

ALISTAIR MACLEAN'S UNFAC



PRIME TARGET

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A US government official is assassinated, a list of names, all male, all German, is found and two men on the list are already dead. What is the connection? When the mission looks impossible, who do you call? UNACO. A young American government employee is murdered in cold blood on a London street. Her death is only the tip of a conspiracy that threatens the life of Andreas Wolff, the computer genius responsible for the security codes for ICON - the computerized criminal identification network. Malcolm Philpott, the nigmatic and powerful head of UNACO, recognizes the grave threat, and assigns his two best agents to the case. Sabrina Carver and Mike Graham must race from New York to London, Morocco and Berlin in their efforts to crack the lethal intrigue that threatens world security and has its roots in the final days of World War Two and the desperate plans of a dying madman.

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PROLOGUE

Berlin, 24 April 1945

General Albers ran up the last few steps from the bunker to ground level and had to stand for a moment at the top, catching his breath. It was his habit to do everything at the double, but a spinal injury and chronic emphysema made that kind of behaviour unwise nowadays.

‘One moment,’ he panted, ‘I’ll take a look...’

He pushed aside a camouflage screen of metal and splintered planks and peered outside, craning his thin neck. All he could see in the immediate area was rubble and a scatter of uprooted shrubs.

‘All clear,’ he said, turning back to the stairs and holding out his hand.

Hitler declined to take it. He braced himself against the side of the stairwell and climbed into the open without help. The young soldier assigned to guard him came clattering up behind, clutching his sub-machine-gun.

‘Please wait, Führer,’ Albers said.

He crossed the rubble-strewn garden, smelling cordite and the damp sourness of the earth. A large hole had appeared near the gateway to the street. He detoured around it, turning up the collar of his greatcoat against the rain. He strode out into the middle of the road and stopped, looking both ways. Twenty metres to his left an officer of the Leibstandarte, nearly invisible in his black SS uniform, raised his arm to attract the general’s attention. Albers waved back and glanced over his shoulder at the Chancellery.

For a moment he was transfixed, shocked by the level of damage. This was his first time out of the Führerbunker in three days. When he had gone in by the stairs where Hitler and his guard now waited, the back of the Chancellery had been intact. Now, caught by the sideward impact of Soviet artillery closing on the rail junction at Spandau, huge stretches of stonework had been gouged out. Interior support walls had split and the second and third storeys had collapsed on to the crossbeams of the ground floor.

Albers started back the way he had come and felt a sudden pressure on his ears. The ground shook and there was a salvo of heavy gunfire to the west. He dropped to his knees as a pediment on the Chancellery roof flew apart with a loud crack and hurtled down in a shower of fragmented black marble. He crouched and put his hands over his head, feeling shards strike his back and arms.

He stood up again and saw the SS officer leading a string of young boys from a burned-out government building across the road. Over at the Chancellery Joseph Goebbels had come up the steps from the bunker. He spoke for a moment to the Führer, then came limping across the garden.

‘Are they ready?’ he asked Albers.

‘They are being brought now, Minister.’ Albers pointed to the straggle of children lining up by the wall on the other side of the road. ‘We couldn’t get proper uniforms, but in the circumstances I don’t think they look too bad.’

The boys wore identical black jerkins, buttoned to the neck, and black forage caps. The youngest, who was eight, was frightened by the gunfire and had begun to cry. He was being comforted by the oldest in the group, a lad of fourteen.

‘I’ll speak to them and prepare them,’ Goebbels said. ‘I will take two minutes, then I’ll come for the Führer.’

Albers went back to the stairs, brushing at his coat sleeves, noticing that black marble-dust mingled with rain resembled smears of oil. He looked at the soldier beside the Führer and saw how scared he was. Everyone had been against holding this ceremony outside. Hitler had been warned it was suicidal, but he had insisted. An induction as important as this had to be performed in the open air under German skies. Even if the skies were black with the smoke of a dying Berlin.

‘The Minister is addressing the boys, Führer.’

Hitler nodded and appeared to shiver. He looked weak, Albers observed, and incredibly old. Four days ago he had turned fifty-six, but today he looked nearer seventy. He was stooped and weary, one side of his body in a perpetual tremor, his light-starved skin the colour of putty. Earlier in the day he had been taken ill and could not stop vomiting. His valet, Heinz Linge, summoned the doctor who administered the usual, an intravenous narcotic that drained the residue of colour from the Führer's face and put a very unnatural glint in his eyes. But afterwards he was no longer so desperately sick, he didn't shake so obviously, and he had even managed to display a little pleasure at the prospect of this ceremony.

Goebbels had finished talking. He came hobbling across the broken ground, smiling cautiously as he always did.

'Everything is ready, Führer.'

'Good, good.' Hitler rubbed one blue-fingered hand on the back of the other, an attempt at vigour. 'So we have thirty boys, yes?'

'That is correct.' Goebbels fished a sheet of paper from his coat pocket and unfolded it. 'I have prepared a summary of the arrangements which have been made for them, if you would care to read it. Everything is precisely as we planned, of course...'

'Just give me the main points again, if you will,' Hitler said.

Goebbels began to speak and a shell exploded a kilometre away, throwing a plume of black and yellow smoke into the sky. The four men moved closer to the Chancellery wall. Goebbels started again.

'This evening, as soon as it is dark, the boys will be taken from Berlin by military transport to a covert SS airfield six kilometres south-west of Tempelhof. At ten o'clock an air-freighter, flying in the livery of the Red Cross -'

'Will this be a genuine Red Cross plane?'

'No, Führer,' Goebbels said patiently. 'It is a Wehrmacht troop-supplies aircraft, suitably disguised for its mission. It will take the boys directly to Zürich, where secure short-term accommodation has been arranged in a converted pavilion in the sheltered grounds of a hospital.'

'Which hospital?' Hitler demanded, as if it mattered. He had a habit of using questions to break the flow of others' speech.

'The Schwesterhaus von Roten Kreuz, Führer. The cost of caring for the boys, and of all their material needs, will be met from the fund set up on your instructions by Secretary Bormann. No outside help will be sought, since none will be needed.'

'The boys will be completely safe in that place?'

'Perfectly safe, Führer. They will be moved to more permanent quarters within the month.'

'Where will that be?'

'A fine location on the outskirts of Bern. It is a large house on a truly vast estate. It will be their home, a place where they will grow together in an environment of wholesomeness and good fellowship.'

The man spoke like a prospectus, Albers thought.

'They will become brothers in every practical sense, and always, *always*, they will be shielded from harmful and corruptive influences. In every particular, they will be educated and nurtured according to the precepts and guidelines you have set down, Führer. In the fullness of time, they will return to Germany and mount the definitive onslaught against the infestation of Judaism.'

'I think we should get started,' Albers said. 'The children will be getting cold.'

Hitler nodded. Albers led the way round the edge of the garden and out on to the street. The wind had dropped but the rain was heavier now, falling in ice-cold sheets that numbed the skin. Hitler walked between Goebbels and the guard, his hands tucked in the pockets of his greatcoat, the peak of his cap pulled close to his eyes. As they reached the edge of the road a shell exploded three streets away. The others broke step but Hitler kept walking as if he hadn't heard.

Drawing near the line of boys, who all looked thoroughly miserable, the Führer took his hands from his pockets and straightened his shoulders. Immediately he appeared to grow a couple of inches. He raised his head and thrust forward his jaw, making it taut. He fixed his famous stare on the boys and smiled.

At a nod from Goebbels, thirty arms shot out in the Nazi salute. 'Heil, Hitler!' the boys chorused. The sound of it echoed through the hollowed-out buildings behind them.

Hitler stood on the pitted road before them and returned the salute. The SS officer raised a battered Leica camera to his eye and pressed the shutter, recording the moment. Goebbels nodded again and the boys stood at ease. General Albers cleared his throat and stepped forward.

'Führer, I have the honour of presenting to you the most recent and final group of inductees to the Hitler Youth. This is a very special body, made up of thirty appropriately special young men. They are orphans, every one, and each is the son of a hero of the Third Reich.'

Albers walked to one end of the line with a sheaf of notes in his hand. He waited for Hitler to join him, then he introduced the boys one by one.

'Erich Bahr, aged twelve years, son of Area Commandant Konrad Bahr, killed with his wife Frieda in the bombing of Dresden in February. Klaus Garlan, aged ten years, son of Panzer Commander Gregor Garlan, killed in the Western Desert in 1944, mother Louisa Garlan killed in a bombing raid on north-west Berlin in January 1945. Albrecht Schröder, aged twelve years, son of Otto Schröder...'

Hitler listened attentively and shook each boy's hand before moving on to the next. By the time he reached the end of the line the rain had soaked right through his clothing and he was stooping again, his head jutting forward from hunched shoulders. He continued to smile nevertheless, as if sunshine blessed their little ceremony.

As he moved to the centre of the road to address the boys two shells landed nearby within a split second of each other. The shockwave struck Hitler obliquely, making him stumble. Five of the remaining Chancellery windows blew out in a cascade of glass and metal and stone. Hitler watched clouds of glittering dust rise around the base of the building.

'A Jewish-Bolshevik reprisal for Kristallnacht, perhaps,' he said, trying to revive his smile.

He turned, straightening his cap, pulling the lapels of his sopping greatcoat closer to his ears. When he spoke his voice was firm.

'I am told that tomorrow, or at the latest the day after, American and Soviet tanks will meet on the Elbe at Torgau. My dear boys, in that dark moment the Germany I dreamed of, the Fatherland I fought with all my heart and strength to build into a living reality, will be dead. It will have been killed. It will have been murdered by barbarians at the incitement of the International Jew.'

He paused and took a long deep breath.

'All that we love most dearly will be turned to smoke, and the smoke will disperse on the wind. Yet I tell you, my young friends, in this moment as I look at you, my heart swells with hope...'

Hitler let his gaze travel along the line, pausing a moment on each young face.

'I look at you and I see the essence of my *Jugend*, my ideal of the Aryan spirit. I see it in every one of you, the bright promise of a race and nation, the natural enemy of those who lay waste to our beloved land.'

General Albers moved a fraction closer, just to be sure: he took a swift hard look at the Führer's face and yes, he could see, there were tears welling in his eyes.

'In your maturity you will bear many duties,' Hitler said, his voice rising above the rumble and crash of gunfire. 'The most important of them, the most sacred, will be to uphold and keep alive the spirit of the Reich, and to eliminate its darkest enemy, with no thought of mercy. This is a precious charge. You boys, as its bearers, are no less precious.'

He paused and looked along the line again.

‘You are the young, pounding heart of Germany,’ he said. ‘You are the embodiment of Siegfried, the strength and hope of your race. You are the future.’

Several boys were smothering tears. Another shell went off, bringing down rubble at the end of the street.

General Albers sidled up to Hitler and spoke in a sharp whisper. ‘We should get back to the bunker, Führer, as much for the sake of the boys as for ourselves. The chances of us all leaving here undamaged must be slim by now.’

Hitler nodded slowly and turned away. Albers and Goebbels fell in behind him. The guard led the way back across the Chancellery garden, the sodden earth sucking under their boots. At the top of the bunker steps Hitler stopped and looked back at the street. The SS officer was shepherding the boys back into the gutted office building. Hitler shook his head.

‘What a thing it would be,’ he said.

Albers and Goebbels looked at each other, mystified.

‘To be young again,’ Hitler said. *‘That young, with everything still to happen.’*

Later, as General Albers sat in his quarters, recording the day’s events in his diary, he looked up at the agonized Christ on a large wood-and-ivory crucifix by his bed.

‘Not long now,’ he said quietly. ‘A week at most, with luck.’

The realism of the crucifix sometimes struck him as grotesque, but he kept it by him. It was the only memento of his wife, the one item to survive the inferno of their cottage after a British bomb reduced everything else, Greta included, to ash and vapour.

‘Perhaps, Lord,’ he said, ‘you will arrange it so I can surrender to someone with a sense of irony, and no great desire to punish.’

He looked at the diary again and thought for a moment before finishing the page. *The small, special brotherhood is established, he wrote. If the meticulous plans of Secretary Bormann and Minister Goebbels unfold in the way they are intended, the remaining Jews in Germany will one day feel the Führer’s throttling grip from beyond the grave.*

He put down the pen and rubbed his hands together. The room was cold and damp. He pushed back the chair, got down on his knees and peered under the bed. There was probably enough schnapps under there to ease the chill. He pulled out the bottle and held it up. Three good drinks, maybe four.

‘Enough for now.’

He stood up, took the tumbler from the night-stand and poured a measure. With the glass held out before him he felt an impulse to toast the future of the thirty bedraggled orphans. They had looked so downcast. Just pathetic, frightened, parentless children.

That was now. But years from now...

‘God,’ he groaned, ‘all the black tomorrows.’

He looked at his row of treasured books on the shelf above the bed; at the framed snapshot of himself and his brother as children; at the ivory face of Christ hanging there, twisted with pain and despair.

‘Why should I wish more calamity on the world?’

Outside in the passage there was the sound of shouting. The wise men in the map room were being outraged again, berating absent commanders for the failure of crazy stratagems to rescue the Nazi dream. Albers sighed and raised his glass to the crucifix.

‘Shalom,’ he whispered.

1

A policeman on New Bond Street pointed towards the corner of Clifford Street. 'Along there,' he told the attractive American woman, 'and it's the first turning on your right.'

She thanked him.

'First visit?' he said.

'Oh no, not at all. I've been coming here since I was in college. But I still manage to lose myself in May fair.'

She thanked him again and moved on, turning along Clifford Street and into Cork Street. At the first gallery she stopped, caught by the sight of a solitary canvas on an easel in the middle of the window.

'Impressive, isn't it?' a man said.

She nodded, coolly enough to stay aloof, not so much as to appear rude. She had reached a stage in her life where the ability to draw men's attention, without trying, was no longer a particular pleasure.

'Probably a fake, mind you,' he grunted, moving off.

She could see it was no fake. It was an untitled George Stubbs, another of his horse paintings, this one a grey stallion hedged around with menacing shadows, rearing back from an unseen threat beyond the edge of the picture. The fear in the animal's eyes was painfully authentic, a primal terror more vivid than a photograph could convey. She turned away and walked on, blinking against the cold wind, wondering how a person could live with such an unsettling picture.

Outside the Lancer Gallery she stopped and glanced at her watch. She had dawdled over lunch and hadn't intended to get here so late. If she went in now, she would have to make it a swift visit. Too swift, probably, to enjoy it. If she waited until tomorrow she would have more time to browse. On the other hand, her London schedule was tight; a visit tomorrow could only be a maybe.

She stood facing the window, not sure what to do. As she raised her arm to look at her watch again, a man on the other side of the street drew a pistol from his pocket and fired a bullet into her spine. The impact threw her against the window. The second shot hit the back of her skull and came out through her forehead, smashing the plate glass.

Her body jerked and twisted, a grotesque puppet in a hail of falling glass. Abruptly she dropped to her knees. A single glass shard slid into her chin and pinned her to the edge of the window frame. She stopped twitching and became still.

The gunman made off along Cork Street into Burlington Gardens. He ran past witnesses too startled to do anything but stare at the glass and the blood and the blonde-headed corpse, spiked on the edge of the window.

The policeman who had given the woman directions appeared at the corner of the street. He stood for several seconds, staring like the others, taking in the scene, then he turned aside and muttered urgently to his radio.

The Arab came out of Sloane Street station with his eyes turned to the ground, walking purposefully, not quite hurrying. He stood in a knot of tourists by the crossing opposite the station entrance and waited for the green man.

'Do you know the way to Oakley Gardens, at all?' a small woman said. 'I have this map but it's very confusing.'

'I'm sorry.' He kept his face averted, as if he was watching for someone. 'I'm a stranger here.' He saw her push the map forward and stalled the next request. 'I need glasses to read small print,' he said. 'I don't have them with me. Sorry.'

He pulled up the collar of his windcheater, hiding half his face without obviously obscuring his identity. He breathed deeply, telling himself over and over to be calm and take care to make no eye

contact. He forced his mind to stay on the primary need, which was to get to his rented room as fast as he could without arousing interest along the way.

The green man came on and he stepped into the road, moving fast but no faster than the others, his hands deep in his slit pockets. His right fingers were curled around his gun. The barrel was still warm.

Hurrying past W.H. Smith's he could see the pedestrian light at Cheltenham Terrace was green, which meant it would be red before he got to the corner. He put on a spurt, just short of running, and cursed as the light changed. People bunched on the edge of the pavement. He eased in among them.

'Bloody traffic,' a man next to him said.

'Right.'

'It's no pleasure walking any place these days.'

'Yeah, right.'

The light changed. He tightened his grip on the gun, holding on to it like a mascot, and let himself move along at the centre of a group.

On the opposite pavement he accelerated again, striding smartly, turning left down Walpole Street and right on to St Leonard's Terrace. One of his many superstitions dictated that if he took the same route back to base on consecutive nights, something bad would happen. Last night he went straight down the King's Road and got to his digs via Smith Street. It was much quicker than this way, but what was a gain in speed alongside the chance of bad fortune?

Approaching the bottom of Royal Avenue he looked up and saw two policemen walking towards him. They were 15 metres away but he was sure they were looking at him. He checked his watch. It was twenty minutes since he did the job, long enough for a description to be circulated. He reminded himself his face had been half covered, as it was now.

But what if they were looking for an Arabic type with half his face covered?

He decided to go up Royal Avenue. He turned right sharply and bumped into a woman. He hadn't even seen her. His foot came down on hers and she yelped. He glanced at the policemen. They were definitely looking at him now.

'I'm so sorry,' he said to the woman. 'Please forgive me for being so clumsy -'

'Stupid idiot!'

He tried to move past her and she swung her folded umbrella at him, hitting his shoulder. He smelled whisky. Of all the people to walk into, he had to pick a belligerent drunk. He pushed her away, but she resisted and tried to hit him again. He stepped aside and she stumbled, swinging wildly. She missed and fell over with a heavy bump, howling as the contents of her shopper scattered across the pavement.

'Hoi! You!'

It was one of the policemen.

'I have done nothing,' the Arab called. 'She slipped and fell, that is all.'

'Just stay where you are, mate. Stay put.'

They were coming for him. His heart began to race. He jumped over the flailing woman and sprinted along Royal Avenue. Leafy branches of garden shrubs slapped his face as he ran.

'Stop! Come back here!'

He put his head down and pumped his legs furiously, hearing the voice of Ahmad Shawqi: 'Never be taken by the police,' he always warned. 'Avoid all police in all countries. There is no worse mis-fortune than to be taken.'

It was one of his superstitions, anyway. If the police ever took him, eternal bad fortune would befall himself and his family. As he ran it occurred to him that last night he had gone back to his digs by the route he had just taken; it was the day before that he had gone straight down the King's Road...

'Right, pal, hold it right there.'

Impossibly, one of the policemen was standing ahead of him, arms spread, clutching his baton. The Arab stiffened his legs, frantically slowing himself as he realized they must have split up and this one had cut through a garden to get in front.

‘Don’t do anything silly, now -’

The Arab ran off the pavement into the traffic, narrowly missing the front of a taxi. He spun away from the near-impact and found himself with his hands flat on the bonnet of a police car. As the blunder registered, the driver and his partner were out and coming for him.

He turned to run and saw the first pair of constables heading straight towards him. He turned back, ran, and slammed into the side of a removals van.

‘Right!’ a constable shouted, grabbing him. ‘Don’t move a muscle!’

A strong hand took his shoulder, the other twisted his left arm up his back. He plunged his free hand into his pocket and grabbed the gun. There were four policemen and they were all close. Even if he worked at his fastest, he knew he could never get them all before they took him. There was only one possible course of action.

‘Shit! He’s got a gun!’

He saw frantic hands coming at him, fingers hooked to drag him down. In an instant the muzzle of the gun was in his mouth. He tried to think of something noble, an image that would define his life.

Nothing came.

He shut his eyes and pulled the trigger.

‘It is Tuesday 27th February, 1996,’ the fat pathologist wheezed into the tape recorder hanging on his chest. ‘The time is sixteen-thirty-three hours. I am Doctor Sidney Lewis and I am conducting a preliminary examination on the body of an unidentified male. The body was brought to the coroner’s mortuary at Fulham by ambulance from St Agnes’ hospital, where the subject was declared dead on arrival at sixteen-oh-eight hours, this date.’

Dr Lewis switched off the recorder and waited as an attendant led two constables and a plainclothes policeman into the autopsy room.

‘I’m DI Latham,’ the plainclothes man said. ‘These are Constables Bryant and Dempsey. They were in pursuit of the dead man shortly before he died.’

Lewis looked at them. ‘You’re the two who were chasing him when he panicked and shot himself?’

‘If you care to put it that way,’ the taller one, Dempsey, said coldly.

‘And why have you come here?’

‘I wanted them to look at the body and tell me it’s the man they chased,’ Latham said. ‘There can be identity problems with Middle Eastern types, and since this case could turn messy, I want basic facts established before everything gets obscured by jargon.’

Dr Lewis waved a hand at the corpse. ‘Well, then, gentlemen, is this the man in question?’

‘That’s him all right,’ Dempsey said. Bryant nodded.

‘Fine.’ Lewis grasped the handle at the top end of the tray holding the body. ‘Now, tell me before we go any further, are there any mysteries here? I mean, do we know how he died, for sure? Was it the way I’ve been told? He took his own life, without a shadow of doubt?’

‘That’s clearly established,’ Latham said. ‘But there’s plenty of mystery, just the same. We don’t know who he is, we don’t know why the gun, or why he shot himself with it.’

‘Shortly after shooting a woman in Mayfair,’ Constable Dempsey added.

‘Not yet confirmed,’ Latham snapped. ‘But that’s likely,’ he told Dr Lewis. ‘He appears to have shot and killed a woman as she looked in a gallery window on Cork Street.’

‘Who was she?’

‘We don’t know that yet, either. All very confused at this stage. There’s a diplomatic angle. American. We’ll know more in an hour or so.’

‘I see what you mean by messy,’ Lewis said. ‘Never mind, in the meantime we can generate paperwork.’ He switched on a bright striplight above the autopsy table. ‘I don’t think we’re going to find much that isn’t obvious already. If one or both of you constables would help me with the clothing, it will speed matters.’

He saw Bryant scowl and watched Dempsey work up a look of affront.

‘Is there a problem?’

Bryant shrugged sullenly.

Dempsey said, ‘I don’t remember signing up for anything like this.’

‘Blame your own bad timing,’ Lewis said. ‘You drove this poor soul to kill himself at approximately the same time a debt collector in Parsons Green pushed two of his targets against the plate-glass window of a betting shop with rather too much force. The glass gave way and the debtors were cut almost in half. They’re through in the other room being stripped at this moment by my only assistant - the bloodstained one who showed you in.’

‘I don’t think you have the right to say we drove this man to -’

‘It was a joke, for God’s sake!’ Lewis said. ‘A bloody *joke*, of which we need plenty in this charnel house.’ He shook his head at DI Latham. ‘A sense of humour should be a prerequisite for the job.’

The body was stripped and the clothes bagged for examination at the police forensic laboratory. The big tray with the body still on board was then transferred to the roll-on scales. Dr Lewis read off the weight, hooked a measuring pole over one foot and read the height at the point where the pole touched the head. That done, he moved the body back under the light, switched on his recorder and proceeded with the preliminary examination.

‘The body is that of a well-nourished man of Middle Eastern appearance, between twenty-five and thirty years old. He weighs seven-nine-point-three kilograms and measures one-eight-five-point-two centimetres, from crown to sole. The hair on the scalp is black and wiry with a natural curl. The sclerae and conjunctivae are unexceptional, the irises appear light brown and the pupils are dilated and fixed. Hairline scars under the ears and on either side of the nose suggest extensive and skilful cosmetic surgery. Apart from considerable damage to the head, to be described below, there are no other apparent injuries.’

Dr Lewis picked up a length of wire and pushed it into the dead man’s mouth. The end appeared from the back of the head with a grape-sized clot of blood attached. Lewis withdrew the wire and spoke to his recorder again.

‘The head is normocephalic, with extensive traumatic damage. A visible bullet-entry wound to the rear of the hard palate connects, on probing, to a gaping area of parieto-occipital bone loss, approximately ninety millimetres by sixty, with significant absence of intervening brain tissue.’

He switched off the recorder and looked at DI Latham. ‘That does it for the preliminary. Nothing more until we have an order for a post-mortem.’ He put a finger into the dead man’s mouth and felt around the edge of the bullet wound. ‘What kind of gun did he have?’

‘Austrian Glock automatic.’

‘Nine millimetre?’

‘Correct.’

‘Registered?’

‘Not in this country.’

‘Foolish of me to ask. You’ve no idea at all who he is?’

‘We fingerprinted him at the hospital and got several mug shots. The PNC is working on it, so is Interpol, and we’ll be uploading all the details to ICON this evening. But the short answer is no, we haven’t a clue who he is.’

The blood-smirched attendant appeared in the doorway and said there was a phone call for Detective Inspector Latham. Latham went to the office and was back in less than two minutes.

‘Apart from some money and the gun,’ he told Dr Lewis, ‘the only thing the dead man had on him was a snapshot, a picture of two women sitting in a bar. Somebody has just noticed one of the women in the picture is the woman who was shot in Mayfair this afternoon.’

‘Why do you think there’s a hold-up on identifying her?’

‘The American Embassy is involved. They probably know all about her, and no doubt so do our top brass, but they have an agreed process whereby information trickles down slowly from the top, and we can’t rush them. Not if we know what’s good for us.’

‘Intriguing.’ Lewis was examining the body again. ‘He’s very muscular.’ He lifted an arm, hefting it, pinching the flesh. ‘He probably worked-out a lot, or he’s recently been in the army.’

He hoisted the arm higher and stared.

‘What is it?’

‘Abdul has a tattoo. It’s just visible through the undergrowth in his armpit. Look.’

The pattern was indistinct. Lewis picked up a knife with a straight blade and used it to shave away the armpit hair.

‘What would you say it is, Doc?’

‘It’s nearly spherical, it’s orange and brown and yellow with a sharp blue border. It could be some kind of Egyptian talisman, for all I know.’

‘Or a Muslim symbol,’ Latham suggested.

Constable Bryant was standing at the top end of the table. ‘If you look at it from here, it’s not too mysterious,’ he said.

Lewis tilted his head and inched around the table. ‘I’ll be damned,’ he said.

Latham was still frowning at the mark. ‘What is it?’

‘The face of a cat,’ Lewis said. ‘And it’s smiling, in a ghastly kind of way.’

2

On Wednesday 28 February at 10.10 a.m. Eastern time, thirteen hours after the Arab had been declared dead at a London hospital, a startlingly clear image of a cat-face tattoo appeared on the ICON information screen in the UNACO Command Centre at UN headquarters in New York. It accompanied a case summary with a picture of the dead Arab male, complete with an investigative précis and inset shots of the dead man's property. Tom Gilbert, the duty Newline Monitor, made high-definition printouts and spent another twenty minutes gathering peripheral information. He then took everything to the office of the Director of UNACO.

That morning was as busy as any other in the complex of offices and technical suites that made up UNACO's headquarters. UNACO - the United Nations Anti-Crime Organization - occupied an entire floor of the Secretariat building which dominated the UN's East River site. More than two hundred employees, many of them highly trained specialists, handled the administration of the world's most efficient crime-fighting body. Thirty prime-rated field agents, drawn from police and intelligence agencies around the world, formed the core of ten teams known as strike forces which, by agreement among the majority of nations, were able to cross national boundaries freely. They could also bypass police administrations and, where necessary, override laws and the diplomatic process. The organization's avowed aim was to counter crime at the international level, using personnel and resources funded by the UN member nations. UNACO was not a secret body. On the other hand it did not publicize itself. Its offices were unmarked, all telephone numbers were unlisted and agents and employees never openly acknowledged their affiliation. The Director of UNACO, Malcolm Philpott, was accountable only to the Head of the Security Council and to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

As Tom Gilbert entered the office, Philpott was staring at a letter printed on CIA notepaper.

'Hope I'm not intruding, sir.' Gilbert crossed the big room, his feet soundless on the carpet. He put the folder on Philpott's desk. 'This could be relevant.'

'So could this.' Philpott tapped the letter. 'Remember Tony Prine and his one-man mission to Bolívar?'

'Prine?' Gilbert thought for a moment. 'Specialist in industrial sabotage - that Prine?'

'The same. A highly resourceful chap. He's been trying to uncover a solvent-manufacturing plant, crucial to the production of cocaine, located somewhere in the region of Cartagena. Well, a satellite surveillance officer at Langley has spotted a big bang in the heart of the Bolívar region. He says if it's got anything to do with us, we should tell the people upstairs to get ready to counter complaints from the Colombian government about unscheduled anti-drug activity on their urban turf.'

'Looks like Prine found his target.'

'Let me know as soon as he makes contact. Some kind of pat on the back will be in order.'

At that hour Philpott still looked puffy, a side-effect of the beta-blockers he now had to take for his heart condition. Otherwise, he looked fit and alert. He pointed to a mini espresso machine on a table at the side.

'Help yourself to Milanese blend, Tom. Bad for the heart so early in the morning, but it does wonders for the soul.'

Gilbert poured himself a cup and sat down to wait. Philpott looked at the pictures he had brought and read the sketchy case details. He looked up.

'No identification on the Arab?'

'Not at present. He's had recent plastic surgery to alter vertical *and* horizontal facial alignment.'

'Perhaps a seriously wanted man then. Is there anything more than you've given me?'

'The woman the Arab is believed to have killed -'

'She's the one on the left in the picture he was carrying. I read that and I've looked at the picture.'

‘Don’t you recognize her?’

Philpott held the print under the desk lamp. The woman had a pallid, delicate face, small-featured and framed by soft-curved blonde hair. Her companion, no less attractive, had a strong face and rich dark hair.

‘You must have met her,’ Gilbert said.

‘Really?’ Philpott shook his head. ‘I meet a lot of good-looking females. Nowadays it’s never a memorable *frisson*.’ He sighed. ‘Her jacket is a Donna Karan, I believe, but I don’t know the wearer at all.’

‘She’s Emily Selby,’ Gilbert said.

Philpott thought for a moment. ‘Political analyst on the White House press team. Yes?’

Gilbert nodded. ‘Her areas of expertise are listed as Central and South-west Asia.’

‘God almighty, I believe I spoke to her at a reception not long ago.’ Philpott groaned. ‘Maybe I’m losing it.’ He read the details again. ‘So, yesterday afternoon, right in front of the Lancer Gallery in Mayfair, Emily was shot through the spine and the back of the head with bullets from a Glock 17, identified as the gun found on the dead man. What was she doing in London?’

‘According to a Reuter’s bulletin, she was taking a month of her annual leave in Europe.’

‘Do we know who this other woman is?’

‘Yes, I got her identity on FaceBase.’

‘Did you, indeed. How long did that take?’

‘Three minutes.’ FaceBase was a feature-comparator capable of identifying photographs from a database of three million images. ‘It never takes much longer than that,’ Gilbert added.

Philpott stared at him. ‘Do I detect a certain smugness?’

‘Well, it does seem to work every time, and I *did* argue strenuously for the installation of the system, even though certain people -’

‘Certain people. You mean even though *I*, alone, reckoned it was going to be a waste of money and floor space.’ Philpott shrugged. ‘I was wrong.’

‘It’s magnanimous of you to say so, sir.’

‘Tom, when you’re right as often as I am, you have to be wrong some of the time or you start to look infallible. That would never do.’

‘The woman’s name is Erika Stramm,’ Gilbert said. ‘She’s German, a freelance political journalist with vague terrorist affiliations. She’s twice been refused a US visa.’

‘But we can’t define the link between her and Emily Selby.’

‘Not yet.’

Philpott got up and stood by the window, looking down at the array of national flags fluttering on their masts in front of the complex. The office was on the twenty-second floor. From that height everything looked reassuringly tidy.

‘So,’ Philpott said, ‘the bald fact is that a man of Middle Eastern origin has murdered a US government employee in the heart of London. I think that until we know more about the gunman and his motive, we should regard this as a matter for low-level UNACO involvement. I’ll have the Political Intelligence office hunt for possible leads.’ He turned from the window and smiled tightly. ‘Thanks for bringing this to my attention.’

Gilbert caught the dismissal. He stood up and drained his coffee cup.

‘What about the dead man’s fingerprints?’

‘They were transmitted on the ICON file, sir. Did you want to have them?’

‘Pass them to Mike Graham, with the rest of the stuff. Tell him I’d like a detailed work-up as soon as he can manage one. You’ll find him in the Interview Suite writing case notes. He’ll be glad of the diversion.’

When Gilbert had gone, Philpott picked up the phone and told the UNACO operator to find the number for Riot City in Hounslow, England, and to give them a call.

‘Sounds like a fun place,’ Ms Redway said.

‘If you don’t find it listed as that, its real name is the Public Order Training Centre,’ Philpott told her, ‘and its bureaucratic handle is TO18. It’s a fantasy violence environment for police officers. I’m not sure I entirely approve, but their crowd-control training is the best.’

‘They probably won’t be open for business for three hours yet.’

‘I know. Tell the security person who answers the phone that Sabrina Carver should call her uncle as soon as she gets to Hounslow.’

The six o’clock forecast had said it would be a cold day, but sunny. On the drive out through Chiswick and Brentford it was still foggy, and on the approach to Hounslow the fog thickened. Slowing down to negotiate the narrow streets on the outskirts of town, Sabrina Carver switched on the car radio to catch the 8.30 news bulletin.

The announcer was annoyingly upbeat for the time of day. He reported that Sinn Fein were to be promised seats at peace talks if they could persuade the IRA to renew their recently-ended ceasefire; a woman shot dead in Mayfair was believed to be an American tourist, but no details of her identity had yet been released; five students had died in a car crash at Milton Keynes; a serial killer had been given three life sentences at a Crown Court in Yorkshire; a British-led team of scientists was on its way to Pisa to help stop the tilt of the leaning tower.

That was it. No news from the States. For the third or fourth time since she arrived in England, Sabrina promised herself she would try again to tune her Sony to Voice of America. Some weird signal-screening in her quarters at the police hostel played hell with shortwave reception.

She stopped by the Riot City barrier and smiled at the constable in the security box. He waved as usual, but this morning it was different. Sabrina realized he was beckoning her. She got out and put her head inside the tiny office.

‘Morning, Terry. What’s up?’

‘You’ve to phone your uncle,’ he told her. ‘Soon as possible.’

‘Yeah. Right.’ It took a second to sink in. Until two weeks ago, the alias had been Cousin Malcolm.

‘You can use this phone if you want.’

Sabrina knew that would be breaking Riot City rules. She also knew Terry was happy to make that kind of gesture if it would gain him points with a hard-bodied blonde his own height. Over tea and biscuits in the canteen, he had told her she was wasting her time being a cop; she should be in pictures.

‘It’s OK,’ Sabrina said now, ‘I’ll get to him later. I don’t want to be late. If Uncle rings again, would you tell him I’ll call back as soon as I can?’

Terry said he would. Sabrina got back in the car, drove on until she was behind the administration block and stopped. She took her cellular phone from her bag and tapped in three digits. There was a scattering of satellite noise, then a ringing tone. Philpott answered on the fourth ring.

‘I got your message, sir.’

‘Fine. It’s nice to hear your voice, my dear. I’ve been looking over your team leader’s evaluation of your progress over there. He believes his notes are for the eyes of his London chief alone, of course, so there are one or two racist, sexist comments about pushy Yank feminist tactics and so on, but on the whole you’ve impressed him. He says that your, er, what is it now...’ paper rustled, ‘your capacity for total focus in a Level One TSG situation was especially to be commended. I assume that’s good?’

‘Level One is the ultimate stage of public order training, sir. A TSG is a Territorial Support Group.’

‘So what have you been doing in your TSG?’

‘All kinds of things connected with crowd handling and public order control. Yesterday we did gasoline-bomb training on a simulated Battersea street. At one stage I caught fire, but a couple of nice Inspectors patted the flames out.’

‘And do they buy your cover?’

‘Sure, they think I’m a New York cop. I chew plenty of gum and I swear a lot. It’s not the hardest cover to maintain. But I’m sure you didn’t get me to call just so we could engage in chit-chat.’

‘No, indeed. There’s a little job I want you to do, while you’re in the area.’ Philpott explained about the Emily Selby shooting and the possibility of the case being taken up by UNACO. ‘You know the kinds of fears a case like this can raise. Apart from the possibility that Emily Selby was a spy, there are other worries. The gunman could have been an irate Palestinian.’

‘Was Emily Jewish?’

‘She was. Think of the possibilities: a Jewish employee of the US government gunned down by a man of Arabic appearance.’

‘It raises a lot of scenarios.’

‘Well, for the moment it’s enough to be aware of them,’ Philpott said. ‘Emily had a small suite at the Knightsbridge Lawn Hotel, and unless intergovernmental procedure has changed wildly in the past year or two, the rooms will be sealed off for a few days until it’s decided who has the right to nose around in the dead woman’s property.’

‘You want me to pre-empt the search.’

‘If you would.’

‘Any idea what I might be looking for?’

‘A journal, perhaps, cryptic notes, any item in her possessions that doesn’t chime with the rest. Try to find out if Emily was less of a credit to her job than anyone suspected.’

Sabrina looked at the clock on the side of the main building. If she was going to get coffee before people started throwing bricks at her, she would have to go now.

‘Should I do the job tonight, sir?’

‘Not any later.’

‘In that case I’ll have to do some manoeuvring.’

‘Why so?’

‘There’s a full-scale military-style kit inspection tomorrow morning. My stuff’s in a foul state. Getting it ready will be a three-hour job, at the tightest.’

‘You’re an agent of UNACO, my dear, which means you count resourcefulness among your many qualities. I’m sure you’ll manage. How much longer will you be at Hounslow?’

‘I finish tomorrow.’

‘Lord, time flies.’

‘I hope to be back in New York Saturday.’

‘By which time, I’ve no doubt, you’ll be an even more finely-honed and efficient emissary of justice than you were before you left us.’

‘Are you being serious, sir?’

‘Not particularly,’ Philpott said. ‘Take care, Sabrina.’

‘As ever,’ she promised.

When she walked into the canteen three minutes later, the usual silence fell. It was momentary, a one-beat cessation of talk and rattling as the sixty-two men and four women in the place stopped everything to register her arrival.

Sabrina was not embarrassed or discomfited. She had been attracting overt interest since a few months past puberty; also, at Hounslow there was the added professional factor. The blonde was an American cop - or so they believed - and since all dreams of slick law enforcement centre on the US police image, Sabrina realized she was as much a focus of envy as anything else.

‘It’s coffee, black, no sugar, right?’ Plump Inspector Lowther was on his feet, pointing to the chair opposite his own at the table nearest the door. ‘I was on my way to get seconds anyway. Sit down, I’ll only be a minute.’

‘Thanks.’

As she pulled out the chair a young officer at the next table said, 'Hey, settle an argument, will you?' He pointed to her black cotton coverall suit. 'You had that made special, didn't you?'

'Nope.' Sabrina patted the gold-and-blue embroidered badge on her sleeve. 'It's standard NYPD issue.'

'Really? Has it got special deep pockets for the bribes?'

Sabrina smiled back. 'You must watch an awful lot of bad movies. Get out more often in the real world. Bribe a girl to go with you.'

He blushed, and the jeering laughter of his companions obviously stung. He looked away and said no more.

'Here we go...' Inspector Lowther put a cup of coffee in front of her and sat down with his tea and a jam doughnut. 'I hope it's hot enough.'

'It's fine, thank you.'

He was a sweet soul, and even though he was on the make Sabrina found the attentiveness endearing. He had latched on to her from the start and had helped her over the early hurdles without once making a move on her. But she could tell the hope was there. When she left England she would not miss Lowther, but at least she wouldn't remember him with distaste.

'So,' she said, making small talk, 'today's the grand finale, huh?'

He nodded. 'Rocks, bottles, firebombs, burning buildings, the lot. Nervous?'

'Very,' she lied. 'How about you? Have you ever been in a real-life situation like this one? People throwing stuff, hating you, too far gone to hear reason?'

'I got a taste of it in 1990, at the Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square. A man with a broken chair leg and a hatred of the police put me in hospital for ten days.'

'Wow.'

'But you must get into some vicious scrapes in New York.'

'I never faced a mob.'

'Ever had to shoot anyone?'

'No,' she lied again, thinking, *More people than you'd believe*. 'Up to now I've dealt mostly with traffic violations.'

'Well, at least you have an exciting working environment.'

'I wouldn't say that. Frantic's a better word.'

And then, without any lead-up or warning, Lowther leaned forward and said, 'Would you have dinner with me tonight, Sabrina?'

That look, she thought: the wistful smile, the eyes telling her he'd be devastated if she said no. It never worked, she always saw it as emotional blackmail, something else about men to despise. On this man, however, it simply looked pathetic.

'I have an engagement already this evening,' she said, simultaneously spotting an opportunity.

'Oh.' He shrugged.

'But I'll tell you what - we finish at noon tomorrow, right? How about lunch somewhere in the West End? My treat. I'd have loved to make it dinner, but I have to catch an overnight flight to New York.'

She watched the flicker of changes in his expression, all desperately transparent. This was less than he'd had in mind; she had side-stepped the proposition, but it was better than rejection; what she suggested still wasn't dinner, it was unromantic daytime stuff, but it still wasn't rejection...

'Well, that would be great,' he said. 'But I can't let you pay.'

'NYPD pays,' Sabrina said. 'They're covering me for two goodwill entertainments and I haven't done one yet, so we can have a splash.' She gave him her friendliest smile. 'Is it a date?'

He nodded, thoroughly charmed.

'Oh, and by the way, I was going to ask you, it's presumptuous of me, I know...'

'Go ahead,' he said generously, 'anything at all.'

‘Well.’ She made an uneasy face. ‘It’s the passing-out kit inspection tomorrow morning. It’s obvious they take it seriously. I wouldn’t want to lose the points, but I’ll be squeezed for time, because I have to go to this woman’s place -’

‘You want me to get your kit ready?’

‘Oh, no! God, no, I wouldn’t dream of imposing. I thought maybe you could find me somebody who would take on the job for a consideration.’

‘I’ll do it for you myself.’

‘Really?’

‘Consider it done.’

‘But that’s so -’

‘Look, Sabrina, don’t mention it. It’ll be a pleasure.’

She touched his hand. ‘You’re a real friend.’ His gratitude was something to see.

3

When Philpott stepped into the semi-darkness of the Secure Communications Suite he found Mike Graham hunched in front of six computer screens, three on three.

‘I know you said another hour.’ The padded walls and ceiling muffled Philpott’s voice. ‘But I got fidgety.’

‘I’m antsy myself, now,’ Mike said. ‘One damned detail has bugged me for twenty minutes. I’m getting nowhere with it.’

He leaned back and stretched. He was a lithe man, conventionally handsome with even features and an easy way of smiling. Philpott, never keen to admit that anything or anyone was without major flaw, often remarked that Mike’s hair was too long.

‘When will you have results worth examining?’

‘I’ve got them now.’

‘Excellent.’ Philpott took the swivel chair next to Mike’s. ‘Do you have a tentative verdict?’

‘Well this could certainly be UNACO’s kind of case, because the dead man had a terrorist pedigree. His real name was Yaqub Hisham, and he was Arabic, as everybody thought. He was registered with the Department of Social Security in London as Kamul Haidar, twenty-six years old, living in rented accommodation in Chelsea, with a home address in Morocco. He’d been in London a month, allegedly studying history and English at the Monkfield Institute.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘Scotland Yard’s SO11 gave it the once-over. It’s a couple of rented rooms off the Edgware Road, run as a school by a retired teacher. Plenty of students are registered with the Institute, but nobody seems to show up for classes.’

‘Another dismal racket,’ Philpott sighed. ‘Something in the atmosphere of England nurtures seedy hustlers.’

‘Aside from his scholastic work, our man was a part-time porter at the Wimcote House Hotel in Paddington.’

‘But in spite of that, he could afford digs in Chelsea. All of this was a cover, I presume.’

‘Oh sure.’ Mike tapped a button on the console and a Mossad Criminal Data card appeared on the third screen of the top row. The Arab’s picture was at the left with his fingerprints at right and a summary of his criminal record below. ‘No information at Scotland Yard or Interpol, but the Israelis have the goods on him. The picture was taken a month after he had his face changed. His prints were altered too, acid and pumice powder they reckon. Mossad’s fingerprint boys used a latency comparator on smudgy dabs they picked up in Hebron, and the comparator turned up this guy’s original set of prints.’

Philpott peered at the text on the screen. ‘It’s in Hebrew.’

‘I got a translation.’ Mike held up a printout sheet. ‘Courtesy of Mossad Criminal Records.’

‘I’m impressed. You have better connections every time I see you.’

Mike ran a finger down the sheet. ‘Hisham had sixteen listed aliases and was a known terrorist from the age of eleven. During his middle and late teen years he managed to study history as well as sedition and anarchy. He was a prominent graduate of the Jezzine terrorist movement in Lebanon. Known to be energetic, technically skilled, resourceful and, unusually, the guy was multi-lingual. He wasn’t strong on ideology, but he got by on plain hatred of the Jews. He was made an honorary member of the Brotherhood of the Civet when he was eighteen.’

‘Brotherhood of the what?’

‘Civet. It’s a kind of cat. The brotherhood are sworn to do harm to Jews in any way they can, which doesn’t make them unique, but they *are* customized. They have a tattoo of a civet’s head in the right armpit. The animal’s supposed to be lucky and to ward off danger.’

‘Every day,’ Philpott said, ‘I learn a little more...’

‘In June 1994 the Israelis bombed a Hezbollah training camp in southern Lebanon and killed forty guerrillas. Six people survived. Yaqub Hisham was one of them.’

‘He was with Hezbollah?’

‘The Israelis believe he was training them. For a while after the bombing he was treated like a living martyr, and he made a public declaration that he would double his efforts against Jews. Three weeks after that he ambushed three officers of Shin Bet at a checkpoint in the Bekáa Valley and butchered them. Mossad’s been on his tail ever since. He was believed to be holed-up in Tetuán, Morocco, which isn’t an easy place for Israelis to go looking for somebody. Mossad are very surprised that he showed up in England.’

‘Indeed. What was he doing in London, shooting a political analyst from the White House? I mean, why him? Why a seasoned, Jew-hating Middle Eastern terrorist?’

‘Emily Selby was Jewish.’

‘Not the kind of Jew that Arab terrorists travel all the way to Europe to assassinate, surely?’

‘If we knew the link between Emily and the other woman in the picture, Erika Stramm, I’m sure we would be standing in a brighter light.’

Philpott looked at the screens. ‘What’s the loose end you’re chasing?’

‘Yaqub’s gun. I checked the serial number with the makers at Deutsch-Wagram, and they say it’s from a batch of fifty bought in Vienna last July for export to the USA. Buyer’s name was Albert Torrance of Denver, Colorado, which turns out to be a fake ID. But the guns did clear US Customs. I have the other weapon numbers from the consignment and I’ve been flagging law-enforcement nodes on ICON, but nobody has a thing on Glock 17s.’

‘Am I right in thinking the Glock 17 is the gun people were making so much noise about at one time? The gun that panic-merchants thought could escape airport X-ray detection?’

Mike nodded. ‘There’s a lot of plastic in its construction. But there’s enough steel to show up on X-rays. What really grabs the enthusiasts is the seventeen-shot magazine.’

Mike tapped a picture of the Glock 17 up on to a screen.

‘There’s a lot going for it. It’s hefty, it’s accurate, and it’s got enough rounds to let you do shot-clustering if that’s what a job calls for.’ Mike looked at Philpott. ‘I’m just intrigued to know how the weapon got from the States to Yaqub Hisham.’

‘And I’m intrigued to know why he shoved it in his mouth and took the back off his head just because four London bobbies were chasing him.’

‘He probably didn’t want to be arrested,’ Mike said. ‘Superstition and obsession are primary components of a fanatic’s mental structure. They’re also the elements that can undermine him. In my experience, a terrorist’s superstition and fear often take the form of an abhorrence of being captured, of being *contained* on somebody else’s terms. Remember in Rome, three years ago? I cornered a billion hijacker, a Lebanese guy -’

‘Shofar,’ Philpott said.

‘Shofar. I had the drop on him, he could do nothing but submit and get taken away. Except he was a fanatic. He didn’t want to be arrested, not at any price. So before I knew it he’d shoved his wristwatch in his mouth and rammed it into his gullet. A heavy-duty Seiko with a steel bracelet and a casing four centimetres across. And boy did it wedge. He went blue and he was dead in less than a minute. All because somebody wanted to restrict his movement.’

Mike stood up slowly, rubbing his eyes.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I think I should get out of here soon. I’m starting to like the cloistered feel of the place, and I’m getting sleepy.’

‘A refreshment break, that’s the thing.’ Philpott took a tiny cellular phone from his pocket and tapped a button. ‘Then you can get on with tracking that gun. I’m sure it’s important.’ He put the

phone to his ear. 'Miss Wellington? I wonder if you could bring something to sustain Mr Graham and myself? We're in SCS-One. Thank you.' Five minutes later, as Philpott was pouring coffee, he noticed a strip of surgical tape across Mike Graham's knuckles.

'Have you been punching something harder than yourself?'

Mike flexed the hand. 'I took a corner too fast and had to correct in a hurry. My hand brushed a projecting stone.'

'You really shouldn't go tearing about on motorbikes the way you do.'

It was something appropriate to say, and it was said with little enough emphasis to be easily ignored, if Mike chose.

'I don't tear about, sir. You know that.'

'Do I? I must have forgotten.'

'Even when I'm in a race I strive for the spiritual dimension,' Mike said, deadpan.

'Ah...'

'My goal is *oneness* with the machine, so that I can be part of the transcendental *fact* of its speed.'

'I see.'

'It's art. What's a little lost skin in pursuit of art? I mean, let's face it, when I'm on my bike I'm expressing my deepest urges and polishing my karma at the same time.'

'Michael. It was foolish of me not to realize all that.'

They laughed. Philpott handed Mike his coffee. For just a moment an edge of stiffness intruded. At sociable moments silences between them were awkward, because matters which stayed unmentioned were nevertheless always there.

'Still enjoying the serenity of Vermont on the weekends?'

'More and more,' Mike said.

'And you still like being on your own?'

'Yep. Just me, my TV for company, my pickup for transport, and my bike for death-defying art.'

Some years before, Mike's wife and son had been murdered by terrorists. He had been devastated, and the grief of his loss damaged him brutally. For a long time he was beyond consolation. Finally, when grief had run its course, he moved from New York to Vermont, and there he took up the solitary domestic life. With time he had gained a measure of tranquillity, though some women liked to think they still saw pain in those dark blue eyes.

The agony of Mike's loss was now a thing entirely of the past, but he was changed, and serious risk-taking was a feature of that change. Philpott privately believed that it was therapy: any ex-policeman knew that jeopardy wiped out restlessness.

'What's your instinct on this case?' Mike pointed at the screens. 'Do you get think we could see some action?'

'Paperwork action, maybe. A ground-covering investigation, with plenty of interviews, then a long, detailed report to tidy the whole thing up.'

Mike stared at him. 'You certainly know how to lift a guy's spirits.'

'On the other hand it could be a thrill-a-minute caper.' Philpott sipped his coffee. 'Let's see what Sabrina turns up. I just have a gut feeling this might be much bigger than we realize.'

4

The receptionist had the kind of relentless smile that would weather any opposition. ‘I assure you, Madame Reverdy, there is not a problem.’ She pushed a registration card and a pen across the mahogany desktop. ‘If you would care to fill this in, I’ll get a porter to take your bag.’

Where the card asked for the guest’s name Sabrina wrote *Louise Reverdy*, the maiden name of her maternal grandmother. She put her address as *28 Rue de la Grand Armée, Paris 75017, France*.

The receptionist came back with a small, thin, green-uniformed man who took up a protective stance beside Sabrina’s suitcase. He smiled and bowed.

Sabrina pushed back the registration card and took the key from the receptionist.

‘Thank you so much,’ she said, revelling in the way she could impersonate her mother’s accent, ‘and let me say again, although you insist it is no trouble, I am deeply grateful for the way you have accommodated me at such short notice.’

‘Not at all, Madame. I hope everything is to your satisfaction.’

The porter took Sabrina up in the lift to the third floor. He led the way along a passage carpeted in deep green Wilton. Outside her room he made a flourish with the key, turned it smoothly in the lock and pushed the door open.

‘*Après vous, Madame,*’ he said.

Sabrina looked surprised. ‘*Vous-êtes Français, m’sieur?*’

‘No,’ he said, following her into the room, ‘fraid not. But I was good at French at school, and now and again I can’t help trying it out. Sounded authentic, did it?’

‘*Absolument!* Top marks.’

He beamed with pleasure. Sabrina handed him a five-pound note and watched one small pleasure overlap another. Priming him had been easier than she imagined.

‘Tell me,’ she said as he turned to go, ‘yesterday a friend passed this way in a taxi, and she tells me she saw police officers. Has there been trouble?’

The little man’s features seemed to clench as he came back, head tilted confidentially. ‘One of the guests,’ he said, pointing upward. ‘An American lady. She was the victim of a shooting. Nasty business.’

‘She was shot here?’ Sabrina managed a note of alarm without having to screech. ‘In this hotel?’

‘Oh no, no, ma’am, it happened over in Mayfair. But she was a guest here at the time.’

‘Oh, how terrible. There will not be police marching about the place all night, I hope? I am such a light sleeper...’

‘Not to worry,’ the porter said, ‘they’ve sealed the room and for the time being everything’s quiet.’ He made his little bow again. ‘Have a peaceful night.’

‘Thank you so much.’

When he had gone she kicked off her shoes and sat on the edge of the bed. She checked her watch: 10.28.

The minibar looked tempting, but she decided to wait until work was over.

Getting here had been a struggle. Nobody had warned her the last operational day at Hounslow could run into the evening. She had come out of a hostage-taking scenario at eight o’clock and got back to her room at the hostel a few minutes before nine. Since then it had been breakneck all the way. First she had transformed herself from tousled squalor to the simulation of a chic Frenchwoman visiting London. In the circumstances a disguise had not been strictly necessary, but she enjoyed changes of personality, and tried always to conduct herself according to Philpott’s Rule One of Subterfuge, which he confided to her one tipsy evening at a UN reception: ‘Be somebody else whenever you can, my dear, and always tell a lie even if the truth would sound better.’

Transformed to her own liking, she drove across town, put the car in an all-night car park, hailed a cab and presented herself at the hotel, looking as if the most strenuous thing she had done all day was sign Amex slips.

She looked around her. This was a nice place. And it should be, since the tariff for one night was the same as a week's rent for a cottage in the Cotswolds. She had called the hotel before leaving Hounslow - delayed flight, staying one more night - and the receptionist promised to hold the one remaining room until eleven at the latest. It happened also to be a double room and there was no concession for single occupancy. Philpott would bleat about that.

She patted the mattress. What she wanted to do, more than anything, was sleep for eight hours solid. But she was here to work. She yawned and made herself stand up.

By the wardrobe she slipped off her dark blue jacket and hipsters, put them on a hanger and opened the suitcase. Inside was one other change of clothes, her NYPD worksuit and three bath towels to make up the weight. She put on the worksuit and a pair of black Nikes.

From the lid pocket of the suitcase she took a tool roll, a fibre optic torch, a plastic box with FIELD KEYMAKER stamped on the side, a Polaroid camera and a pair of thin latex gloves. She put the tool roll, the box and the camera on the bedside table and slipped the torch and gloves into her pocket. She closed the suitcase.

'Two hours twenty,' she said aloud as she lay down on the bed. She put her arms straight by her sides and let her hands lie open, palm upwards. She closed her eyes. 'Two hours twenty,' she said again, then fell asleep almost at once.

She woke up in rapid stages, first clambering out of a dream about being pawed by a policeman with sugar on his fingers; then she was entering an ante room just behind her own eyelids. Consciousness came and she was aware of pink translucence. She opened her eyes and brought up her wrist, peering at her watch. Five minutes to one. Not bad.

In the bathroom she splashed water on her face, patted it dry and went back to the bedroom. She put the tool roll and the box in her side pockets and looped the thong of the torch around her wrist.

Before she opened the door she put out the light. She stood for a minute just inside the doorway, listening. The place was quiet and dark. This was a hotel with a special reputation, an establishment where ladies could stay on their own. By now all the guests would be in bed; when Sabrina arrived, she noticed the bar was already deserted.

She closed her room door and walked soundlessly to the staircase at the end of the passage. The porter had pointed upwards when he talked about the shooting; there were six floors so she only had two to reconnoitre, at most. That was one blessing. The other was the kind of door locks they used.

The sealed room was on the sixth floor, and the sealing was figurative. There was a strip of yellow-and-black adhesive tape across the top of the door, another at the bottom, and a notice warning it would be a criminal offence for anyone to open the door, or attempt to open it, without the express permission of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

Sabrina went to the switchbox by the stairs and turned off the dim night lights along the passage. If she was disturbed and had to run for it, at least no one would see her face. She went back to the sealed room and shone the narrow torch beam on the lock. It was exactly like the others, a straightforward Yale, and the police had added no locks of their own.

She unfurled her tool roll on the carpet and took out a tiny pick and a torque wrench. The key-making kit in the box might still be needed if the dead woman's luggage turned out to have fancy locking arrangements.

Sabrina pocketed the tool roll and stood close to the door. She slid the torque wrench into the bottom of the key slot and with the other hand she inserted the pick, prong upwards, sliding it all the way to the back of the lock. She slowly withdrew it again, getting the feel of resistance from the springs pressing down on the pins.

Now she turned the wrench a fraction to the right and put the pick back in the lock, pushing it in all the way, not letting it touch the pins. Then she began pulling it out, applying steady upward force to the pins. The correct pressure had to be only a shade greater than the minimum needed to overcome the force of each spring. She stroked the pick over the farthest of the five pins, increasing the pressure on the wrench until the pin stuck. She brought the pick forward to the next pin and did the same. She repeated the manoeuvre with the third pin.

There was a sound along the corridor, a creak like boot leather. Or like an old door shrinking in the night air. Or like a million possible things. Sabrina remained frozen by the door, counting to a hundred before she moved again.

The next pin would not stay up when she probed it. This was not unusual: the pins at the front of a lock were often bevelled at the edges from simple wear. Sabrina kept the torque pressure fixed and began sliding the pick back and forward over the remaining two pins, scrubbing, as professionals called it. As the pick moved over the pins Sabrina gradually increased the upward pressure of the prong. Suddenly both pins slid upwards and stuck. She turned the wrench another fraction and the door slid open, tearing softly away from the adhesive tape.

Sabrina pulled out the picking tools and pocketed them as she stepped into the room. She made sure the door was locked behind her, then she closed the heavy curtains and put on the overhead light.

There was always an eeriness about a room a person had planned to return to, but never did. Clothes had been laid out for the evening, bottles and jars were lined up in the bathroom, shoes stood in a row in the bottom of an open closet.

Sabrina assumed the police had touched nothing. It was also safe to assume they knew where everything was. She took out the Polaroid camera and photographed the room from several angles. She took close-ups of the distribution of items on the dressing table, the bathroom ledge and the closet shelves.

When she had leaned the pictures in a row along the top of the washbasin to dry, she pulled on the latex gloves and set to work.

Any search, to be effective, had to be strictly methodical, and no improbability had to be rejected. Sabrina had trained with an FBI Search Unit, people so skilled and so downright suspicious of human deviancy that nothing could be hidden from them. She began at the front of the room, by the door, and worked backwards to an imagined three-dimensional grid pattern.

In the course of an hour she learned several things about Emily Selby. For a start, she had had a mild but distinct case of obsessional neurosis. Her shoes in the closet were not only lined up neatly, they were positioned with their toes a precise distance from the back of the closet. Prior to noticing this, Sabrina had found a small cut-off piece of a plastic ruler carefully wrapped in tissue. It was 10 millimetres long, the precise distance of each well-polished toe from the wooden back panel of the closet.

Emily had also been an enthusiastic botanist, and in her notebook she had prepared a detailed itinerary for herself around Kew Gardens, which she had planned to visit on Friday.

Most fascinating of all, for Sabrina, was the fact Emily had been writing a traveller's guide to Israel. Two hundred pages of the hand-written manuscript were in her suitcase, together with working notes and a letter of encouragement from her publisher.

For ten minutes Sabrina speed-read the pages, looking for further insights on Emily. She picked up interesting facts about places like Ashdod, Gedera, Giv'atayim, Migdal and Nazareth, but none of it was likely to throw light on why the bookish, seemingly repressed political analyst had been murdered.

Sabrina was drawn back to the closet. Something there was wrong, the smallest thing perhaps...

She stood back and looked at the row of clothes, the jackets, skirts and slacks on their hangers, the lower edges aligned, the spacing between hangers just so, a monument to obsessive compulsion. Manically precise, a little masterpiece of symmetry. But yes, something was wrong. A beige jacket,

squared and creaseless on its hanger, hung a fraction low on the near side. What was more, when Sabrina bent and peered at it, she saw a clear centimetre of loose thread at the hem of the jacket, just where it hung low.

She touched the hem and felt something hard. She took out the jacket and fingered the object. It was a key. It had been sewn into the hem.

Carefully, stitch by stitch, she unpicked the hem enough to fish out the key. It was made of brass with a toughened plastic top, the kind used to open high-security lockers and strongboxes. Sabrina slipped it into her pocket.

By 2.15 she believed she had made a thorough search of the room. She stood by the door, letting her eyes do a slow pan, left to right, up and down. No area had been missed. She walked slowly round the place again, looked in the closets, drawers, bathroom cabinets and under the bed.

Still on her knees she paused and looked under the bed again. She saw something, paper, folded and tucked under a canvas strap supporting the mattress near the foot of the bed. Only one folded edge was showing, but she knew she should have seen it first time.

‘For that,’ she told herself, reaching for the paper, ‘you get one drink instead of two.’

It was a sheet of computer printout paper with perforated sides, folded in four. She opened it and spread it flat on the carpet. There was a vertical row of printed names, with an address opposite each. At first sight the names appeared to be all male, and all German. At the bottom were a couple of pencilled lines in tidy handwriting she recognized from the manuscript: *Journal note: list completed 2/15/96, passed to ES, 2/24/96.*

Sabrina looked at the names again. They meant nothing to her. She folded the list and put it in her pocket. As an additional act of penance for missing the paper the first time, she made one more trawl of the room, swift but detailed. She found nothing new.

Finally she put everything back as it was, using the Polaroids to guide her. She put out the light, opened the curtains and left, locking the door behind her.

Ten minutes later, back in her room with a drink and the list beside her, she called Philpott on her mobile, using the scrambled satellite line. It was after ten o’clock in New York, but he was still at his desk.

‘I assumed you’d like a progress bulletin on the Emily Selby case,’ Sabrina said. ‘I got into her room and picked up a couple of things.’

‘Specifically?’

‘A key and a list of names. Men, all German I think.’

‘Do you have the list there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Read out a few of the names.’

They’re not in alphabetical order - looking at the addresses, I’d guess they’re graded in order of their proximity to Berlin. Here goes. Gunther Blascher, Walter Höllerer, Johann Boumann, Andreas Wolff, Friedrich Schadow, Albrecht Schröder, Kurt Ditscher, Karl Schinkel -’

‘That’ll do. Fax it to my secure number.’

‘Do the names mean anything?’

‘We’ll discuss it when you get back.’ A phone was ringing. ‘I’ll talk to you soon. Just get that list to me.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Sabrina thumbed the red button and put down the phone. She looked at her watch. There was hardly any night left. For a while she stood there, wondering if she should get in the tub or go straight to bed.

Tub, she decided. And no bed. At a pinch, a long hot soak could do the work of six hours’ sleep. She could get herself dressed and ready for the day at a comfortable pace, take an early breakfast, read the morning paper and still be out on the street by 7.30.

She ran a hot bath and undressed as it filled. As she climbed in and sank up to her neck, the heat seeped smoothly into her muscles. She closed her eyes and her mind drifted. She thought of home, the reassurance and comfort of her own apartment in New York, her favourite weekend restaurant...

Abruptly she thought of lunch. Today. Her eyes opened. She had forgotten. Lunch with gooey-eyed Inspector Lowther.

'Merde,' she groaned, in a perfect replica of her mother's voice.

5

At 9.10 a.m. on Monday, C.W. Whitlock downloaded the final piece of information to expand the details of the list Philpott had given him on Friday morning. The job had been painstaking, frustrating and exhausting. Worse than that, the expenditure of a whole weekend on the work had put a strain on Whitlock's private life. Following a hurried and stressful cancellation of a Saturday-night dinner party, his wife was no longer communicating.

After the fourth attempt to reach her that morning he put down the telephone and saw the final lines of text scroll up on the computer screen. He sat back and yawned. Feeling old, he decided, was a matter of how much hope you abandoned. For twenty-four hours he had felt rundown and sinking, aware of no clear end. Seeing the long job finished did not quite lift his spirits, but there was a measure of relief. Relief, in turn, fired a tiny hope: things between himself and Carmen might work out with a minimum of fighting. 'And a pig will go flapping over the UN complex any minute,' he said aloud.

Whitlock was a man people tended to like on sight, a native Kenyan with skin a girl once called light umber, and gold-brown eyes his mother swore would break many hearts. His skin colour was part of a legacy from his grandfather, a white British Army officer, whose genes had also conferred a strong jaw and a firm mouth, which C.W. softened with a moustache.

He leaned forward, tapped the PRINT button and checked the clock. He was up against the deadline. Too often, it seemed, he was handed jobs with no slack in the schedule. He picked up the internal telephone and dialled 3 for Security.

'Calvin? Has Mr Philpott arrived yet?'

'He signed in five minutes ago.'

'Thanks.'

'Sorry to dash your hopes.'

'That's all right, Calvin. The day he does turn up late, I'll buy you lunch.' He put down the phone. 'This,' he sighed, 'is no life for a sensitive boy.'

He was Oxford-educated, a former soldier with wide experience as an officer in the Kenya Intelligence Corps. He had been recruited into UNACO by Philpott himself, and was now the longest serving member of Task Force Three. On two occasions Philpott had openly acknowledged that Whitlock was the most versatile and well-informed of his active agents - a distinction, Whitlock believed, that invited abuse.

As the last piece of information came off the printer he signalled Interpol's National Central Bureau in Berlin and switched momentarily to voice contact. He thanked the duty information controller for his help and expressed the hope that he could return the favour.

Two minutes later he walked into the washroom with the accumulated data in a manila folder under his arm. Mike Graham was there, standing by the basins, bending to see himself in the mirror as he combed his hair. His reflection nodded at Whitlock, who looked grim.

'Morning, C.W. Nice to see a guy who can start the week with a grin.'

Whitlock put down his folder and rolled back his shirtsleeves. He washed his hands and face, re-tied his tie and buffed his toecaps at the polisher. He came back to the basins and leaned close to the mirror, pulling up one eyelid, then the other.

'I can't decide if I'm anaemic, or if clinical depression has crept in.'

'I hear you've been on all weekend.'

'The Selby case. I did a workup on a list of German citizens, most of them hard to nail. Not a criminal record among them, so I had to trespass on a lot of legitimate secrecy.'

'Nobody does it better.'

'Go ahead,' Whitlock sighed, 'patronize me. I thrive on that.'

Mike put on his jacket as he went to the door. 'Meeting in five minutes,' he said. 'Don't be late.'

‘I’m moving as fast as I can...’

Three sides of UNACO’s briefing room were panelled in dark shiny wood. The fourth was a ceiling-to-floor window looking out on the East River. The centrepiece of the room was a long polished table with three chairs at each side and one at the end near the window. On the table were notepads, pencils, glasses and two water pitchers. A long ebony sideboard against the right-hand wall had a steel tray with coffee, tea and a Thermos jug of chilled Coke.

Philpott was already there when Mike Graham and C.W. Whitlock walked in. He stood by the window reading a fax. Lucy Dow sat at the end of the table nearest the door. Lucy was a tall, solemn-faced young woman, an authority on Arab affairs with three years experience in Lebanon as a field operative. Sabrina was there too, pouring coffee.

‘Welcome home,’ Mike said. ‘How was England?’

‘Strenuous.’

‘Did you remember my Bath Olivers?’ Whitlock said. ‘Or did they get forgotten in the whirl of events?’

Sabrina pointed to a Fortnum and Mason’s bag on the sideboard. ‘Six packets. Enough to turn up the flame of nostalgia till it hurts.’

‘Bless you.’ Whitlock pecked Sabrina’s cheek. ‘Those biscuits are all I really miss about my student days.’

‘You must have really lived it up,’ Mike said. ‘What did you do - crumble them into a chillum and smoke them?’

‘Right.’ Philpott looked up from his fax and pointed at the table. ‘Sit down, will you? I’ve a busy day so we must keep this brief.’

Whitlock and Mike brought coffee to the table and sat opposite each other as they always did. Sabrina sat somewhere different every time. She did that in case anyone imagined there was significance in the way the only permanent female member of the unit sat in relation to the other two operatives and to the chief. Today she sat at the top of the table on the same side as Whitlock, adjacent to Philpott.

‘You’re all familiar with the superficial details of the Emily Selby shooting,’ Philpott said, opening a folder in front of him. ‘Lucy is here this morning to add anything that might help in formulating at least the nucleus of a procedure. I can add to what you all know about the case by telling you that early on Saturday, a call was received here at the UN from Colonel Wolrich of Security Liaison, working out of the US Embassy in London. He talked about the case with the Deputy Secretary General of the Security Council. As a result of their discussion, the Selby inquiry has been made our business.’

‘So my weekend wasn’t a complete waste,’ Whitlock said.

‘Why did they pass it straight to UNACO?’ Lucy asked.

‘Well, there’s the hard evidence the gunman was a trained assassin, and a high-profile one at that. There’s the fact that he travelled West to kill an American who happened to be a Jew, and who happened to be working for the government, right inside the White House. That bare-bones synopsis alone makes this our kind of case. We have a strong enough indication of international crime, with the attendant danger of escalation, to warrant UNACO intervention.’

‘I can vouch for the killer’s prominent profile,’ Lucy said, crossing and uncrossing her long legs as she spoke. ‘They were very proud of Yaqub Hisham in the Lebanon.’

‘Ever meet him?’ Sabrina said.

‘He wasn’t a social animal, but yes, I was in the same big tent as him one time, along with maybe fifty others, while I was doing a hill-gypsy routine for cover. He was nothing unusual as terrorists go, except he was maybe luckier than most, or more foolhardy. Until he got too hot a target for the Israelis, he was really the main man. Scourge of the Jews, they called him. When things warmed up

and Mossad started closing in, it was a top Arab surgeon that volunteered to change Yaqub's face. A big freebie, carried out in one of the finest hospitals in Egypt.'

'Was it business as usual after the face-change?' Philpott said.

Lucy shook her head. 'Mossad got leaked a picture of him. From Yaqub's point of view it was a waste of time. He ended up with a face he thought wasn't nearly as pretty as his real one, and the way things turned out he might as well have hung on to the old face. He had to get back into hiding. That's why he went to Morocco. Hard for the avenging Israelis to get at him there.'

Philpott looked at Mike. 'Fill us in on what you learned.'

Mike gave them a summary on the Arab's un-exceptional stay in London, up to the time he killed Emily Selby and then shot himself. 'Lucy could tell us more, but the things we most need to know are his reason for killing Emily Selby, and the source of the gun he used. So far, those things remain a mystery.'

'Sabrina?'

Sabrina explained how she got into Emily Selby's hotel room, and what she found during her search. 'For a tourist Emily carried a lot of stuff, but the key and the list were the only items out of the ordinary. The key wouldn't be half so interesting if it hadn't been stitched into her jacket.'

'What impressions did you get about the woman herself?' Philpott asked.

'Tidy and well organized, though perhaps to a pathological extent.' Sabrina explained about the piece of ruler she had found, and about clothes stored by colour, bottles in the bathroom regimented by size. 'The kind of clothes she wore indicated she had good fashion sense, but she was also reticent, modest probably, because she had what I call an extravagance-shut-off. She had limits and barriers, she showed flair but with enough of a conservative streak to stop herself from being flamboyant.'

'Overall impression?' Philpott said.

'That she was intelligent, gifted and inquisitive, with a tragedy at the centre of her life, supported by the evidence of her compulsive neurosis,' Sabrina said. 'Compulsive rituals, notably in the behaviour patterns of intelligent people, indicate that they use rigid and complicated routines to divert their minds from areas of pain.'

C.W. was nodding. So was Lucy.

'Emily Selby's history supports that interpretation,' Sabrina went on. 'Her employment record, which I read as soon as I got here this morning, shows she was widowed three years ago. She suffered a compound tragedy, because her husband and father died at the same time and in the same place.'

Philpott tapped the photocopy in front of him. 'Lake Cayuga, Ithaca, New York State,' he said. 'A fishing accident. Verdict of drowning on both men. We will look into the details. Now, Sabrina, did you find anything at all to link Emily Selby with Erika Stramm, the woman with her in the picture?'

'I'm assuming the pencilled initials ES at the bottom of the list stand for Erika Stramm. But that's all I have. I'm still working on a connection.'

Philpott looked at Whitlock. 'Tell us how you fared with the list.'

Whitlock had his folder open, the sheets of information spread out before him. 'It's a list of thirty German names and addresses, and all the names are male,' he said. 'I sifted the criminal records first, but there was nothing. Whatever else they are, these are law-abiding citizens. Then I had to go the slow route, with the help of Interpol. Everybody was very helpful, and eventually I got expansion - as much as is known - on every name on the list.'

'What's their connection?' Mike said.

'Nothing worthy of the name. They don't appear to be related by blood or commercial ties. They're apparently prospering in various quiet ways, but that's all they seem to have in common. Well, except for one factor. We know that fifteen of the men on the list were adopted. They were war orphans.'

'And the others?' Philpott said.

‘No childhood records extant. Destroyed by enemy action. The bombing of Dresden and Berlin and countless other communities wiped out millions of official histories. It simultaneously provided a blank slate for the creation of others.’ C.W. spread his hands. ‘About two-thirds of the population records collated in Germany during the immediate post-war years are just not reliable, from an investigative standpoint.’

‘What’s the men’s professional range?’ Sabrina asked.

‘Everything from bookbinding and carpet-tile manufacture to medicine and law - there are two doctors and two lawyers - the rest are one-offs. Interpol tried a few test searches with the records of marriages but no links showed up.’

Mike asked if they were all about the same age.

‘It’s tight, between fifty-nine and sixty-five years old.’

‘I think there might be something in the fact there are so many orphans,’ Sabrina said. She saw Mike shake his head. ‘At least I won’t close my mind to the possibility,’ she added, giving it an edge.

‘And in the meantime,’ Philpott said, ‘I won’t make any wild guesses about the significance of this list. However...’ He pushed forward a copy of the list and pointed to a name halfway down the page. ‘I’m concerned that this man’s name appears on it.’

The others turned their heads to peer at the list.

‘His name is Andreas Wolff. He’s an Austrian computer systems engineer and program designer.’

‘I can see his face now,’ Mike said.

The others looked at him.

‘Youthful middle-aged, short salt-and-pepper haircut, steel-framed glasses and a great smile.’

Philpott nodded slowly. ‘What are you trying to tell us, Michael?’

‘His picture’s on the boxes of a very expensive series of computer games. They’re on sale all over the place.’

‘Mike spends a lot of time in toy shops,’ Sabrina said.

‘This guy is a king of contemporary games design. He specializes in hybrids: dungeons and dragons, arcade stuff and straight crime detection rolled into one. It must be a great formula, the games sell fast and they ain’t cheap.’

‘Andreas Wolff is certainly well known for his recreational software,’ Philpott said dryly. ‘However, in security and law-enforcement circles, which is to say *serious* circles, he’s also an eminent individual. He created the software that protects all the data carried by ICON.’

ICON - the International Criminal Observation Network - was the main criminal intelligence service in the West. Criminal records, fingerprint files, *modus operandi* profiles and databases, plus details of hundreds of current and impending police operations were carried and interchanged on the ICON network. With appropriate clearance and the necessary keyboard skills, an operator could call up the details of virtually any crime, any criminal or any current police record in a matter of seconds.

‘The man on the list is definitely the same Andreas Wolff?’ Sabrina said.

The address is the same,’ Philpott said, ‘and I see from C.W.’s information that the age is right, too. Wolff is fifty-eight. I repeat, I won’t make wild guesses about the significance of the list, but it’s worrying that Wolff’s name comes up in a *mysterious* context at a time like this.’

‘Like what?’ Sabrina said.

‘Well, as you know, the complexities of ICON have multiplied in the past year. What you don’t know is that as more law-enforcement agencies have committed their data to the network, Andreas Wolff has become indispensable. ICON’S continued existence depends on his expertise.’

‘You mean,’ Mike said, ‘that half the world’s police and national security organizations have been silly enough to put all their eggs in one basket? How come?’

‘It’s not an ideal state of affairs,’ Philpott said, ‘and nobody planned it that way. Wolff has become so closely linked to the system, and to determining its rate of development, that he’s pulled

ahead of others in the field. No one else understands his programming routines or his security protocols.'

'So if anything were to happen to Wolff,' Whitlock said, 'archive security could stagnate and the files would soon be vulnerable.'

'That's precisely what I'm saying. The potential gain from hacking into ICON is vast. It's inestimable. And it pains me to tell you that the possibility of getting inside ICON is the driving force behind a lot of developments in electronic crime.'

'Do hackers stand a serious chance?' Lucy said.

'Oh, yes, they have a chance and they've taken it. ICON'S security has already been breached.'

Lucy looked startled. So did Sabrina.

'Twice in three weeks,' Philpott said. 'Each time it was open for only a microsecond before alternative encryption routines cut in, but the warning is clear enough. The current generation of safeguards is being eroded, and we're not over-stocked with alternatives.'

'Who's doing it?' Lucy said.

'Lord knows who. I shouldn't think it's any one group. It suits criminal organizations anywhere in the world to have a hole knocked in law enforcement. Hackers try all the time, and they're fed big financial inducements to keep trying.'

'So what's being done?' Mike said.

'For the moment, Andreas Wolff provides emergency ICON security by changing the custodian routines at twelve-hour intervals. He will do this until his new generation of self-enhancing safeguards are test-run and installed.'

'So if Wolff leaves the picture for any reason,' Sabrina said, 'the whole of ICON security collapses?'

'It could be that extreme,' Philpott said. 'We could shut down ICON temporarily in an emergency, but the disruption would be catastrophic. It would be nearly as bad as having the system broken into. The new security arrangements will change everything. ICON will in effect become auto-secure. But until then we remain at serious risk. Without Wolff's support, records and operational strategies could be uncloaked long enough to bring this organization's security to its knees.'

Philpott stopped abruptly and looked at his watch.

'Right.' He stood. 'That's it. I have to go. Compare notes. Make sure you all know the same amount about the case. The facts as they stand present us with a paradox, but in theory the way forward is simple. Find out what links the names on that list and you will have a line on why Emily Selby was killed. When you know that, you'll know what you're up against. Lucy, thanks for your input.'

Halfway to the door he stopped. 'I may change my mind later, but in the meantime I think Sabrina should dig up the whole story on Emily Selby, with special reference to her association with Erika Stramm.'

'Shouldn't we maybe get somebody to interview Stramm right away?' Whitlock said.

'No. I want us to know something about the relationship before she feeds us her version. Mike, I want you to get to work on that key Sabrina found. C.W., keep trying for a linking factor between the names on the list.'

Philpott strode to the door and pulled it open.

'In order to proceed we need a picture, something with shape and features we can identify. Do your best for me on this one.'

Mike and C.W. muttered assurances. Sabrina nodded.

'I deserve it, after all,' Philpott said, and left.

6

‘Now, tell me honestly, what did you think? Were you bored? Or did you enjoy the visit as much as you told the guide you did?’

Karl Sonnemann, one week off his sixty-fourth birthday, stood smiling like a boy on the street outside Goethe’s birthplace in Frankfurt. His hands rested on the shoulders of Charlotte Gustl, a slender, shapely Münster girl with hair the colour of butter. Charlotte was twenty-two, one of Karl’s literature students at the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University. As of last night she was technically his mistress, too.

‘I truly, truly loved the place,’ Charlotte said. ‘I’m sure I shall dream about it.’

‘I did feel that a visit to the birthplace might touch a chord in you,’ Karl said.

‘Seeing that little room where he slept. Where he had his dreams, oh...’ Charlotte clasped her hands under her chin. ‘I could feel, or I imagined I could feel, the surge of the forces that empowered him. This has given me a new perspective on Goethe, Professor.’

‘Karl,’ he said, beaming at her. ‘I told you, call me Karl.’

‘Very well.’ She coloured a little as he slid his arm through hers. ‘I seem to have moved forward *years* in the space of twenty-four hours.’

‘As they walked towards the taxi rank he squeezed her arm, thinking how alike they all were, the girls he picked to be his special blossoms for a term or two. How much alike in the way they looked, in what they said, in how they gave their bodies to him, season after season...’

How much alike, yet he never tired of them, and he found each one breathtakingly new. When he turned fifty a friend had winked at him and asked him how long now, how long before he would have to defer to his years and abandon his little hobby. At the time, Karl had said he would never cease, not until he died, and he said it wishing it were true. Now he felt it might indeed be true; he would simply never stop. The girls showed no more resistance as time passed, he still managed to charm them and, just as important, he could identify the ones he had charmed the most, and so take advantage.

‘I thought we would have a leisurely lunch at Alexander’s,’ he said, ‘and then go back to the university, where my only tutorial of the day is with a Fräulein Charlotte Gustl, if I’m not mistaken.’

She chuckled. It was a moist throaty sound, a variation of the sounds she made against his ear in the night, under crisp sheets at the Excelsior Hotel. For a moment Karl found himself overcome by the swiftness of one sound conjuring up another, and by the sharp, tactile memory of her warmth and closeness...

‘There’s that young man again,’ Charlotte said.

‘Which one?’

‘The one I said was watching you at the birthplace.’

Karl turned. The young man was looking in a shop window a few metres away. Karl had noticed him as they went into Goethe’s house, standing by the edge of the pavement, looking aimless, or trying to. For a terrible moment Karl considered the possibility that the young man, for all his fair-haired, clear-eyed wholesomeness, was a detective. What if Ursula, after so many years, had begun to suspect, and had set this snooper to find out for sure?

Karl turned away, smiling at the wildness of his imagination. ‘I think he has taken your fancy, that young man. You seem to be tracing his movements.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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