistic habits such as idioms and stock phrases are absent from Kasir's speech. When juxtaposed with his measured use of language, it is possible to discern two different value systems emerging in the conversation with Borringer, which subtly foreshadows the disunity about to manifest itself amongst supposed allies. Kasir's syntactic concision implies a careful, methodical personality and befits an urbane, Middle Eastern academic accustomed to sharing considered opinions with his colleagues. Unlike Borringer, who can offer no more than speculation about Bel's suitability for the operation, Kasir considers the practical obstacles to Bel's role:

“She is not Libyan, though. If she has to travel it will need to be under a new identity. As a Libyan.”

“Simple enough, Yusef. Bound to be plenty of dead infants around the date of her birth. Most probably got her original identity just that very way.”

Kasir wouldn't have thought so. “Birth certificates and passports aren't easily rushed through in Tripoli. We only have a few days, remember. The child of Libyan nationals, or a Libyan father just. A child of the same age, who died in England? Perhaps this is a better approach?” (57)

His sentences are strikingly concise for someone who has been presented with a new scenario and is understandably full of questions. The sentences suggest self-control and purpose, whereas Borringer's speech suggests impatience and speculation.

The juxtaposition of different registers recalls Bakhtin's notion of “heteroglossia”, the interweaving of multiple voices that represent different social types and belief systems and create a type of dialogue within the text ([1975] 1996, 259-263). In *Call Her Slim*, the dialogue between intelligence operatives allows for a comparative analysis of espionage ethics, but there is a larger structural reason for Kasir's counter discourse. I wished the character to convey disillusionment with all sides in the espionage arena, and I wished to avoid a story pattern developed around confronting ‘the

enemy'. Clearly defined enemies seem incompatible with the murky post-9/11 espionage world of the novel.

Asik (2008) also describes *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a counter discourse, one revealing the bias in Changez's own narrative and those of Americans (the Other), such as his girlfriend Erica's father, whose critical perspective on Pakistan offends him. However, quite differently to my own novel, Asik argues that a key function of Hamid's narrative is to deny any meaningful dialogue between Muslim and American/ Western civilisations, reflecting the fact that both sides produce one-sided discourses through their media. Clearly, this reading allows us to classify *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in terms of Moylan's anti-utopian dystopian discourse, as no utopian horizon of reconciliation is apparent at the novel's conclusion.

The only universality in human experience that Changez observes is, in fact, expressed in terms of the existential incoherence resulting from a trauma. In Changez's case, the trauma is caused by the failure of his relationship with his American girlfriend Erica, who unable to regain the feelings of a lost love, suffers mental illness after the 9/11 attacks and eventually disappears from the hospital, possibly taking her life:

It is not possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us. (197)

At the end of the narrative, Changez still retains this much of his insider/ outsider perspective, which accounts for the reluctant nature of his new found fundamentalism. The anti-utopian dystopian framework implied by Asik's interpretation is subject to further ambiguity in that Changez is fortunate to return to his native Pakistan a free man.

By contrast, Thomas Keneally's protagonist in *The Tyrant's Novel* (2004), writer Alan Sheriff, languishes as an asylum seeker in a geographically unspecified detention camp (implied to be Australian) after losing his wife and escaping a fictional Middle

Eastern dictatorship. Keneally acknowledges that this dictatorship is based upon journalist Mark Bowden's article on Saddam Hussein and Iraq, "Tales of the Tyrant" (293). The theme of the state's jurisdiction over an individual's identity is established from the outset when Sheriff is visited by a journalist in detention. Even visitors to the prison are stripped of their identity, their hands temporarily stamped with animal symbols for security purposes, "one of the absurdities which always seem to cling round the flanks of noxious institutions" (3). Keneally's novel criticises refugee policy in the author's native Australia, and in so doing echoes the theme explored in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Harbor* of the failure of the New World as Promised Land.

John Le Carré makes a similar point about UK immigration detention policy in *The Mission Song* (2006). Like Sheriff, Le Carré's protagonist Salvo is tasked with work regarded as important for his country and is eventually driven by conscience to resist the deceit and corruption such work assists. Although both novels explore their protagonists' crises of conscience, Le Carré's novel is more concerned with its protagonist's conflict of national loyalties and how the identity of the immigrant of whatever generation may always be used as a weapon against him by the state. In these post 9-11 novels, the rights of the foreigner or outsider in democratic countries are easily revocable.

### 2.3.3: The dystopian protagonist in the post-9/11 novel

While contemporary geopolitical concerns in the preceding works of fiction may lend themselves to analysis in terms of dystopian discourse, the dystopian elements informing the post-9/11 novel have consequences for the role of the protagonist as well as the story patterns employed. If the state cannot be trusted, it makes sense that the protagonist's role is often occupied by flawed, reluctant heroes or naïfs (or a combination of the two), rather than officially appointed intelligence agents. Western macropolitical agendas in

novels like Le Carré's *Absolute Friends*, Christopher Reich's *Rules Of Deception* and my own *Call Her Slim* are presented as highly questionable, which leaves little scope for an ideologically motivated hero to effect change from within the system. Consequently, in post-9/11 novels the 'enemy of the state' is usually a civilian.

This in turn lends itself to the element of dystopian discourse Gottlieb identifies as "The Deliberate Miscarriage of Justice." Recent work by Le Carré explores how the post-9/11 context makes such an occurrence a near staple of the espionage world. Speaking in 1997, Le Carré denied having any difficulty finding adversarial situations for his characters after the Cold War:

I'm not saying that I made the transition easily...But I never wanted to write about Smiley again. I felt it was done...All of a sudden everything was up for grabs. It was extremely comic that the uninformed were saying that spying is over, hence Le Carré is over. The one thing you can bet is that spying is never over. Spying is like the wiring in this building - it's just a question of who takes it over and switches on the lights. (*Paris Review Online*, Summer 1997)

At that point, four years prior to 9/11, the question of how the traditional spy role would be adapted in the post-Cold War world was still unanswered. By the time of *Absolute Friends* (2003), Le Carré could examine how the role of conventional espionage services had changed, with the greater pluralism evident regarding the number of agencies involved in such work. The experience of the protagonist Mundy is prey to this shift. As a Cold War double agent, he is literally dispensable in the new age of proactive American interventionism.

Le Carré's novel shows how the shaping of his double agents in Europe in the Cold War era left them unprepared for the post-9/11 world. Le Carré imbues his protagonist Mundy with elements of both naïf and reluctant hero: from his essentially innocent desire to continue in the long-standing role of his friend Sasha's protector, he exposes the duality of law and lawlessness characterising the post-9/11 American

espionage world. The ‘naïf hero’ can be a device of structural irony in fiction, and in *Absolute Friends* and Torsten Krol’s *Callisto*, this is the case to the extent that the narrator exposes frailties in the protagonist’s own interpretation of events. The tone of these narratives is analogous to Gottlieb’s categorisation of “Dystopia as a No-Man’s Land between Satire and Tragedy”.

Again with reference to Gottlieb, the “window on history” that she mentions as a strategy of canonical dystopian literature (“a strategic device through which the writer reveals the roots of the protagonist’s dystopian present in the society’s past” (15)) reveals how Mundy’s past association with MI6 makes him a convenient patsy for former allies. Le Carré emphasises his gullibility from the start. “The Parson”, the head of the party welcoming him into the espionage fold, merely emphasises his left-wing contacts as the basis for his suitability, saying “if we’d had to invent you, you wouldn’t be half as convincing” (167). Mundy seems prepared to accept almost unquestioningly his cipher-like quality in these operations:

To be conveyed.

To take no decisions.

To sit back and be a spectator to your own life. That’s spying too, apparently.

(161)

His perspective is at least partly due to the fact that, despite having been given some surveillance training, Mundy has no official status within the MI6 structure. This kernel of the story provides Le Carré’s cautionary message, one echoed later in the fate of Salvo in *The Mission Song* (2006): unofficial involvement with the security services as a run agent leaves those involved entirely exposed to unpredictable future recriminations. A similar theme informs both Bel’s and Evelyn Morgan’s narratives in *Call Her Slim*. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Bel has been actively involved in a covert MI6 operation years before, which has resulted in the death of her lover Rian: her recollection of it is only retrieved under hypnosis (237-240). In Evelyn’s case, her betrayal of MI6 on

behalf of the CIA leaves her entirely exposed to recriminations from all sides when they have reason to distrust her (220-224). She has no protection, having turned her back on MI6 and having no official status within the CIA.

Unlike Evelyn's character, however, Le Carré invests Mundy's with a strong moral sense, which manifests itself in the bond of friendship with Sasha and his loyalty to his Turkish Muslim partner Zara and her son Mustafa. It is this integrity, traditionally one of the fictional hero and of Moylan's "anti-utopian dystopian" protagonist that leads to Mundy's demise.

While Le Carré's novel explicitly juxtaposes the pre- and post-9/11 eras in order to draw stark distinctions between them in terms of espionage practices, it is also structured to emphasise the post-9/11 context. At the outset, the second war in Iraq is underway and Mundy is living in Munich with Zara and Mustafa, with a failed English language school venture behind him and working as a tour guide, when Sasha reappears on the scene. "We meet, we fight a war, we separate for a decade" (25) is Mundy's summary of their relationship. The two men have interacted this way during the Cold War, the conditions of the era having perpetuated their personal and professional relationship. However, Sasha's latest scheme, revealed after the flashbacks to the Cold War era, is in fact the product of the Pentagon's War on Terror and the false flag/ black operations mindset of "America's post-Nine Eleven psychopathy" (272). The mysterious *agent provocateur* "Dimitri", Sasha's latest intellectual guru, encourages Mundy and Sasha to open a non-profit "Counter-University" for radical free-thinkers. Mundy discovers that the set-up is a sham orchestrated by Rourke, an ex-CIA contact now working for the Pentagon.

Like the experience of his MI6 handler Amory, Mundy's valuable Cold War exploits are now of no consequence. All he has to guide him is his history of looking out for Sasha, which is why he returns to the schoolhouse to ensure Sasha arrives safely. Once there, he finds a consignment of radical literature including bomb making instruction manuals. When Sasha arrives, Rourke and Dimitri's men, US Special Forces,

are waiting to execute him before storming the building. Rourke subsequently executes Mundy, taking time to choose the most sophisticated rifle. The scene is made to look as though the ‘terrorists’ have fired a barrage of bullets from inside the house at empty neighbouring buildings. The black operation is anti-Islamist propaganda, “a clear signal to all critics of America’s policy of conservative democratic imperialism” (369). Unlike the show trials of canonical dystopian protagonists, those of Mundy and Sasha will be posthumous and media-driven.<sup>8</sup>

In *Absolute Friends* a traditional story pattern for a thriller is adapted to suit the post-9/11 context. The traditional pattern is one where the villain (one or several espionage services) discovers the hero’s point of psychological weakness (a certain passivity and naivety in Mundy, filial resentment and naivety in Sasha) and manipulates them into enacting their plans. Traditionally, the hero would overcome this psychological weakness in order to survive or frustrate the villain. Le Carré sees such a restitution narrative as impossible at the time of writing, as the narrator’s summary of Amory’s anonymous exposé of the American operation makes clear:

Summing up the whole tawdry affair, a well-placed and reliable senior official with access to the highest levels of government was reported as saying that some people these days were getting a bit too George Orwell for their own health. He was referring, of course, not to Downing Street or Washington, but to the spies. (379)

The evocation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* helps identify the novel’s discourse as “anti-utopian dystopian” under Tom Moylan’s formulations. Evil (here in the form of American-led Western imperialism) simply triumphs.

While Le Carré’s representation of the moulding of the British Cold War spy is a hallmark of the author’s work, the novel’s concluding episode serves a clear function in

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<sup>8</sup> In *Dystopian Fiction East and West*, Erika Gottlieb discusses show trials in such works as Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*, and Zamyatin’s *We*.

terms of post-9/11 dystopian discourse, as it is intended to be provocative and alarming.<sup>9</sup> The work of right-wing American political forces and US intelligence agents to discredit left-wing intellectuals and opponents of US politics is extended into the domain of the False Flag operation. Normally conceived to discredit a foreign state, this particular operation is targeted instead at anti-imperialist ‘dissenters’ Sasha and Mundy, who are civilians of sovereign foreign states and whose past intelligence work is the tenuous thread out of which the conspiracy against them is woven. As with the False Flag operation in *Call Her Slim*, Le Carré’s storyline explores the potential a powerful foreign intelligence service has to exploit and destroy the lives of another country’s civilians, in order to serve its own country’s geopolitical ambitions.

The espionage thriller trope of ‘black’ operations or ‘False Flag’ operations (where one or more states orchestrate an atrocity to implicate another state) lends itself to the involvement of naïfs or reluctant heroes. As such operations do not officially exist, workaday spies may not be much better informed than citizens who are co-opted or merely stumble into the web of intrigue. When an author employs the False Flag scenario, the agents of the state serve unambiguously as the fiction’s villains, as is the case in *Call Her Slim*.

In Christopher Reich’s complex thriller *Rules of Deception* (2008), the author creates a similar, albeit more apocalyptic scenario to Le Carré’s in *Absolute Friends*. Once again, what Le Carré’s narrator describes as “America’s post- Nine Eleven psychopathy” is brought into focus. After the apparent death of his wife, Jonathan Ransom, who works with Doctors Without Borders, is drawn into a conspiracy on behalf of a shadowy Pentagon-affiliated espionage unit called The Division to implicate an Iranian terrorist cell in Switzerland in an attack on a commercial Israeli aircraft. After his wife Emma apparently dies in a mountaineering accident, Ransom receives a letter

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<sup>9</sup> Le Carré’s novel was greeted with hostility by several American critics, who accused the author of creating anti-American propaganda. In particular, see Geoffrey Wheatcroft: “Smiley’s (Anti-American) People.” *New York Times*, 11.01.04.



directing him to pick up expensive affects supposedly belonging to her and kills two Swiss *kantonspolizei* who try to rob him of them. Ransom realises that Emma has been leading a double life, and eventually that she is still alive and serving The Division. In pursuing the truth about 'Emma', he becomes caught in the crossfire of inter-agency rivalry between The Division and the CIA, and is hunted by Swiss counterespionage agents on suspicion of the murder of another Division agent.

Ransom is cast very much in the role of the reluctant hero, picking up skills in doctoring ID cards and drivers' licenses, as well as banging out bullet dents on a car fender. He is finally reunited with his wife, who saves him from a CIA assassin, before abandoning her part in the The Division's operation and helping him thwart the act of sabotage intended to trigger war between Iran and Israel.

With its pursuit element and the protagonist's recognisably heroic attributes, Reich's novel is not dissimilar to the old amateur spy capers of Ambler and Buchan. However, the novel arguably provides the clearest example of a dystopian world view among the novels considered in this survey. It posits a nightmare scenario of American state-sponsored terror with its origins in the event of 9/11: American Christian Fundamentalist terrorism and the dystopian control of a covertly theocratic government. In so doing, Reich's novel brings into play Gottlieb's third element of dystopian discourse: "A Barbaric State Religion".

John Austen, a decorated Major General who remotely pilots the explosives-laden drone into the path of an arriving Israeli aircraft, does so to usher in the Second Coming with a war between Iran and Israel. This religious mania is incorporated into a False Flag operation as a result of the Pentagon's all-pervasive influence in foreign politics and US commerce. Alphons Marti, the Swiss Government minister who interferes in the Swiss counterespionage operation, is eventually revealed to be in the pay of the US Defence Department. Additionally, The Division's front company (ZIAG) has filled export licenses for the equipment for Iran's uranium enrichment program.

Emma, immediately prior to her conversion, justifies the Pentagon supplying Iran with the capacity for nuclear warfare as “only hastening matters along, so we can control how the situation develops” (327). The furthest imaginable extent of America’s pro-active black operations is thus explained as unofficial foreign policy. However, the CIA’s operation to frustrate the Division’s own operation makes it clear that this ‘secret government’ is not acting in the country’s wider security interests. In creating his scenario, Reich offers a chilling critique of the Joint Special Operations Command structure implemented by Washington after 9/11.

Despite a conspiracy successfully thwarted, *Rules of Deception* ends on a note of uncertainty regarding the fate of Jonathan and Emma. Left to their own devices to get away, the suggestion is that the chance of survival is slim: the conspiracy has many facets, and there are many avenues for retribution. I created a similar ending in *Call Her Slim*, where Bel and Kasir are comparable targets for the retribution of American, Italian and British intelligence. Kasir’s appraisal of both his and Bel’s situation anticipates as much:

Bel would become MI6’s I.O.U. and SISMI would call it in as a way of settling the score for their lost agents. Realpolitik at its most hateful; but this was how enemies continued working together. (240-241)

Unlike *Absolute Friends*, however, both *Call Her Slim* and Reich’s post-9/11 fictional world are comparable to “utopian dystopias”, because the hegemonic power has not yet “coercively and ideologically” closed in (Moylan 2000, xiii). Nonetheless, the reader is likely to leave the diegetic world of both these novels with fear and pity for hero and heroine.

In *Callisto* (2007), Torsten Krol entraps his naïf protagonist Odell Deefus in a similarly inescapable web of intrigue. This novel encompasses five of Gottlieb’s elements of dystopian discourse: “The Push and Pull between Utopian and Dystopian Perspectives”; “The Deliberate Miscarriage of Justice”; “A Barbaric State Religion”;

“The Destruction of the Individual’s Private World”; and “Dystopia as a No-Man’s Land between Satire and Tragedy”. Odell writes his own story on a succession of bus trips from Florida to Oregon. A naïf in the traditional satirical sense, Odell is a simple and good-natured American boy who loves fast-food, beer and women in uniform, and plans to enlist in the army. Much of his narrative is infused with his enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life, and Odell’s utopian perspective on ‘The American Way of Life’ contrasts meaningfully with the dystopian world of the military detention camp for which he is fated.

Odell’s story traces how a single complicating action (the manslaughter of Dean, whose house he stays in after his car breaks down en route to enlisting) leads to further complications and finally impossible entanglements: in short, Odell’s story provides a parallel to America’s military adventurism in the Middle-East. To distract the police from his manslaughter, Odell resorts to “ten percent lies”, playing up Dean’s Islamic sympathies and inflating his remark about wanting to kill a right-wing senator. This spur-of-the-moment decision leads him into a series of bizarre escapades with drug dealers, an evangelical Christian group with political contacts called the Born Again Foundation, the FBI and Homeland Security. As events spiral out of control he is subject to rendition to a military base in the tropics where he is tortured as a suspected terrorist.

The novel can be read as a satire on America’s homeland security measures in the wake of 9/11, and as such addresses the curtailing of civil liberties in democratic societies. Krol’s dystopian USA is a technocratic, bureaucratic and theocratic nightmare world. Whereas in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961), the military’s unchecked paranoia adversely affects only its personnel, in Krol’s America the intelligence services and US army can treat private citizens as enemies of war on the flimsiest of evidence. The torture and humiliation of Odell by the military personnel in the secret overseas base produces a sense of realism and provokes a comparison with Guantanamo Bay. None of it is played for laughs, although the Evangelical Lieutenant Harding’s conclusion that Odell is “too peculiar” to join the military may raise a smile (413). However, the larger

narrative form Krol employs is that of the satirical picaresque, with elements of pure farce. The most comical is Odell's repeated burying and digging up of Dean's body after the incompetent and fractious local police department first check the hole under the coop, then return after Odell replaces the body to video record evidence of the digging.

The final conspiracy that Odell uncovers – the plot between the Evangelists and the right wing Senator Ketchum to frame Odell for a terrorist attack at a Fourth of July rally, in order to boost the Homeland Security agenda and the senator's Presidential chances – is foiled in an equally farcical fashion. Having stolen Odell's lawnmower truck, one of the Evangelists returns it fitted with explosives to the farmhouse, mistakenly leaving Odell's mobile phone (the detonator) switched on in the cab. Having found the truck, but not the phone, Odell calls his own mobile number in the farmhouse and blows up the entire property, miraculously managing to survive.

The representation of the American Evangelical villains in *Callisto* is comical, whereas that of John Austen in *Rules of Deception* is chilling, although the characters are similarly destined to fail in the arena of 'black operations', one characterised by hard pragmatism. Nonetheless, the plot against Odell involving politicians and Christian fundamentalists raises the spectre of Gottlieb's "barbaric state religion" once again.

At the end of the novel, mysterious Homeland Security agent "Jim Ricker" congratulates Odell on being an "invisible hero", having foiled a plot "that would have made the Oklahoma City bombing look like a rehearsal for the real thing" (424). Odell's reward is that Dean is only declared missing not dead, and he has \$10,000 hush money. It is small compensation for the destruction of Odell's private world: as Ricker phrases it, "A big plot has been reduced to a small plot. That's the way it goes" (425). We learn that Odell will be put under surveillance indefinitely to ensure that's the way it stays.

In *Call Her Slim*, Bel's narrative could be said to take up where Odell's leaves off: virtually her every move has been under the watch of the intelligence services for several years. As such, alongside Mundy's and Odell's, Bel's story is closest in this survey to that of the classical alienated dystopian protagonist who refuses to abide by the

rules of the socio-political hegemony and, through a particular combination of circumstances, is eventually punished for it. The narrative permits detailed access to the protagonist's experience of her inner life, while exposing how the system operates covertly to break down the very core of her personality. Bel's experience presents in microcosm that of the inhabitants of the literary dystopian 'monster state' as summarised by Gottlieb:

by being relentlessly bombarded by state propaganda while also being deprived of privacy and intimate relationships, we may be deprived of the core of our being, our personal memory of the past. (12)

According to Moylan, it is precisely this type of scenario that provides the basis for the concern central to dystopian discourse:

Crucial to dystopia's vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people. (xiii).

Bel is very much one of Moylan's "everyday people". Unlike Odell, she is not a naïf hero in the satirical sense: her character does not function as a device of structural irony, as her viewpoint is neither consistently wrong nor impossible for the reader to share. Additionally, that she is subject to a mind control program involving drugs and hypnosis which has distorted or destroyed her memory of her past is not in itself what marks her out as a distinctive protagonist for the post-9/11 novel; rather, it is the political use to which her program is put and the way in which it is undermined that brings a fresh perspective to this category of fiction.

The fictional suicide bomber is generally depicted as having been shaped by a combination of personal and political motivations, and often as a product of secret Jihadist camps. A notable example is the Englishwoman Jean D'Aubigny in Stella

Rimington's *At Risk* (2004), whose rejection of Western values and attraction to the ascetic quality of Islamic fundamentalism leads her into terrorism. Like Bel, she ultimately does not carry out an act of terror. However, the conventional evolution of the suicide bomber as described above is inverted in *Call Her Slim*. Unlike Alessandra Baranyi, who is motivated by her family having been killed by the Libyan regime, or Reem in John Fullerton's *This Green Land* (2005), whose family have been killed in the Lebanese civil war of the nineteen-eighties, Bel is the politically incompatible product of a western state's intelligence program and is expected to carry out an atrocity on foreign soil in the guise of a Middle-Eastern suicide bomber. Given the restrictions to the protagonist's agency that this scenario entails, I had to ensure that Bel would not merely appear passive or predictable, someone who would follow her commands robotically or through cowardice.

In order to shape the reader's responses to Bel's character as well as to other characters in the novel, I made specific use of certain narrative techniques for the representation of consciousness. I will suggest below that these techniques additionally serve the themes of my novel and help locate the work within the post-9/11 context discussed here.

### 3: Representation of consciousness: narrative techniques

#### 3.1: Focalization

In the following section, I will describe my employment of focalization in detail, before explaining how this relates to the post-9/11 context explored in this commentary.

The term "focalization" refers to the story being presented in the text through a mediating perspective which is put into words by the narrator. The perspective,

however, does not necessarily belong to the narrator.<sup>10</sup> The concept was introduced by Gérard Genette in order to differentiate between “who sees” in a narrative and “who speaks” ([1972] 1980, 186). Subsequent theorists have refined the concept, leading to competing interpretations of what the term “focalization” actually encompasses.<sup>11</sup>

My narrative strategy involves employing third-person narration that focalizes, at different times and for different reasons, through the eyes of a number of different characters. This also allows the narrator to focalize through individual characters as they focalize on other characters. I use the following focalizing opportunities made available by the use of third-person narration: fixed internal focalization (view from a position inside the represented events), the presentation of events restricted to the point of view of one or more focal characters (character-focalizer); and external focalization (view from a position outside the represented events). The external focalizer (or narrator-focalizer) can either adopt an omniscient point of view, or adopt the limited point of view of one character in the story and stay within this character’s range of perception. In this latter case, the narrator-focalizer has access to the focalized’s feelings and thoughts, and knowledge about their past, present or future. This choice of perspective does not depend upon whether or not the narrator is a character in the story.

In different sections of the narrative, the protagonist is character-focalizer or the *focalized* object: in most of the scenes where she is the focalized, the focalizer is Kasir. I wished to sustain the reader’s sense of the protagonist being observed, to preserve some of her mystery and to juxtapose utopian and dystopian perspectives regarding her possible fate, and also to give the reader access to the consciousness of other characters, primarily that of Kasir. This transition of focalizations keeps the protagonist’s trauma in

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<sup>10</sup> This definition essentially paraphrases that given by Rimmon-Kenan: “The story is presented in the text through the mediation of some ‘prism’, ‘perspective’, ‘angle of vision’, verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his” (1983, 71).

<sup>11</sup> Contemporary focalization theory encompasses extremely divergent views on what constitutes “focalization”. See Fludernik: “[the] extensive debate on focalization has really demonstrated that the category is an interpretative one and not exclusively a textual category” (1996, 345).

an appropriate context, by reminding the reader that she is the victim of an intelligence program, even when her thoughts might simply suggest a delusional mind.

However, the parts of the narrative where she is the character-focalizer also make it apparent that her observers have a very limited understanding of her behaviour. In the party scene, for example, Bel's hallucinations of an Ancient sacrifice foreshadow the collapse of her mind control program:

*Two warriors approached the plinth, cutting the Sacrifice loose and throwing him to the ground at the priest's feet. The horns ceased. The priest uttered an invocation and brought the axe down, many times, until the body was broken and severed into pieces...*

Clasping her head, she shook herself awake. "Christ! Everything's coming apart!"

...

Kasir leant forward, breathing the word into her face. "*Bellissima...*"

He knew her trance-like state of moments before wasn't due to the trigger phrase. The outburst was unusual too. What then? Opiates? Some quirk in her program? A combination of the two? At her feet, a glass lay broken at the stalk. (133)

Kasir's confusion as the programmer suggests the program is ultimately fated to fail. Elsewhere, in the parade sequence, the narrative switches between Manchietti's externally focalized (supposedly 'bird's-eye') observation of Bel, and Bel's own internally focalized narrative as limited observer at the heart of the drama. Bel's motivation for resistance and escape is presented as both personal and the product of Kasir's revisions to her programming:



The bucket was wedged fast between the front wheels. Then there was a loud *crack*.  
*Maybe this was her chance?* The one in charge screamed through his hailer at his thugs.  
The vein on his nose looked like a baby slug.

It was obvious now. These bastards had to be the ones behind everything! *Had*  
to be. *The small crowd*. Her grandfather wouldn't lie. (172)

Kasir has not specified that “the small crowd” consists of those responsible for Bel's situation. That is her independent perception. However, Kasir *has* given her new instructions under hypnosis in the guise of her late, beloved grandfather. Her own limited perspective on events, therefore, reveals complex factors underlying her disorientation, factors beyond the understanding of Kasir, Manchietti or any second party. This becomes clear after Bel enters the chapel, where the complex interaction between the residue of her past programming and her present programming is revealed to be a factor in her identity crisis:

Could she really burn? Would her soft skin, pale body, all her back pages of mystery be destroyed by the flames...?

The circle of fire had engulfed the font, and there was the illusion of a figure shimmering amidst the flames. Her grandfather's words were her only guide: it was still the font she had to embrace to quell the fire. She was nearing the end. (174)

The juxtaposition of these passages of narrated monologue with Manchietti's perspective on her behaviour prevents the reader from becoming attached to either's perception, because both characters display limited knowledge of what is taking place. Here, the focalization strategy juxtaposes the dystopian perspective of Bel's constant surveillance with the utopian perspective created by the albeit turbulent thoughts that drive her resistance to the program. This juxtaposition creates the sense of push and pull between the two.

My strategy regarding focalization is illuminated by the post-Genettian terminology proposed by James Phelan (2001, 59), implying the following narrative possibilities combining who sees and who speaks. Phelan's terminology is helpful in maintaining the distinction between narrating and focalizing while describing how they function in combination. I am primarily interested here in the second, third and fourth of Phelan's combinations:

1. narrator's focalization and voice;
2. character's focalization and narrator's voice;
3. blends of narrator's focalization and voice with character's focalization and voice;
4. narrator's focalization and character's voice.

Phelan's categories allow us to analyse the narrative more closely to show how focalization is used to shape the reader's responses to different characters. When Bel is focalized through the eyes of an unsympathetic character, the reader's distance from that character is maintained. In the scene where Manchietti observes the parade, the reader's ambivalence towards his viewpoint is achieved by a use of external focalization which blends the narrator's focalization and voice with the character's focalization and voice:

Manchietti scanned the children standing solemnly under their balloons moored to the allocated lampposts on the far kerbside. Andreus's CIA shadow was on her right. He squirted a bow-tie and flower's worth of water at a young girl absently wrapping the cordon around her lamppost. Damned fool, Manchietti thought; the girl was upset. (169)

The verbal indicators of the character's focalization and voice in this excerpt are the use of Bel's surname and the expression "Damned fool" respectively, which betray Manchietti's attitude towards both Bel and the CIA agent. In this instance the 'blend' of

focalization keeps the reader at a certain distance from Manchiotti, the character who may orchestrate the protagonist's death.

Phelan's character/ narrator blend can also be examined to show how the reader may be drawn closer to a character. Some segments of the narrative where Kasir is the focalizer and Bel the focalized place the emphasis on the focalizer trying to perceive what the focalized is seeing or thinking. In this way, Kasir's growing empathy with Bel is expressed. For example, when Bel is reunited with Evelyn on the flight to Milan, Kasir attempts to interpret how Bel perceives her old friend:

Kasir could sense the nerves, the stubborn doubts in Bel. She studied the contours of Evelyn's face the way an infant might a slightly familiar adult's: with innocence, trepidation and a need to believe. (81)

Here, the narrator stays almost entirely within Kasir's range of perception and so we know that it is Kasir paying close attention to Bel. Nonetheless, certain sentences in this section of narrative (79-84) betray the narrator's presence ("They all followed Kasir through the open hatch behind the cockpit and moved to the rear of the six-passenger Twin Squirrel." (80); "A few minutes later, the helicopter descended from cruising altitude onto a helipad in an independent RAF flight base just outside Folkestone." (83)). As a consequence, the above quotation where Kasir appears to observe Bel *actually* presents the narrator-focalizer observing the character (Kasir) observing another character (Bel) observing still another (Evelyn). This is an example of what Mieke Bal has termed "embedded focalization" (1983, 257).

Although it is true that a third-person narrator can focalize through the viewpoint of any character, Phelan's refinement of narrative combinations preserves the distinction between narrator and focalizer that is ignored in the classification "omniscient third-

person narration".<sup>12</sup> Additionally, it becomes possible to describe the use of focalization with more specificity regarding the interplay of the narrator and character. The following passages represent blends of the narrator's focalization with the character's voice, the narrator's focalization and voice with character's focalization and voice, and the character's focalization with the narrator's voice:

Kasir wound his watch and looked out on the neon curves of the medium-sized town below [narrator's focalization]. The questions were perfectly natural. It was a positive sign, her thinking of the days ahead [character's voice]. (82)

The hand stayed patiently outstretched. Bel clasped the fingers. Good. Composure. Just the right touch [character's focalization and voice]. Kasir had to remind himself that this was the same woman who'd cradled an imaginary baby in the chapel just hours before [narrator's focalization and voice]. (83)

Bel's friend placed a censorious index finger to her lips. An elegant gesture [character's focalization]. But Kasir found questions about the flight's monitoring and the scope of Birch's brief beginning to occupy him [narrator's voice]. (83)

These blends of focalization and voice contribute directly to the reader's understanding of the interrelated developments of Bel and Kasir, culminating in the utopian horizon at the novel's conclusion. The characters have come to care for one another, and the narrative hints at the possibility that their relationship might develop further. At the fertility clinic, Bel is touched by the picture of an Arabic boy on the information packs. It influences her choice of treatment, and her thoughts, words and manner suggest that Kasir may become the donor (236). In turn, Kasir associates the urgency he feels in his final decision to get Bel under the protection of the International Court of Justice

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<sup>12</sup> See Genette's "zero focalization": the narrator knows more than the characters. He may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures. This is the traditional "omniscient narrator".

immediately, with his feelings on reaching the hospital just in time for his child's birth years earlier:

The first set of doors slid open, and he could feel his wife's kiss, trusting him with their gift to the world. (241)

These episodes indicate emotional transitions in both characters: in Bel's case away from having a child with no paternal involvement; in Kasir's, the cautious recognition that there is another woman who may come to mean as much to him as his late wife Neith, and with whom he may have the renewed chance of a loving, family life.

The development of Bel and Kasir as revealed through my focalization strategy may, by analogy, suggest a kind of reconciliation between the West and Islam. From this perspective, my employment of focalization complements the novel's themes and the post-9/11 context. My intention was to create a narrative less focused upon combating an enemy than providing a humanist intervention in the many questions relating to geopolitical and cultural divisions in the wake of 9/11.

My employment of focalization in the service of this humanist intervention invites comparison with Lorraine Adams' employment of the technique in *Harbor* (2004). Like *Call Her Slim*, *Harbor* is a third person narrative focalized through the eyes of the different characters, principally through the Algerian characters Aziz and Ghazi. In order to convey Aziz's sensory disorientation after a life-threatening passage to America, Adams makes sustained usage of the blend of narrator's focalization and character's voice in conveying Aziz's decentered mind style. This emphasises the importance of language in shaping culturally distinct ways of thinking. A typical example is Aziz's expression of his feeling of closeness to the nurse who tends his wounds, which seems far removed from Western notions of romantic discourse:

He was already a mile further down the road because she had held him. Something about her had slipped under him. He couldn't give her *gniin*; no his lies would have to be true in some way, not hopping and light and false. (35)

Adams' employment of this blend of focalization helps create tension between a dominant Anglo-centric discourse and a repressed North African one throughout the novel. It comments on language's influence on society and vice versa: how it simultaneously gives Aziz and his friends their sense of identity while limiting (albeit to different degrees) the viability of their aspirations in the new society. As such, Adams' focalization strategy illuminates a key theme of *Harbor*, which is the failure of the process of exile and the failure of the New World to provide a utopian horizon as Promised Land. This may be contrasted with my own use of focalization as regards Bel and Kasir, which is intended to align the perspectives of a Western and Middle Eastern character, and to suggest how their cultural identities are fluid and thus not destined to be subject to mutual distrust and incomprehension.

In *Call Her Slim* I also try to prioritise a humanist perspective by focalizing over the course of the narrative through as many characters as is practical, whether these characters are sympathetic or otherwise. This allows me to present the players in the espionage drama without privileging one set of goals over another. I have already referred to the interrogation of espionage agendas as one function of Kasir's characterisation: for example, in the sections of narrative focalized through the character relating to the political situation in his native Egypt, the agenda of British Intelligence and that of the American CIA and Italian SISMI. However, in the case of Eskin's narrative, my intention was to use focalization to reveal a Russian espionage villain as ruthless as the Cold War stereotypes instantly recognisable from Bond movies, but without the formal status or institutional mindset of a KGB/ FSB/ SVR character: in effect, a villain with an obvious thriller pedigree whom the implied reader might be prepared to invest in. The primary reason for the involvement of a Russian villain and

Russian security services was to make the plot-line of the stolen thermobaric bombs credible, as at present such weapons would only be developed for use by Russia or the United States. Eskin's nationality is also integral to the plot line involving the Chechen atrocity survivor Rumissa. The factual Katyr Yurt atrocity in Chechnya (125-127) involved the use of thermobaric bombs by the Russian military.

Eskin is an outsider in the new Russia and alienated in many respects by his political masters. In particular, given the egregious nature of the task that he is programmed to perform, I felt that focalizing through Eskin should reveal the role that his personality and beliefs play in his eventual fate and that of his victim, Rumissa. What drives Eskin is revealed to be a combination of programming, his own sociopathic personality and a desire for Russia to return to its mightiest days as the nucleus of the Soviet Union:

His desires were increasingly masked in strange narratives. A cartoon had run through his mind on and off for days: a grizzly bear tearing a stenographer to pieces, her tiny disembodied hand rattling the return key the last body part devoured. The stenographer, he knew, stood for bureaucracy, for FSB, SVR, MI5 and other acronymatic serfs. The bear, the true soul of Mother Russia. (124-125)

The blend of character's focalization and narrator's voice in the above quote conveys Eskin's distinctive outsider quality, bringing the reader as close as is desirable to such an unsympathetic character: the narrator almost colludes with the character's point of view. However, as we see elsewhere, Eskin is someone who cannot converse with colleagues on their level (1-2) and who treats subordinates and superiors alike with contempt (2; 124). The violent murder of the Chechen atrocity survivor Rumissa is, therefore, meant to be interpreted in terms of the arrogance and vanity of the sociopathic personality and not merely as the consequence of the fears of Russian Intelligence concerning Rumissa's propaganda value for their country's enemies. In the following excerpt, where Eskin

contemplates his impending attack on MI5 premises, blends of narrator's focalization and voice with character's focalization and voice are employed to emphasise the schism between the character's own preoccupation with his self-image on the one hand, and the task of the professional assassin he has been programmed to execute on the other:

A direct attack, worthy of the Samurai or Taliban fighter; if Stiles and his colleagues were there, all the better. He slowed at the first junction, leaning over to pull the chamois out of the passenger seat compartment, and winding it tightly round his fingers. Little bitch! He'd need a fucking tetanus shot! What story would he cook up for Godovin? He'd have to have been injured in a fight. Outnumbered, using anything to hand. Or else tortured and maimed and still refusing to talk. The wounded hero had to be authentic.  
(156)

Such a blend of focalization in Eskin's narrative helps to prevent it from being interpreted in terms of hackneyed Cold War-style divisions between those acting on behalf of West and East, just as Kasir's narrative resists being interpreted within the context of stereotypical post-9/11 divisions between Western and Middle Eastern cultures. In these examples, the post-9/11 espionage environment is considered in terms of the flawed characters embroiled in it, rather than their professional and political commitments.

### 3.2: Narrated monologue and the theme of mind control

The mind control theme in *Call Her Slim* provides the most obvious link between the dystopian fiction of the past and the dystopian mood of the 9/11 novel, and it was clear to me from the outset that the role of memory suppression and thought control had major implications for the representation of Bel's consciousness. I felt that the reader at times should share in her disorientation, and certain of the novel's more difficult scenes (the episodes involving Swain and Bel's initial interrogation being two examples early in the



novel) are focalized through her with this aim in mind. In these scenes the narrator knows little, if anything, more than Bel.

Bel's primary struggle in the novel is with memory, and she suffers psychological anguish about her lost past and alienation in the present. To convey this, I chose to generally present her dreams, thoughts and flashbacks in narrated monologue, also known as indirect interior monologue or free indirect discourse.<sup>13</sup> In narrated monologue the voices of both narrator and character merge momentarily. Thoughts are reproduced as in interior monologue, but the narrator's mediation is still apparent in references to the character in the third person. An example of narrated monologue is Bel's dream about Rian's disappearance in Amsterdam:

*A night ride through quiet streets, fear of loved ones dying in unfamiliar places. A van. Guys in flak jackets. Medics. She's wet, shivering, her hair a damp tangle, her ears and face stiff, but no memory of being submerged. Just a place near Rian's drowned body...*  
(78)

The technique is used here to reflect fragmentary thoughts and dream content. The narrator approximates the idiolect of the character's thought with sentences of informal, elliptical syntax<sup>14</sup>: in Mieke Bal's words, "the narrating party approximates as closely as possible the character's own words without letting it [sic] speak directly" (1985, 113).

Elsewhere in the narrative, Bel's thoughts are communicated with the narrator's mediation more apparent:

The bank. What was it about the bank? Georgy's assets. Tangled, so tangled like his DNA. Yes – his *share* transfers. Had they gone ahead? She'd have several hundred

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<sup>13</sup> See McQuillan (2000, 252-253) for a discussion of the historical development of the literary modes for rendering consciousness.

<sup>14</sup> See Bronzwaer (1970) for a study of how free indirect discourse is suited to the theme of a discontinuous, developing self.

thousand to her name. The very thought gave her a jolt. She'd need the details about the funds in her new Swiss bank account. (34)

These excerpts present the protagonist in an altered state of consciousness, and both concern her impaired memory of facts and events. In the first, she is dreaming of the night of Rian's death; in the second, she has been injected with a truth drug, and unable to shut her mind down, desperately tries to remember what she is asked to. However, narrated monologue is also employed when she is fully conscious, in order to relate her problems with memory to her feelings of anguish and dislocation:

Sometimes she'd walk through the village during the primary school's lunch hour, absorbing the energy from carefree little lives, just to understand what living here *could* have been like. She'd always notice the stragglers, the non-joiners, keeping to their own side of the street...

She scanned the kitchen with its Aga and round banquet table: no cooking and no housework for Mata Hari, no babbling soundtrack of *Trisha* or *Loose Women*. No cornflakes for breakfast. (7-8)

This passage identifies the most important aspect of Bel's conflict relating to memory. While she retains some fond memories from childhood, it is her desire for more meaningful memories such as those raising a child can offer that is frustrated most painfully. Bel's resistance to her program manifests itself early in the narrative in this desire to both retain past memories and create new ones. This is the germ from which the novel's eventual utopian horizon develops.

The centrality of the subject of memory to Bel's development complements my specific intention in treating the theme of mind control, which is to undermine the credibility of the process. This is a departure from how similar storylines have been treated in thriller fiction from the immediate post-World War Two period onwards. Cold War precursors to Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) with a 'brainwashing' theme ascribe Pavlov-Lysenko theories of reflex conditioning to

Communist infiltrators in America, or to foreign regimes or agencies holding Americans hostage. Pat Frank's *Forbidden Area* (1956) and Paul Gallico's *Trial by Terror* (1952) are two respective examples. The mind control, as in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), is typically by state dictat, and the procedures are executed with ruthless efficiency. Effective thought control in dystopias such as Orwell's or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* relies upon the population allowing itself to be robbed of its collective memory, of its knowledge of shared practices and even entire traditions. So when the fireman Guy Montag is asked by a little girl in *Fahrenheit 451* if it is true that firemen used to fight fires instead of creating them in mass book burnings, he replies earnestly: "No. Houses have *always* been fireproof, take my word for it" (16). The effectiveness of mind control on whatever scale thus relies on the compliance of the subject(s).

In *Call Her Slim*, my desire was to undermine this literary representation of mind-control programs as efficient, and to emphasise that Bel is consistently misunderstood and underestimated by everyone bar Kasir. Regarding the program's specific moment of failure, the circus routine allows the mechanics of Bel's program to be shown unravelling moment by moment in close detail (168-173). The use of a circus troupe as cover for the operation revisits a thriller staple of the circus as a setting for plots concerned with espionage, mystery and subterfuge, but the routine itself allows greater scope for original content than alternative scenarios that I considered.<sup>15</sup> Relatedly, the ineffectiveness of Bel's program is not due to its being outmoded: it is presented in a very contemporary context, with the use of designer drugs and tracking biochips (59). With such adaptations, the mind-control theme seems well-suited to the post-9/11 context, as such programmed assassins represented an asymmetric mode of warfare before that phrase was used by the Pentagon to denote suicide bombers. Additionally, the post-9/11 concern with state-sponsored terrorism invites the espionage thriller trope of the Deep Cover (or 'Manchurian') agent, who unwittingly serves the

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<sup>15</sup> The alternative scenarios considered for the atrocity were a student demonstration and a Papal visit. Immediate influences on my use of the circus in *Call Her Slim* were Alistair Maclean's 1975 spy-cum-crime thriller *Circus* and Stuart Kaminsky's late Cold War crime thriller *A Fine Red Rain* (1987).

aims of political masters rather than consciously promoting the ideals of a terrorist faction. So, in *Call Her Slim*, Western powers attempt to achieve their propaganda victory in the War on Terror, firstly by brainwashing a citizen of the enemy state (Alessandra Baranyi), and subsequently one of their own citizens. However, their strategy backfires drastically. The program does not take, implemented as it is at short notice, and undermined as it is by the programmer's decision to save his assassin.

Meanwhile, Bel manages to undo some of the program's damage by rediscovering some of her own history. In this respect, learning that she can bear and love a child is a crucial step in her recuperation. Within the context of dystopian discourse, the protagonist's recuperation relies upon the recognition or regained memory of suppressed knowledge that will liberate her from the official story of her life.

#### 4: Gottlieb's and Moylan's formulations and the structure of *Call Her Slim*

As I have used Erika Gottlieb's characteristics of dystopian fiction and Tom Moylan's formulations of the utopian dystopia and anti-utopian dystopia to argue for the type of discourse apparent in the works of other authors, it follows that I should do likewise regarding my own novel. Whether or not a novel can be described as "utopian dystopian" or "anti-utopian dystopian" depends upon its story pattern and the tone of its conclusion. In the case of *Call Her Slim*, I would also argue that the novel's structure contributes to a particular interpretation in terms of Gottlieb's characteristics of dystopian discourse.

It is worthwhile contrasting *Call Her Slim* with Le Carré's *Absolute Friends* in terms of narrative structure with reference to Gottlieb's formulations. Whereas Le Carré structures his novel in order to open "The Protagonist's Window on the Past", the structure of *Call Her Slim* complements Gottlieb's category of "The Push and Pull between Utopian and Dystopian Perspectives".

My decision to give the reader information as required has the consequence that plot and fabula do not coincide in the novel. Nonetheless, although characters' back stories inevitably place sections of narrative in the historical past, the main plot threads are developed in a linear fashion. This is the most straightforward way to present how the main conflicts spread to affect all players in the narrative, and my decision takes account of the reader's cognitive requirements when faced with a kinetic plot involving shifts in characters' personal and professional priorities. Also, a linear presentation of plot best illustrates the protagonist evolving to deal with the conflict. This is important because the stages in resolving her conflict involve uncovering truths about the people who have had the greatest impact on her life: Georgy, Evelyn and Rian.

The structuring of my novel may be contrasted with that of Le Carré's, in which fabula and plot are desynchronised to a much greater extent, in order to reveal how Mundy is left ill-equipped to deal with his coming conflict by his effectively being stranded between two political eras. By contrast, there is only one instance of discrepancy between story-order and text-order in *Call Her Slim*. That occurs in Chapter Five where certain story events are presented having occurred chronologically before those related earlier in the text. These events, Baranyi's death and Kasir's subsequent meeting with CIA agent Borringer, are placed at the end of the first section, because they directly anticipate the events of subsequent sections.

Whereas Le Carré's novel is structured in order that the narratives of the espionage characters (Mundy, Sasha, Amory and Rourke) converge at the conclusion, I structured *Call Her Slim* as a multi-layered narrative. The protagonist's narrative has an additional narrative running parallel to it, which traces the story and eventual demise of Eskin. However, the secondary narrative relating to Eskin does not sprout from the protagonist's narrative; rather, this narrative develops into a subplot quite separate from the protagonist's story. The subplot does, however, involve several key characters from Bel's narrative: Stiles, Zal Tunney, and Mexican Radio Vince. The subplot echoes the

mind control theme of the main plot, sets up Eskin as a foil, and eventually illustrates the fate Bel will avoid.

The multi-layered plot action is spread across the four sections of *Call Her Slim* as follows:

i.) *Character Background/ Conflict*: The first section focuses on two major plot threads and their interaction: (1) the theft of Russian thermobaric bombs and the Russian Security Analyst Eskin's attempt to locate these; (2) the use of protagonist Bel by the MI5 in their homeland operations. The interaction of these two plot threads occurs in Chapter Three with Bel's interrogation. The final chapter of the first section prepares the reader for the next and main stage of the plot, the unofficial operation-by-proxy in Italy co-ordinated by various Western Intelligence agencies with the protagonist at its heart.

ii.) *Situation*: The second section is devoted to the preparation of Bel in England by Kasir for this operation and her departure with Kasir and Evelyn for Italy. The shifting priorities in both Kasir's and Eskin's discrete operations are also revealed.

iii.) *Revelation/ Disaster*: The third section is devoted to Bel's growing suspicions about her past, about Evelyn, and revelations about her programming and her 'husband' Georgy's key role in her manipulation by MI5 and MI6. The central events of this section are the growing alliance between Bel and her programmer Kasir and the conclusion of Eskin's narrative.

iv.) *Disaster/ Goal*: The final section focuses on the Milan operation and on Bel and Kasir's subsequent escape with MI6. Evelyn's role in Bel's manipulation is revealed, as are details of MI6's unsuccessful operation to capture or kill Evelyn for selling British state secrets. The novel concludes with Bel and Kasir fleeing three intelligence agencies to Switzerland, where Bel's plans for a new life and restitution for her past mistreatment

take shape. However, the novel's conclusion suggests this new life will hang in the balance for some time to come.

While the open ending of Bel and Kasir's narrative leaves their fate ambiguous, a utopian horizon is still perceptible, unlike in the anti-utopian dystopian narratives of Mundy and Eskin.

My multi-layered narrative model was also influenced by Arthur W. Frank's classification of illness narratives, inviting an interpretation of Bel's narrative as having a positive trajectory.<sup>16</sup> Frank posits three narrative types: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative and the quest narrative. Both the protagonist and the 'foil' Eskin are prone to physical ailments. The novel suggests that Bel's are the result of physical and psychological abuse (and possibly largely psycho-somatic) or drug-abuse; Eskin's age and lifestyle are significant factors. Both characters, programmed by their respective intelligence services to commit murder, are to that extent 'mentally unbalanced'. In other words, both characters can be described as being 'ill'.

Bel's story and Eskin's can be read as enacting "The Push and Pull between Utopian and Dystopian Perspectives", because the novel invites us to contrast the fates of these characters in terms of their resistance to or compliance with their spymasters' machinations in support of, to quote Tom Moylan, "the hegemonic power" (2000, xiii). Neither are spies, both having been 'outsourced' for the programs of their respective intelligence services. The novel starts with Eskin's story, which at first appears to be a quest narrative, his goal being to discover the whereabouts of the stolen vacuum bombs. As the novel progresses, however, Eskin serves his spymasters in increasingly extreme ways. Eskin's story ultimately becomes a narrative of chaos, culminating in self-destructive acts of psychotic violence.

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<sup>16</sup> Narrative Therapy involves factual accounts of illnesses being written or recorded by patients and used for therapeutic purposes with other patients in similar circumstances.

Eskin's fate accentuates by contrast the dominant theme or motif of Bel's narrative, that of rebirth and redemption. In that sense, Bel's narrative conforms to Frank's definition of a quest narrative, her quest being one for epistemological insight and the recovery of an authentic private life. Her experience grants her an opportunity to transform herself for the better through battling adversity and coming to understand that, however precarious, the private world of motherhood offers an alternative to the geopolitical turmoil and its impact upon her private life. This is the utopian dream of a better world that the novel considers. However, crucial to this perception of a better world is Bel's recognition that she has a responsibility to try to ensure that others do not share her experience:

You've got to narrow your focus. Even if there's one less Birch or Stiles, or one less Evelyn. And one less *me*." (231)

Bel's potential for self-transformation may also invite a contrast with Mundy's story, because although Le Carré's character understands what is most important in his life (his love for Zara and Mustapha, and loyalty to Sasha), Mundy cannot be saved by that understanding. With a greater knowledge of her past, there is at least the possibility that Bel is better placed to prevent it destroying her future, whereas Mundy's past is the very thing that ensures he will have no future. Whether Bel can really be finally physically safe or healthy is perhaps less important than her spiritual and psychological transformation. For this reason, I classify my own novel as a utopian-dystopian narrative.

### Summary and conclusion

I would compare the experience of reading a good thriller to that of the adventurer tackling unfamiliar and dangerous terrain, in poor light and often in pitch darkness, and



with the destination uncertain until the very last. As author, therefore, my artistic goal was to produce a contemporary work of espionage thriller fiction, one characterised by an unpredictable, fluid plot that avoided shopworn thriller set-pieces. In the commentary, I have located my work alongside other post-9/11 novels, initiated a fresh discussion about the relevant works within the context of literary utopianism (specifically, how they can be interpreted in terms of dystopian discourse) and compared and contrasted my own novel with the others surveyed, in order to argue that *Call Her Slim* makes a distinctive contribution to the field.

In writing my novel, I have reconfigured generic story patterns, themes and characterisation, taking account of the significant interaction between these three elements of the narrative. In relation to story pattern, I wished to posit an untested plot scenario for the post-9/11 novel, that of Western intelligence services grooming a native, non-Muslim British subject to carry out a suicide bombing as part of a false flag operation on European soil. In this way, the more conventional literary evolution of the suicide bomber (a theme of many post-9/11 novels) as extraterritorial enemy and anti-establishment figure is reconfigured in *Call Her Slim*. This in turn, subverts the story pattern common to post-9/11 thrillers of a confrontation with the enemy, by focusing instead upon the dystopian narrative of the manufacturing of the enemy by the state. The mind control plotline, unlike its treatment in Cold War fiction, is subsequently developed to suggest the impracticability of such programs. Finally, the multi-layered narrative structure also supports a reading of Bel and Kasir's story in terms of utopian dystopian discourse, by presenting Eskin's "chaos narrative" in parallel to Bel's "quest narrative", whereby Eskin's character may be considered as a foil to Bel's character.

Regarding themes explored in *Call Her Slim* that are more widely relevant to the post-9/11 novel, I have argued that the dialogues on cultural differences and espionage ethics focused in Kasir's characterisation enact Gottlieb's "push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives". As a Muslim character in the midst of the post-9/11 international espionage world, Kasir comes to adopt a dystopian perspective upon the

interplay of espionage agendas of East and West (a role emblematic of that of intelligence services in the Middle East in Washington's "War on Terror") and their impact upon countries and cultures involved. The utopian perspective is restored by the symbolic reconciliation of the West and Islam that Kasir's eventual relationship with Bel represents.

Finally, the characterisations of both Bel and Kasir support a humanist intervention in the world of post-9/11 international politics and espionage, which in turn provides the novel's utopian horizon. Both characters ultimately prioritise life's fundamentals over political causes and allegiances, as foreshadowed by the widespread ruminations throughout their narratives upon food, clothes, values rooted in childhood, lost love and authentic desire for family. This emphasis upon interiority allies *Call Her Slim* to a degree with the literary fiction and literary thrillers of Updike, McEwan, Le Carré and Krol; however, these authors privilege interiority over action in their novels, whereas the density of plotting and ratio of action to interiority in my novel aligns it with the commercial espionage thriller as practised by Reich, Fawer, Ludlum et al.

In the commentary, I have identified aspects of dystopian discourse in both post-9/11 thriller and literary narratives, offering a fresh perspective upon and extending the scope of previous studies on the American '9/11 novel' and the post-9/11 novel. To support my argument, I have considered studies in literary utopianism by Erika Gottlieb and Tom Moylan. Using Moylan's formulations for marking distinct categories of dystopias, I have concluded that my novel can be considered an example of utopian dystopian discourse.

I will conclude the thesis by assessing the cultural value of the post-9/11 novel. I would suggest that its dystopian discourse is a response to the political climate and uneasy public mood of the era.<sup>17</sup> A reading of post-9/11 fiction as dystopian discourse has already been suggested by Sicher and Skradol (2006), who argue that the literary

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<sup>17</sup> The mainstream success of dystopian narratives such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and the 2006 film adaptation of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's comic book series *V For Vendetta* (1982-1989) may further support this conclusion.

fascination with 9/11 itself reflects a desire on behalf of authors for the real to intrude into fiction, as happens in dystopian narratives in order to discernibly warn people about what should not be allowed to happen or recur. Nelson (2003) reaches a similar conclusion via a contrary argument, suggesting that the events of 9/11 and the anticipated political response are prefigured in Hollywood genre films from the late twentieth century, especially Horror, Dystopia, Thriller and Noir. Nelson also points out that the dystopia and thriller are united in Hollywood movies by the trope of conspiracy, whereby terrorist acts are connected with conspiratorial politics (89-90).<sup>18</sup> Whether conducted by a ruling elite against one or more of its citizens or by terrorists against the state, “Such terrorism impugns the legitimacy of states and regimes by demonstrating that they cannot meet their responsibility to provide domestic tranquility – by protecting civilians from violence” (90). Nelson’s argument may reflect a perception of 9/11 having spawned a “dystopian epidemic”, specifically in America’s national security and intelligence system, whereby the extent of its activities and their effectiveness can only be guessed.<sup>19</sup>

Much post-9/11 fiction addresses a similar moral dilemma to the Hollywood dystopias and conspiracy thrillers. In positing worse case scenarios arising out of the resulting political climate, post-9/11 novels preserve an ambiguity between how bad things are and how bad they might become. In *Call Her Slim*, Bel’s story achieves this by a distinctive mix of story elements. Some recognisable scenarios of contemporary espionage thrillers – such as the False Flag operations carried out by Western

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<sup>18</sup> The material available for conspiracy narratives surrounding 9/11 is vast. For an example, see McMurtry’s reliably sourced account of how FBI agents knew of Al Qaeda’s plan to attack Lower Manhattan with commercial airliners and onboard explosives, but had their investigation blocked and were threatened with prosecution under the National Security Act by FBI and Justice Department command if they published this information (2002, xii).

<sup>19</sup> “Dystopian epidemic” is a phrase coined by David Isenberg, who explains: “Considering revelations in recent years ranging from renditions, the overseas Central Intelligence Agency prison system, torture during interrogations and National Security Agency wiretapping, aka “warrantless surveillance”, it is difficult to claim, a-la Claude Rains in the movie *Casablanca*, that anyone is “shocked, shocked” to find the United States intelligence system so cumbersome that oversight is virtually impossible.”

intelligence agencies in *Absolute Friends* and *Rules Of Deception* and the state surveillance practices evident in *Improbable* and *Callisto* – are combined with an updating of the brainwashing theme of the Cold War thriller to create the original scenario already mentioned: that of the British state and its intelligence allies facilitating an atrocity in a compliant Western nation that involves a British subject being forced to masquerade as an Islamic terrorist.

Regarding the distinctive mood of post-9/11 *thrillers* in relation to their Cold War antecedents, the Cold War thriller author was not faced with such grim political realities on his or her own doorstep. More broadly, the dystopian discourse of the late Cold War era had a different focus. Moylan identifies the nineteen-eighties and the influence of post-structuralism and postmodernism as heralding the advent of a new form of dystopian fiction that he labels “the critical dystopia”. Such fiction occupies a space between the pessimism essential to dystopian discourse and the possibility of a utopian horizon where militant challenges to the hegemony might prove successful (195). In the eighties, such fiction articulated the ideological power struggle between traditional liberals and the era’s conservative neo-liberals:

Challenging capitalist power as well as conservative rule—and refusing the false ‘utopianism’ of reformist promises from neoliberals and compromised social democrats with their bad-faith exercises in ‘third way’ solutions—the new dystopias have rekindled the cold flame of critique and have thereby become a cultural manifestation of a broad-scale yet radically diverse alliance politics that is emerging as the twenty-first century commences. (142)

Such ideological battles, however heartfelt, were carried out between parties who shared a certainty in democratic values: the Soviet Union and Communist China were viewed in the West as the models of modern totalitarian states. Few Western writers or theorists would have imagined the draconian protocols of these states implemented in Western democracies, as some of the post-9/11 novels surveyed here suggest and warn against. In

this respect, the post-9/11 Western societies of these novels may be considered analogous to what Gottlieb terms “emergency dystopias”, whose elites prey on the fears of the populace in justifying “specific elements of totalitarianism such as denunciations, oppression, and the lies of propaganda” (9).

It is also the case that espionage thriller fiction occupied a very different cultural context prior to 9/11. The following “recipe” for the Cold War thriller comes from Joseph W. Slade (1992), writing at the end of that era, and anticipating the period immediately after it:

The typical recipe calls for a good deal of improbable adventure and more modest proportions of exotic sex, seasoned with off-the-shelf ingredients: overwrought deaths, ingenious brutalities, esoteric tradecraft, stereotypical villains, redundant heroics, obvious conspiracies, colourful locations, global quests, Cold War platitudes, and, most titillating of all, nightmare images of apocalyptic, big-power showdowns. (226)

Slade sees the Cold War thriller as significant in its commentary on technological advancement. It is “a genre devoted to the profound changes in information flow, in the nature of that information, and in the communications systems by which we process that information” (226). As a novel like *Improbable* shows, the Information Age has the potential to breed nightmarish scenarios. However, yet again, few Western writers or theorists prior to 9/11 warned of state surveillance on a grand scale in their own homelands.

For this reason, I feel that Keith Booker’s contention that “in many ways, dystopian fiction has become a paradigmatic expression of the Western imagination in the twentieth century” (1995, 58) does not explain its cultural value in the twenty-first. The real sense of menace and threat in post-9/11 novels lies, I suggest, with the perceived meaninglessness and impracticability of political ideals, which it may be argued has its origins in the event of 9/11 itself.

Baudrillard, in his essay 'The Spirit of Terrorism' (2001), suggests we respond to the event of 9/11 in the following way:

Terrorism is immoral. The event of the World Trade Center, this symbolic challenge is immoral, and it answers a globalization that is immoral. Then let us be immoral ourselves and, if we want to understand something, let us go somewhat beyond Good and Evil. (*Le Monde*, 2.11.01)

Baudrillard's conclusion is that America has no adequate response to the particular manifestation of Islamic terrorism realised on 9/11. This observation derives from his perception that the event serves as a rallying call, a Divine inspiration, for Jihadists. The terrorists' suicide is a crucial weapon against their powerful adversary, since it deprives the adversary of agency, of the ability to extinguish them with vastly superior force, which would render their sacrifice useless:

(It) moves the fight into the symbolic domain, where the rule is the rule of challenge, of reversal, of escalation. Thus, death can be answered only through an equal or superior death. (Terrorism) challenges the system by a gift that the latter can reciprocate only through its own death and its own collapse. (*Le Monde*, 2.11.01)

According to this interpretation, Al-Qaeda realised an essentially nebulous agenda on 9/11. The attack lacked an obvious political objective. It was not a conventional act of war, the use of violence accompanied by the promise to cease violence on certain political objectives being met. Rather, the purpose of the attacks lay in their symbolising the potential of radical Islam to triumph through the will of its martyrs,<sup>20</sup> while the

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<sup>20</sup> See El-Sayed Sae'ed (2001) for an interpretation of Al-Qaeda's agenda:

"Bin Laden is not Guevara, speaking in the name of all the oppressed peoples of the world, with a vision that revolutionized socialist thought at the time. Bin Laden's vision is a much simpler one, dividing the world into Muslim and non-Muslim, and his "strategy" is not about making the Muslims of the world aware of their political, cultural or social reality, or even a call for their unity. It is based on a comparison between the state of the Muslim world today and that of the early days of Islam; for just as the Soviet empire fell, so too should the U.S. empire . . . This is the key: the primitive rebel. His mission is revenge.

assassination of Osama Bin Laden by US Special Forces in 2011 possibly serves the same symbolic function for many Americans.

On the other hand, America and Britain responded to the attack with an incoherent political strategy: the neo-conservative narrative of spreading democracy by force, or revolution as imposed from above. There was no evidence that radical Islam would be thwarted by political democracy, any more than Hitler's rise to power was by the democratic political system in nineteen-thirties Germany. Indeed, it has been argued that the War on Terror's confused narrative exposed Bush and Blair's new proactive foreign policy as neo-imperialism in the service of wresting control of Iraq's oil supplies.<sup>21</sup>

This political context clearly lends itself to dystopian discourse in cultural criticism and the arts. Such discourse in turn allows post-9/11 fiction to engage in a dialogue with history, with the literary study of utopianism as discussed by theorists such as Gottlieb and Moylan, and with the great canonical dystopian/ utopian novels of the past. Nonetheless, that the novels surveyed here have a dystopian quality is ultimately a subjective judgement, as the terms "utopia" and "dystopia" necessarily have relative meanings for different readers and critics. As Tom Moylan states:

This [...] the judgment of utopian or dystopian quality [is] up to the reader or critic who undoubtedly works from a particular standpoint (with particular affiliations and principles) in order to decide whether a given fictive society is better or worse than the author's or the reader/critic's. (155).

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His strikes are against the ordinary man living within the boundaries of the "enemy empire." The horrifying human losses are irrelevant for him, for what matters is the icon: the World Trade Center, a symbol of America."

<sup>21</sup> Katz (2002) argues that the "oil-siphoning" motive became pressing after Sunni Islamist movements gained influence in Saudi Arabia and Arab nationalism and Shi'ite fundamentalism looked set to threaten the corrupt Saudi kingdom, leading America's ruling elite to plan the privatisation of Iraq's oil supplies. Katz details how similar plans were implemented for Central American nations including Colombia and Venezuela.

The identification of utopian, dystopian, or anti-utopian elements in whatever combination in a work of fiction will inevitably be coloured by the reader's political views.

An argument between the character Lianne and her mother's friend, the only European character in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, sums up what I perceive to be at the root of the post-9/11 novel's adaptation of dystopian discourse: a heightened awareness (on behalf of authors and their readers) of the historic roots of global inequality and its perpetuation in unjust societies ruled by power hungry elites, and the probability that such inequality will be the root cause of future global conflicts, as evidenced by 9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent atrocities. The root causes of the inequality itself constitute the problem that globalisation is unable to resolve:

'They strike a blow to this country's dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies.'

He spoke softly, looking into the carpet.

'One side has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die.'

'God is great,' she said.

'Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness.'

(46-47)

The "radically diverse alliance politics" quoted from Moylan is not up to redressing these matters of history. After 9/11, dystopian discourse entered a new phase, and it is this that the post-9/11 novel reflects.



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