LEN DEIGHTON

The master of fictional espionage

Faith

'The plotting is masterly, the atmospheric descriptions superb' SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

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Faith

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Bernard Samson returns to Berlin in the first novel in the classic spy trilogy, FAITH, HOPE and CHARITYBernard has known that he is not getting the full picture from London Central ever since discovering that his wife Fiona was a double agent.Werner Volkmann has been cast out by London Central as untrustworthy. Yet Werner still seems able to pick up information that Bernard should have been told…This reissue includes a foreword from the cover designer, Oscar-winning filmmaker Arnold Schwartzman, and a brand new introduction by Len Deighton, which offers a fascinating insight into the writing of the story.

Содержание

Cover designer's note

As Bernard Samson is now on an assignment in Poland I searched through my collection of photographs for a suitable image that would evoke that part of the world, and Bernard's involvement with the women in his life.

I remembered that, while on location for one of my documentaries in Poland, I had come across a window with a lace curtain adorned with a pair of ladies; the image of this would now provide a subtle visual analogy for the Iron Curtain.

I discovered that by placing a larger than life photograph of Samson in the window it created a rather surreal effect. Rather like Kong peering in at an unsuspecting Fay Wray, Bernard looms behind the curtain, an unwilling outsider ostracized from domestic comfort.

For a further reference to the two women in Bernard's life, the back cover displays a heart-shaped traditional Polish Wycinanki, an intricate design carefully cut from folded paper. Here, the heart is torn in two, separated by the sword of a KGB badge. You will note that the Western half features a very elegant gold wedding ring.

At the heart of every one of the nine books in this triple trilogy is Bernard Samson, so I wanted to come up with a neat way of visually linking them all. When the reader has collected all nine books and displays them together in sequential order, the books' spines will spell out Samson's name in the form of a blackmail note made up of airline baggage tags. The tags were drawn from my personal collection, and are colourful testimony to thousands of air miles spent travelling the world.

Arnold Schwartzman OBE RDI

Len Deighton
Faith

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Introduction

'Is this going to go into a book, Len?' my friend asked. He was a close and trusted friend and also an important functionary of the communist government. But he was armed with a healthy scepticism for all authority and this provided a bond and, at times, much merriment. I can't remember which year it was; sometime in the mid-nineteen sixties probably. We were sitting on a bench in what had once been the site of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp near Berlin.

'I don't know,' I replied.

'Because when I read your books I suddenly come across a description of something we have seen or done together and it brings it all back to me.'

To write these introductions I have been reading my books and this has revived many memories. Some memories have been happy ones but some are painful and now and again I have had to put the book aside for a moment or two. It is only now, with this re-reading, that I see how much of what I wrote was based on people, facts and experiences. I have often claimed that my books were almost entirely created from my imagination but now I see that this was something of a delusion. Now, as I read and recall events half-forgotten, brave people and strange places come crowding into my memory. Many of these people and places no longer exist. I can't offer you the past world but here is a depiction of it; here are my impressions of that world as I recorded it.

I had asked my friend to take me to the Sachsenhausen site, which was in the 'Zone' thirty miles from Berlin and outside the limits of its Soviet Sector. We went in his ancient Wartburg car with its noisy two-stroke engine that left a trail of smoke and envy. For even this contraption represented luxury to the average citizen in the East. Since neither of us had permission to enter the Zone we enjoyed the childish thrill of breaking the law. Sachsenhausen had been the Concentration Camp nearest to Berlin, and for that reason it was haunted by the ghosts of Hitler's specially selected victims. Eminent German generals had been locked up here before being tortured and executed for participation in the 'July 20th' attempt to overthrow the Führer. Some notable British agents passed through these bloodstained huts including Best and Stevens, who were senior SIS agents and whose capture and interrogation crippled the British Secret Intelligence Service for the whole war. Peter Churchill, an agent of the British SOE, was brought here. Martin Niemoller was imprisoned here too, so was Josef Stalin's son and Bismarck's grandson. Paul Reynaud, the PM of France, the prominent former Reichstag member Fritz Thyssen, Kurt Schuschnigg the Austrian chancellor and countless other anti-Nazis were locked away here. So were the Prisoners of War who escaped from Colditz, German Trade Union leaders, Jews and anyone who stepped out of line.

The camp had been set up in 1933 by Hitler's brown-shirted hooligans, the Sturmabteilung, but the 'Night of the Long Knives' had seen fortunes reversed; the SA leaders were murdered by Himmler's SS 'Death's Head' units, which took control of the camps and of much else. It was while under SS control that the camp installed a forgery unit for Operation Bernhard, for which imprisoned printing and engraving experts were sought from camps far and wide. These prisoners forged documents of many kinds and produced counterfeit currency – notably British five-pound notes – that even the Swiss bankers could not distinguish from the authentic ones. But more horribly, this camp was notorious for the systematic murder by gassing of many thousands of innocent Jews. My friend, in an official capacity, had interrogated one of the camp's Nazi commanders during his postwar captivity, and recalled the chilling way in which he had spoken of the killings without remorse or regret.

After the war, the Sachsenhausen camp was used by the Russians. Called 'Special Camp No. 1', they imprisoned here anyone they considered to be enemies of the Soviet occupation authorities or anyone who opposed the communist system of totalitarian government. After the Wall fell, and

the Russians departed, excavations revealed more than 12,000 bodies of people who died during the period of Soviet control.

In fact, I never did use my visit to the Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg camp complex in my books but it was another lesson in my attempt to understand Germany and the Germans. German history has always obsessed me and in my writing a well-researched historical background provides a necessary dimension to the Berlin where Bernard Samson has lived since childhood. Although my asides about German history are subordinate to the plot and to the characterizations, they are researched with care and attention. And the story is not confined to Berlin. Faith quickly moves into Magdeburg, which the German secret police and their Russian colleagues made the centre of their operations. My brief aside about Adolf Hitler's mortal remains being held there was based upon reliable evidence. Despite what is widely written, Hitler's body was not completely consumed by flame in a shallow trench outside the Berlin bunker. The amount of gasoline used could not ignite a fresh corpse, so much of which is water. When the Soviet Russian Army arrived in Berlin, the army's secret police seized what remained of Hitler's body as a macabre trophy, and have held on to it ever since. After Magdeburg this collection of dried flesh and scorched bone was taken to Moscow where, as far as my research can discover, it remains, kept in a glass-sided cabinet like the revered body fragments of medieval saints.

Discovering facts or a sequence of events that others have missed is the great joy of research. Some such discoveries can be confirmed given a little digging, some cross-references and some whispered confidences. Even such well-turned over soil as the Battle of Britain revealed to me some remarkable revelations and in Fighter became a cause of argument and anger. Now, however, the 'surprises' in my history books have been accepted as facts. But some research brings surprises more difficult to confirm. Even when I am quite sure about the truth of them I have abstained from declaring them as history. But 'fiction' brings an opportunity to say things that are difficult to prove. That's how it stands with the revelations about the Russian Army's electronics and hardware being stolen and shipped from Poland in exchange for CIA money. There were historical finds, too. I discovered that, during the Nazi regime, all extermination camps were situated just outside the German border so that the insurance companies could avoid payment to the relatives of people murdered in the camps, but I failed to find written evidence. Other than the maps that showed how deliberately systematic the siting of the camps was, proof was beyond me. My recourse was to use that undoubtedly true discovery in Winter together with other lesser-known facts of history.

I work hard to make each book of the Samson series complete, and I contrive a story that does not depend on knowledge of the other books. The story of Faith continues directly from Sinker, which is devoted mainly to the events seen through the eyes of Bernard's wife, Fiona. Fiona's secret assignment was to establish financial links between London and the Lutheran Church in the German Democratic Republic, i.e. communist Germany. It was an important task and a notable success. Of the 20 million people living in communist East Germany about ninety per cent remained members of the Christian Church. As Bret remarks, they provided a 'powerful cohesive force' that would eventually break down the Wall.

But the plot, and the strategy of the British intelligence service, is not the most important thread in the series. The characters were at the heart of my labours. The social exchanges of Faith demonstrate Bernard's painful dilemma when Fiona confronts Gloria, and the love affair which Bernard stumbles into when he believes that he will never see his wife again. The reactions of both women, and such events as Dicky Cruyer's dinner party which both women attend, is vital to the development of the plot and the interaction between all the major characters.

Writing ten books about the same small group of people is a strange and demanding task. I am a slow worker and I don't take regular vacations or set work aside for prolonged periods. Ten books meant about fifteen years during which these people, their hopes and fears and loves and betrayals were constantly whirling around in my brain. They disturbed my sleep and invaded my dreams in a

way I did not always enjoy. Because the story line was such a long one, the characters became well-defined and were not easily bent to the needs of the plot. Unlike the content of my other books, Bernard Samson and his circle became imprinted in my mind and remain there today. I confess to you that I find this unremitting concern for these fictional people disturbing. That long period of concentration seemed to be a brain-washing. Do other writers suffer the same problems? I don't know; not many writers produce ten books about the same people so it is not easy to find out.

Len Deighton, 2011

1

‘Don’t miss your plane, Bernard. This whole operation depends upon the timing.’ Bret Rensselaer peered around to spot a departures indicator; but this was Los Angeles airport and there were none in sight. They would spoil the architect’s concept.

‘It’s okay, Bret,’ I said. He would never have survived five minutes as a field agent. Even when he was my boss, driving a desk at London Central, he’d been like this: repeating the instructions, wetting his lips, dancing from one foot to the other and furrowing his brow as if goading his memory.

‘Just because Comrade Gorbachev is kissing Mrs Thatcher and spreading that glasnost schmaltz in Moscow, it doesn’t mean those East German bastards are buying any of it. Everything we hear says the same thing: they are more stubborn and vindictive than ever.’

‘It will be just like home,’ I said.

Bret sighed. ‘Try and see it from London’s point of view,’ he said with exaggerated patience. ‘Your task was to bring Fiona across the wire as quickly and quietly as possible. But you fixed it so your farewell performance out on that Autobahn was like the last act of Hamlet. You shoot two bystanders, and your own sister-in-law gets killed in the crossfire.’ He glanced at my wife Fiona, who was still recovering from seeing her sister Tessa killed. ‘Don’t expect London Central to be waiting for you with a gold medal, Bernard.’

He’d bent the facts but what was the use of arguing? He was in one of his bellicose moods, and I knew them well. Bret Rensselaer was a slim American who’d aged like a rare wine: growing thinner, more elegant, more subtle and more complex with every year that passed. He looked at me as if expecting some hot-tempered reaction to his words. Getting none, he looked at my wife. She was older too, but no less serene and beautiful. With that face, her wide cheekbones, flawless complexion and luminous eyes, she held me in thrall as she always had done. You might have thought that she was completely recovered from her ordeal in Germany. She was gazing at me with love and devotion and there was no sign she’d heard Bret.

Sending me to do this job in Magdeburg was not Bret’s idea. I’d caught sight of the signal he sent to London Central telling them that I was no longer suited to field work, particularly in East Germany. He’d asked them to chain me to a desk until pension time rolled round. It sounded considerate, but I wasn’t pleased. I needed to do something that would put me back in Operations; that was my only chance of being promoted and getting a senior staff position in London. Unless my position improved I would wind up with a premature retirement and a pension that wouldn’t pay for a cardboard box to live in.

I nodded. Bret always observed the niceties of hospitality. He had driven us to Los Angeles airport through a winter rainstorm to say goodbye. They could watch me climb on to the plane bound for Berlin, and my assignment. Then he would put Fiona on the direct flight to London. The Wall was still there and people were getting killed while climbing over it. Now Bret was just repeating all the things he’d told me a thousand times before, the way people do when they are saying goodbye at airports.

‘Keep the faith,’ said Bret, and in response to my blank look he added: ‘I’m not talking about timetables or statistics or training manuals. Faith. It’s not in here.’ He tapped his forehead. ‘It’s in here.’ Gently he thumped his heart with a flattened palm so that the signet ring glittered on his beautifully manicured hand, and a gold watch peeped out from behind a starched linen cuff.

‘Yes, I see. Not a headache; more like indigestion,’ I said. Fiona watched us and smiled.

‘They are calling the flight,’ said Bret.

‘Take care, darling,’ she said. I took Fiona in my arms and we kissed decorously, but then I felt a sudden pain as she bit my lip. I gave a little yelp and stepped back from her. She smiled again. Bret looked anxiously from me to Fiona and then back at me again, trying to decide whether he should

smile or say something. I rubbed my lip. Bret concluded that perhaps it was none of his business after all, and from his raincoat pocket he brought a shiny red paper bag and gave it to me. It was secured with matching ribbon tied in a fancy gift-wrap bow. The package was slightly limp; like a paperback book.

'Read that,' said Bret, picking up my carry-on bag and shepherding me towards the gate where the other passengers were standing in line. It seemed as if it would be a full load today; there were women with crying babies and long-haired kids with earrings, well-used backpacks and the sort of embroidered jackets that you can buy in Nepal. Fiona followed, observing the people crowding round us with that detached amusement with which she cruised through life. With one phone call Bret could have arranged for us to use any of the VIP lounges on the airport, but the Department's guidelines said that agents travelling on duty kept to a low profile, and so that's what Bret did. That's why he'd left his driver behind at the house and taken the wheel of the Accord. Like other Americans before him, he had exaggerated respect for what the people in London thought was the right way to do things. We reached the gate. I couldn't go through until he handed over my carry-on bag.

'Maybe all this hurry-hurry from London will work out for the best, Bernard. Your few days chasing around East Germany will give Fiona a chance to get your London apartment ready. She wants to do that for you. She wants to settle down and start all over again.' He looked at her and waited until she nodded agreement.

Only Bret would have the chutzpah to explain my wife to me while she was standing beside him. 'Yes, Bret,' I said. There was no sense in telling him he was out of line. Another few minutes and I'd be rid of him for ever.

'And don't go chasing after Werner Volkmann.'

'No,' I said.

'Don't give me that glib no-of-course-not routine. I mean it. Whatever Werner did to them, London Central hate him with a passion beyond compare.'

'Yes, you told me that.'

'You can't afford to step out of line, Bernard. If someone spots you having a cup of coffee with your old buddy Werner, everyone in London will be saying you are part of a conspiracy or something. God knows what he did to them but they hate him.'

'I wouldn't know where to find him,' I said.

'That's never stopped you before.' Bret paused and looked at his watch. 'Be a model employee. Put your faith in the Department, Bernard. Swallow your pride and tug your forelock. Now that London Central's funds are being so severely cut, they are looking for an excuse to fire people instead of retire them. No one's job is safe.'

'I've got it all, Bret,' I said, and tried to prise my bag away from him.

He smiled and moistened his lips, as if trying to resist giving me any more advice and reminders. 'I hear Tante Lisl has had a check-up. If she's going to have a hip replacement, or whatever it is, trying to save a few bucks on it is dumb.'

That was his way of saying that he'd pay old Frau Hennig's doctor's bills. I knew Bret well. We'd had our ups and downs, especially when I thought he was chasing Fiona, but I'd got to know him better during my long stay in California. As far as I could tell, Bret wasn't a double-crosser. He didn't lie or cheat or steal except when ordered to do so, and that put him into a very tiny minority of the people I worked with. He handed over my bag and we shook hands. We were out of earshot of Fiona and anyone else.

'This Russkie who's asking for you, Bernard,' he whispered. 'He says he owes you a favour, a big favour.'

'So you said.'

'VERDI: that's his codename of course.' I nodded solemnly. I'm glad Bret told me that or I might have arrived expecting an aria from La Traviata. 'A colonel,' he coaxed me. 'His father was a

junior lieutenant with one of the first Red Army units to enter Berlin in April '45 and stayed there to become a staff officer at Red Army headquarters, on long-term political assignment at Berlin-Karlshorst. Dad married a pretty German fräulein, and VERDI grew up more German than Russian … so the KGB grabbed him. Now he's a colonel and wants a deal.' Having gabbled his way through this description he paused. 'And you still can't guess who he might be?' Bret looked at me. Surely he knew I wasn't going to start that kind of game; it would open a can of worms that I wanted to keep tightly shut.

'Do you have any idea how many hustlers out there answer that kind of description?' I said. 'They all have stories like that. Seems like those first few Ivans into town fathered half the population of the city.'

'That's right. Play it close to the chest,' said Bret. 'That's always been your way, hasn't it?' He so wanted to be in London, and be a part of it again, that he actually envied me. It was almost laughable. Poor old Bret was past it; even his friends said that.

'And your girlfriend,' whispered Bret. 'Gloria. Make sure that's all over and done with.' His voice was edged with the indignant anger that we all feel for other men's philandering. 'Try to hang on to both of them and you'll lose Fiona and the children. And maybe your job too.'

I smiled mirthlessly. The airline girl ripped my boarding pass in half and before I went down the jetty I turned back to wave to them. Who would have guessed that my wife was a revered heroine of the Secret Intelligence Service? And with every chance of becoming its Director-General, if Bret's opinion was anything to go by. At this moment Fiona looked like a photo from some English society magazine. Her old Burberry coat, its collar turned up to frame her head, and a colourful Hermès scarf knotted at the point of her chin, made her look like an English upper-class mum watching her children at a gymkhana. She held a handkerchief to her face as if about to cry, but it was probably the head cold she'd had for a week and couldn't shake off. Bret was standing there in his short black raincoat; as still and expressionless as a stone statue. His fair hair was now mostly white and his face grey. And he was looking at me as if imprinting this moment on his memory; as if he was never going to see me again.

As I walked down the enclosed jetty towards the plane a series of scratched plastic windows, rippling with water, provided a glimpse of rain-lashed palm trees, lustrous engine cowling, sleek tailplane and a slice of fuselage. Rain was glazing the jumbo, making its paintwork shiny like a huge new toy; it was a hell of a way to say goodbye to California.

'First Class?'

Airlines arrange things as if they didn't want you to discover that you were boarding a plane, so they wind up with something like a cramped roadside diner that smells of cold coffee and stale perspiration and has exits on both sides of the ocean.

'No,' I said. 'Business.' She let me find my own assigned place. I put my carry-on bag into the overhead locker, selected a German newspaper from the display and settled into my seat. I looked out of the tiny window to see if Bret was pressing his nose against the window of the departure lounge but there was no sign of him. So I settled back and opened the red bag that contained his going-away present. It was a Holy Bible. Its pages had gold edges and its binding was of soft tooled leather. It looked very old. I wondered if it was some sort of Rensselaer family heirloom.

'Hi there, Bernard.' A man named 'Tiny' Timmermann called to me from his seat across the aisle. A linguist of indeterminate national origins – Danish maybe – he was a baby-faced 250-pound wrestler, with piggy eyes, close-cropped skull and heavy gold jewellery. I knew him from Berlin in the old days when he was some kind of well-paid consultant to the US State Department. There was a persistent rumour that he'd strangled a Russian ship's captain in Riga and brought back to Washington a boxful of manifests and documents that gave details of the nuclear dumping the Russian Navy was doing into the sea off Archangel. Whatever he'd done for them, the Americans always seemed to treat him generously, but now, the rumours said, even Tiny's services were for hire.

'Good to see you, Tiny,' I said.

'Hals und Beinbruch!' he said, wishing me good fortune as if dispatching me down a particularly hazardous ski-run. It shook me. Did he guess I was on an assignment? And if news of it had reached Tiny who else knew?

I gave him a bemused smile and then we were strapping in and the flight attendant was pretending to blow into a life-vest, and after that Tiny produced a lap-top computer from his case and started playing tunes on it as if to indicate that he wasn't in the mood for conversation.

The plane had thundered into the sky, banked briefly over the Pacific Ocean and set course northeast. I stretched out my legs to their full Business Class extent and opened my newspaper. At the bottom of the front page a discreet headline, 'Erich Honecker proclaims Wall will still exist in 100 years,' was accompanied by a smudgy photo of him. This optimistic expressed view of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED, the party governing East Germany, seemed like the sincere words of a dedicated tyrant. I believed him.

I didn't read on. The newsprint was small and the grey daylight was not much helped by my dim overhead reading light. Also my hand trembled as it held the paper. I told myself that it was a natural condition arising from the rush to the airport and carrying a ton of baggage from the car while Bret fought off the traffic cops. Putting the newspaper down I opened the Bible instead. There was a yellow sticker in a page marking a passage from St Luke:

For I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

Yes, very droll, Bret. The only inscription on the flyleaf was a pencilled scrawl that said in German, 'A promise is a promise!' It was not Bret's handwriting. I opened the Bible at random and read passages but I kept recalling Bret's face. Was it his imminent demise I saw written there? Or his anticipation of mine? Then I found the letter from Bret. One sheet of thin onion-skin paper, folded and creased so tightly that it made no bulge in the pages.

'Forget what happened. You are off on a new adventure,' Bret had written in that loopy coiled style that characterizes American script. 'Like Kim about to leave his father for the Grand Trunk Road, or Huck Finn starting his journey down the Mississippi, or Jim Hawkins being invited to sail to the Spanish Caribbean, you are starting all over again, Bernard. Put the past behind you. This time it will all be different, providing you tackle it that way.'

I read it twice, looking for a code or a hidden message, but I shouldn't have bothered. It was pure Bret right down to the literary clichés and flowery good wishes and encouragement. But it didn't reassure me. Kim was an orphan and these were all fictional characters he was comparing me with. I had the feeling that these promised beginnings in distant lands were Bret's way of making his goodbye really final. It didn't say: come back soon.

Or was Bret's message about me and Fiona, about our starting our marriage anew? Fiona's pretended defection to the East was being measured by the valuable encouragement she'd given to the Church in its opposition to the communists. Only I could see the price she had paid. In the last couple of weeks she'd been confident and more vivacious than I could remember her being for a very long time. Of course she was never again going to be like the Fiona I'd first met, that eager young Oxford-educated adventurer who had crewed an oceangoing yacht and could argue dialectical materialism in almost perfect French while cooking a souffle. But if she was not the same person she'd once been, then neither was I. No one could be blamed for that. We'd chosen to deal in secrets. And if her secret task had been so secret that it had been kept concealed even from me then I would have to learn not to resent that exclusion.

When the flight attendant brought champagne and a liver compound spread on tiny circles of toast I gobbled everything down as I always do, because my mind was elsewhere. I still couldn't help thinking about Honecker and Bret and the Wall. It's true that things were slowly changing over there; financial loans and political pressure had persuaded them to make the Stasi dig up and discard a

few of the land-mines and automatic firing devices from the 'death-strip' along the Wall. But the lethal hardware remaining was more than enough to discourage spontaneous emigration. I suppose Western intelligence was changing equally slowly: people like me and 'Tiny' were no longer travelling First Class. As I drifted off to sleep I was wondering how long it would be before that professional egalitarian Erich Honecker found himself adjusting to the rigours of flying Economy.

'Did you manage to sleep on the plane?' said the young Englishman who met me at the airport in Berlin and took me to his apartment. He put my luggage down and closed the door. He was a tall thin thirty-year-old with an agreeable voice, a pale face, uneven teeth and a certain diffident awkwardness that sometimes afflicts tall people. I followed him into the kitchen of his apartment in Moabit, near Turmstrasse U-Bahn. It was the sort of grimy little place that young people will endure in order to be near the bright lights. As a long-time resident of the city I knew it as one of the apartment blocks hastily built in the ruins soon after the war, and nowadays showing their age.

'I'm all right.'

'I'll make some tea, shall I?' he said as he filled the electric kettle. I reached the teapot from the shelf for him and found on its lid a sticky label with a message scrawled across it in a feminine hand: 'Don't forget the key, Kinkypoo. See you at the weekend.'

'There's a message here,' I said and gave it to him. He smiled self-consciously and said: 'She knows I always make tea as soon as I get home. That reminds me – I was told to give you something too.'

He went to a cupboard, found a box and got from it a slip of paper with typed dates, times and numbers. It was a good example of the bullshit that the people behind desks in London Central wasted their time with: radio wavelengths.

'Okay?' said the kid, watching me.

'Typed on a 1958 Adler portable by a small dark curly-haired guy with a bandaged middle finger.'

'Are you kidding?' said the kid, reserving a margin of awe in case I was serious.

I tossed the paper into the kitchen bin, where it fluttered to rest among the dead teabags and accumulated strata of half-eaten frozen TV dinners, their seams marked by the azoic ooze of brightly coloured sauces. This was not a place to stay on full pension. 'If we get into trouble over there,' I said, 'I'm not going to be wasting a lot of time trying to contact London by radio.' I opened my suitcase and laid my suit across the back of the sofa.

A large fluffy cat came in to investigate the kitchen garbage, sniffing to make sure that the discarded message was not edible. 'Rumtopf!' said the kid. 'Come over here and eat your fish!' The cat looked at him but forsaking the fish strolled over to the sofa, jumped up on to its favourite cushion, collapsed elegantly and went to sleep. 'He likes you,' said the kid.

'I'm too old for making new friends,' I said, moving my suit so it didn't pick up cat hairs.

'There's no hurry,' said the kid as he poured tea for us both. 'I know the route and the roads and everything. I'll get you there on time.'

'That's good.' It was still daylight in Berlin, or as near daylight as it gets in winter. It wasn't snowing but the air shimmered with snowflakes that only became visible as they twisted and turned, while dark grey cloud clamped upon the rooftops like an old iron saucepan lid.

He looked at my red eyes and unshaven face. 'The bathroom is the door with the sign.' He pointed at an old enamel Ausgang sign, no doubt prised from one of Berlin's abandoned railway stations. The apartment had many such notices, together with advertisements and battered American licence plates and some lovingly framed covers from ancient Popular Mechanics magazines. There were other curious artifacts: strange weapons and even stranger hats from far parts of the world. The collection belonged to a young German art director who shared the rent here but was temporarily living with a redheaded Irish model girl who was depicted in a large coloured photo doing handstands on the beach at Wannsee. 'London said I was to give you anything you needed.'

'Not just tea?'

'Clothes, a gun, money.'

'You don't expect me to go across there carrying a gun?'

'They said you'd find a way if you wanted to.' He looked at me as if I was something out of the zoo. I wondered what he had been told about me; and who had been telling him.

'Half a dozen different identity documents for you to choose from. And a gas-gun, handcuffs and sticky-tape and restraints.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We won't need any of it,' he hastened to assure me as he prodded at the discarded list of radio wavelengths to push it deeper into the garbage. 'He just wants to talk to someone he knows; someone from the old days, he said. London thinks he'll probably offer us paperwork; they want to know what it is.' When I made no response he went on: 'He's a Stasi colonel … Moscow-trained. Nowadays we can be choosy who we take.'

'Restraints?' I said.

'London said you might want handcuffs and things.'

'London said that? Are they going crazy?'

He preferred not to answer that question. I said: 'You've met this "Stasi colonel"? Seen him close up?'

'Yes.'

'Young? Old? Clever? Aggressive?'

'Certainly not young,' he said emphatically.

'Older than me?'

'About your age. Medium build. We talk to him in Magdeburg. And check the material if he has anything to show us. But if he arrives panting and ready to go, London said we must have everything prepared. It is prepared – a safe house and an escape line and so on. I'll show you on the map.'

'I know where Magdeburg is.' It was useful to know that I was now officially in the 'certainly not young' category.

'A back-up team will take him from us. They'll do the actual crossing.'

'Have you had a briefing from Berlin Field Unit? What does Frank Harrington say about all this?' Frank Harrington ran our West Berlin office, doing the job my father once did.

'Frank is being kept informed but the operation is controlled directly from London Central.'

'From London Central,' I repeated softly. It was getting worse every minute.

The kid tried to cheer me up: 'If there is any problem we also have a safe house in Magdeburg.'

'There's no such thing as a safe house in Magdeburg,' I said. 'Magdeburg is home town for those people. They operate out of Magdeburg, it's their alma mater. There are more Stasi men running around the Westendstrasse security compound in Magdeburg than in the whole of the rest of the DDR.'

'I see.' We finished our tea in silence, then I picked up the phone and dialled the number for Tante Lisl, a woman who'd been a second mother to me. I wanted to pass on to her Bret's message of encouragement, and if surgery for her arthritis was going to prove costly I wanted to see the hospital and make my own financial arrangements with them. Meanwhile I planned to buy a big bunch of flowers and go round to her funny little hotel to hold her hand and read to her. But when I got through, someone at reception said she had flown to Miami and joined a winter cruise in the Caribbean. So much for my visions of Tante Lisl expiring on a couch; she was probably playing deck tennis and winning the ship's amateur talent competition with her inimitable high-kick routine of 'Bye Bye Blackbird'.

'I'll shave, shower and change my clothes,' I said as I sorted through my suitcase. To make conversation I added: 'I'm putting on too much weight.'

'You should work out,' he said solemnly. 'The older you get the more you need exercise.'

I nodded. Thanks, kid, I'll make a note of it. Well that was great. While I was nursemaiding this kid he was going to be second-guessing everything I did because he thought I was out of condition and past it.

The bathroom was in chaos. I'd almost forgotten what the habitat of the young single male looked like: on a chair there was draped a dirty tee-shirt, a heavy sweater and a torn denim jacket – he'd obviously donned his one and only suit in my honour. Three kinds of shampoo, two flavours of expensive after-shaves and an illuminated magnifying mirror to examine spots.

I went to the bathroom window, an old-fashioned double-glazed contraption, the brass handles tightly closed and tarnished with a green mottle as if it had not been opened in decades. Along the bottom ledge, between the dusty sheets of glass, lay dozens of dead moths and shrivelled flies of all shapes and sizes. How did they get inside, if they couldn't get out alive? Maybe there was a message there for me if only I could work it out.

The view from the window brought mixed feelings. I had grown up here; it was the only place I could think of as home. Not so long ago, in California, I had continually ached to be back in Berlin. I had been homesick for this town in a way I had never thought possible. Now that I was here there were no feelings of happiness or satisfaction. Something inexplicable had happened, unless of course I was frightened of going once more to the other side, which once I'd regarded as no more demanding than walking to the corner store for a pack of cigarettes. The kid thought I was nervous and he was right. If he knew what he was doing, he'd be nervous too.

Down in the street there was not much movement. The few pedestrians were wrapped in heavy coats, scarfs and fur hats and walking head-bent and hunched against the cold east wind that blew steadily from Russia's vast icy hinterland. Both sides of the street were lined with cars and vans. They were dirty: caked with the mud and grime of a European winter, a condition unknown in southern California. On the glasswork of the parked cars, frost and ice had formed elaborate swirling patterns. Any one of these vehicles would provide a secure hiding place for a surveillance team watching the building. I regretted letting the kid bring me here. It was stupid and careless. He was sure to be known to the opposition, and too tall to be inconspicuous; that's why he'd never last as a field agent.

After I'd cleaned up and shaved and changed into a suit, he spread a map across the table and showed me the route he proposed. He suggested that we drive through Charlie into the Eastern Sector of Berlin and then drive south and avoid the main roads and Autobahnen all the time. It was a circuitous route but the kid quoted all London's official advisories to me and insisted that it was the best way to do it. I yielded to him. I could see he was one of those fastidious preparation fanatics, and that was a good way to be when going on a venture of this sort.

'What do you think?' the kid asked.

'Tell me seriously: did London Central really say I might want restraints to drag this bruiser out even against his will?'

'Yes.'

'Do you have any whisky?'

As is so often the case with frontier crossings that inspire a nervous premonition of disaster, passing through Checkpoint Charlie went smoothly. Before driving out of the city I asked the kid to make a small detour to call at a quiet little bar in Oranienburger Strasse so I could get cigarettes and a tall glass of Saxony's famous beer.

'You must have a throat like leather to actually crave East German cigarettes,' said the kid. He was staring at the only other people in the bar: two youngish women in fur coats. They looked up at him expectantly, but one glance was enough to tell them that he was no proposition and they went back to their whispered conversation.

'What do you know about it?' I said. 'You don't smoke.'

'If I did smoke, it wouldn't be those coffin nails.'

'Drink your beer and shut up,' I said.

Behind the counter Andi Krohn had followed our exchange. He looked at the girls in the corner and stared at me as if about to smile. Andi's had always been a place to find available women for a price: they say it was notorious even as far back as before the war. I don't know how his predecessors had got away with it for all these years, except that the Krohn family had always known the right people to cultivate. Andi and I had been friends since we were both schoolboys and he was the school's most cherished athlete. In those days there was talk of him becoming an Olympic miler. But it never happened. Now he was greying and portly with bifocal glasses and he took several minutes to recognize me after we came through the door.

Andi's grandparents had been members of Germany's tiny ethnic minority of Sorbs, Slavs who from medieval times had retained their own culture and language. Nowadays they were mostly to be found in the extreme southeast corner of the DDR where Poland and Czechoslovakia meet. It is one of several places called the Dreiländereck – three-nation corner – a locality where they brew some of the finest beers in the world. Strangers came a long way to seek out Andi's bar, and they weren't all looking for women.

We exchanged banalities as if I'd never been away. His son Frank had married a pharmacist from Dresden, and I had little alternative but to go through an album of wedding photos and make appreciative noises, and drink beer, and a few schnapps chasers, while the kid looked at his watch and fretted. I didn't show Andi pictures of my wife and family and he didn't ask to see any. Andi was quick on the uptake, the way all barmen become. He knew that whatever kind of job I did nowadays it wasn't one you did with a pocketful of identification material.

Once back on the road we made good time. 'Smoke if you want to,' the kid offered.

'Not right now.'

'I thought you were desperate for one of those East German nails?'

'The feeling passed.' I looked out at the landscape. I knew the area. Forests helped to conceal the military encampments, row upon row of huts complete with chain-link fences and coils of barbed-wire and tall watch-towers manned by men with guns and field-glasses. So big were these military camps, and so numerous, that it was not always possible to be sure where one ended and another began. Almost as abundant in the first fifty miles of our journey were the open-cast lignite mines where East Germany obtained the fuel to make electricity and to burn in a million household stoves and create the most polluted air in Europe. Winter had proved capricious this year, tightening and then loosening its grip on the landscape. The last few days had seen a premature thaw and had left snow patches to shine in the moonlight, marking the edges of the fields and higher ground. The back roads we'd chosen were icy in places and the kid kept to a sensible moderate speed. We were within fifteen miles of Magdeburg when we encountered the road-block.

We came upon it suddenly as we rounded a bend. The kid braked in response to an agitated waving of a lighted baton of the sort used by German police on both sides of the frontier.

'Papers?' said the soldier. He was a burly old fellow in camouflage fatigues and steel helmet. 'Switch off the engine and the main beams.' His country accent was perfect: something to put into the archives now that all East Germany's kids were talking like TV announcers.

The kid switched off the car headlights, and in the sudden quiet I could hear the wind in the bare trees and subdued pop music coming from the guard hut. The man who'd spoken handed our papers over to another soldier with Leutnant's tabs on his camouflage outfit. He examined them by means of a flashlight. It was the very hell of a place for a lengthy delay. A bleak landscape of turnip fields until, right across the horizon, like tall-stacked cruisers of the Kaiser's coal-burning battle fleet, there stood a long line of factory chimneys, puffing out clouds of multicoloured smoke.

'Get out,' said the officer, a short slim man with a neatly trimmed moustache and steel-rimmed glasses. We got out. It was not a good sign. 'Open the trunk.'

When it was open the Leutnant used his flashlight and groped around the oily rags and spare wheel. He found a bottle of Swedish vodka there. It was still in a colourful fancy box they use for overpriced booze in airport duty-free shops.

'You can keep it,' the kid told him. The Leutnant gave no sign of hearing the kid's offer. 'A present from Sweden.' But it was no use. The Leutnant was deaf to such bribes. He looked at our papers again, holding them close to his face so that the light reflected on to his face and made his spectacle lenses gleam. I shivered in the cold. For some reason the Leutnant didn't seem interested in me. Maybe it was my rumpled suit with its unmistakable East German cut, or the pungent smell of Andi Krohn's rot-gut apple-schnapps that had been repeating on me for the last half hour and was no doubt evident on my breath. But the kid was using a Swedish passport, and the identification that accompanied it described him as a Swedish engineer working for a construction company that was about to build a luxury hotel in Magdeburg. It was plausible, and anyway the kid's German was not good enough to pass him off as a German national. The Swedes had made a corner for themselves building hotels to which only foreigners with hard currency were admitted, so it was a reasonable enough cover. But I wondered what would happen if someone started questioning him in Swedish.

I stamped around to keep my circulation moving. The trees were tormented by the wind and the skies had cleared enough to bring the temperature drop that always accompanies a sight of the stars. I didn't envy these men their job. As we stood there on the country road the wind had that cruel bite that dampness brings. It was more than enough excuse for becoming bad-tempered.

The two soldiers circled the old dented Volvo, looking at it with that mixture of contempt and envy that Western luxuries so often produced in the Party faithful. Then, with the boot open, the two soldiers went back to their hut, leaving us standing there in the cold. I'd seen it all before: they were hoping we would get back into the car so that they could come back and scream at us. Or that we would close the trunk or even drive away, so that they could phone the back-up team at the next checkpoint and tell them to open fire at us. It wasn't anything to take personally. All soldiers are inclined to get like that after too much guard duty.

Eventually they seemed to grow weary of their game. They returned and examined the car again, wondering perhaps if it would be diverting to tear the upholstery out of its interior and then make sure there was no contraband hidden inside the tyres. The Leutnant stayed close to us, still brandishing our papers, while the old man climbed into the back seat and prodded everything proddable. When he'd completed his examination he got out and looked again at the back. There was a loud bang as he slammed the trunk. When he returned he was carrying the vodka. The Leutnant gave us our papers. 'You can go,' he said. The older man hugged the fancy box to his chest and watched our reaction.

We got in the car and the kid started up the engine and switched on the lights. I turned my head. Just visible in the darkness the two men stood watching us depart. 'We'll be late,' said the kid.

'Take it very slowly,' I said. 'And if they shout "Stop", stop.'

'You bet,' said the kid.

'Militia,' I said as we pulled away.

'Yes,' he said, suddenly turning testy now that the danger seemed past. 'The accountant and one of the men from the packing shed playing soldiers.'

'They have to do it.'

'Yes, they have to do it. They started tightening up on the factory militias eighteen months ago.'

'We were lucky.'

'It usually goes like that nowadays,' said the kid.

'I thought we'd be sitting there all night,' I said. 'They like company.'

'Not lately. It's beginning to change. Lately they just like vodka.'

We were in the outskirts of Magdeburg, and running twenty-five minutes late, by the time he spoke again. 'I screwed up,' he said suddenly, and with that knotted anger that we reserve for our own errors.

'What?'

'Do you think we'll be back by tomorrow?'

'I don't know,' I said truthfully.

'I forgot to leave the key for my girlfriend. She won't be able to feed the cat.'

I felt like saying that Rumtopf had more than enough body fat to sustain itself over a few foodless days, but people can be very unpredictable about their pet animals, so I grunted amiably.

'This colonel, this VERDI, says he knows you. Is he working for us?'

'Because he has a cover name? No. They all have those if we deal with them on a regular basis, or mention them in messages. Even Stalin had a cover name.'

'VERDI says he owes you a favour; a big favour.'

I looked at him. 'What's he supposed to say?' I'd had enough of this crap from Bret without more from the kid. 'Is he supposed to say that I owe him a big favour? That would really get their attention in London Central, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose it would.'

'Of course he's going to say that he owes me a big favour. That's the way these things are done: the person making contact always says he's trying to repay a favour: a big favour. That way no one in London is likely to suspect that I'm going over there to bend the rules and do all kinds of things that the boys behind the desks have inscribed in their big brass-bound no-no book.'

'I didn't think of it like that,' said the kid.

'He's a bastard,' I said.

'VERDI? SO you do know him?'

'He thinks I owe him a favour.'

'But you don't? Is that what you mean?'

I thought about it. 'He tossed an arrest certificate into the shredder instead of putting it on the teleprinter.'

'That's a favour,' said the kid.

'He had other reasons. Anyway favours done for the opposition are like money in the bank,' I said resentfully. And then, before he thought it was a currency I stocked up on, I added: 'For guys like that, I mean. They like being able to call in a few.'

The kid shot a sudden glance at me. I'd gone too far. I had the feeling he'd heard in my voice that note that said that I was under some kind of obligation to the bastard. And that was something I'd not until then admitted even to myself. 'What's your guess?' the kid said. 'Do you think he wants to talk?'

'We all talk,' I said. 'Opposing field agents all talk. You bump into these guys all the time; at airports, in bars and on the job. Sometimes we talk. It can be useful. It's the way the job is done. But we never ask questions.'

'But if VERDI wants to go on the payroll we can start asking him questions. Okay, I understand now. But will he know something we need to hear?'

'There is usually something worth hearing if they want to be helpful. If he gives us a few good targets; that would be valuable.'

'What are good ones?'

'Cipher clerks who gamble or borrow money,' I said. 'Department chiefs who drink, analysts who are screwing their secretary, translators who sniff. Vulnerable people.'

'This one knows you. He'll talk only to someone he knows.'

'Yes, you told me. But I'll take a lot of convincing he's on the level.'

The car had slowed and the kid was looking at the street signs. 'I know the house,' he said. 'I delivered a package here last month. Money I think.'

'You live dangerously,' I told him.

'All this won't last much longer,' he said. 'I want to get a little excitement while I can. I want to be able to tell my kids about it.'

He must have been talking to Bret. ‘You can have my share,’ I told him, and smiled. But such highly motivated youngsters worried me: so did these people who thought it was so nearly all over. There was once an old chap at the training school who started the very first day’s lecture saying: our job here is to change gallant young gentlemen into nervous old ladies. This kid needed that lecture badly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.