

Walking the Dog

Smilodon



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Chapter One

It was a flat November morning, a morning when colours run and the mist hung in the jaws of the estuary above the liver-coloured flott. A slatternly wind was ruffling the tussocks of coarse grass that grew along the littoral, doing nothing to shift the grey curtain. The air smelt of salt and older, darker things. Even the normally raucous gulls were muted, their endless carping muffled by the damp air. No horizon was discernible. The sky coalesced into the iron water, leaching all colours into unrelieved gradations of greyness. Only the dogs seemed unconcerned. They pursued their normal doggy rituals of sniffing at and pissing on every small feature they encountered on the beach. I trudged behind them, collar turned against the cold, pockets stuffed with icy hands. I called them away from worrying at a dead crab. I love my dogs but their habits are distinctly unsavoury. Their world is roughly divided between food and not-food. Sometimes the boundaries blur.

The morning suited my mood. I'd come up to the cottage this weekend to get away from London. The cottage belonged to some sympathetic friends. "You need a break," they said, "why not use our place in Norfolk." I agreed in a moment of weakness. I guess in Samuel Johnson's eyes I was tired of life. London held no attraction for me since I split with Steph. We'd been together for about four years. Suddenly, instead of my Earth being flat and stable, she'd let me know it was really round and spinning. I wasn't 'exciting anymore,' whatever that means. I'd never felt particularly exciting. Steph provided all the brightness in my dull little lawyer's life. If I'm completely honest, the world of restaurants and wine bars through which she sparkled like a meteor was alien to me. I tagged on to her coat tails with a fixed grin and an open wallet. The denizens of these places all seemed to know Steph. In their eyes I was as much an accessory as her Hermes scarves or Gucci handbags, only less explicable.

I'd met her quite by chance in a little gallery in the Fulham Road. The one fruit of my success that I truly enjoy is collecting bronze miniatures. She was in there with another woman, gushing over a small piece by an unknown artist called Angela Sable. I'd bought it a couple of weeks previously and had just popped in to collect it. Conversation was inevitable. The three of us went to a coffee shop to continue the discussion on the merits of Auguste Renoir. The other woman, I don't recall her name, left after about twenty minutes. I took Steph to supper at Green's. Things progressed from there. Within six months she'd moved into my home in Kensington and had started rearranging my life. My wardrobe underwent the first transformation. It's now full of Dior and Balmain. My Crombie overcoat and Sackville suits were laughed out of court. "You're so predictable, Darling. You dress like a lawyer!" I reminded her that I am a lawyer, it got no use.

Steph glided through life, I plodded. I've always been a plodder. I'm a 'details' sort of person; Steph was broad-brush. That was all part of the attraction. I was thirty-seven, unmarried and reasonably successful. Actually, that's too modest, *very* successful. Although I'm a barrister, I've rarely appeared in Court. I'm a tax specialist. I provide opinions for smart arses who want to sail close the wind. Steph thought I should be more glamorous but Tax isn't sexy, it's just very well paid. Before Steph, my life was simple. I worked; I walked my dogs. Winters were for ski-ing holidays in Cervinia and summers were spent in Scotland or the Isles. She was right, I was, am, predictable. But there is comfort in certainty. Steph changed all that.

In Steph's mind, summers were to be spent at House Parties in Tuscany. Ski-ing was to be at Klosters or St Moritz. Dog walking was to remain my solitary occupation. Sensible shoes didn't figure in Steph's wardrobe and as for picking up dog-logs in Kensington Gardens, well! I went along with it. She brought something into my life that hadn't been there before. I won't say it was missing. That would suggest that I felt the lack. Steph was a member of another species whose existence I'd barely believed in, like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. She moved in different circles. My few friends were bemused by her and she by them. Sometimes a sympathetic glance would be cast in my direction as if to say, 'what have you got yourself into this time?' I didn't have an answer.

Of course it couldn't last. Could I say it was fun while it lasted? Probably not. I didn't have fun; I had Steph. I was consumed by love, blind as Oedipus. The inevitable happened. She collided with another meteor. I got burned in the fall-out. All of which led me to a Norfolk beach on that dismal November morning. Once I was there, I couldn't help wondering if I wouldn't have been better off staying in London. Still, the dogs were enjoying themselves.

I have a Siberian Husky called Trotsky and a Retriever called Magic, because he's black. I don't usually let Trotsky run free because he's a bolshie sod and is liable to vanish into the next county, if the mood takes him. However, that morning, with no one else in sight, I'd let him go and he and Magic were thoroughly enjoying the change of scenery. Kensington Gardens is a good place by London standards but this was real freedom. They were oblivious to the weather and Magic was charging in and out of the sea, always contriving to shake himself violently next to me. It's some kind of unwritten doggy law. Trotsky was behaving himself for a change and living up to his name as he followed his nose along the tidemark. I shambled along between them wishing I'd put another pair of socks on under my wellies. It wasn't that cold really, it was the damp that seemed to penetrate and chill my bones to the marrow. Moisture clung to my coat in grey pearls. All in all, I was thoroughly miserable.

We'd gone a little over a mile when I saw another figure, bundled against the weather, trudging up the beach towards me. Trotsky chose that moment to disgrace himself and took off like a cream and brown rocket straight for the stranger. Magic started to follow but responded to my whistle. I could see Trotsky bouncing up at the figure. Whoever it was didn't seem concerned, thank God. They were ruffling his fur and pushing him away in a playful manner. He can be a complete tart to strangers. If I try to play with him, he'll gaze at me with injured dignity writ large in his ice blue eyes. He fawns all over someone new as if to say 'look at me, love me!' Huskies aren't all that common in England so he usually attracts lots of attention. He laps it up. Magic, on the hand, is your typical Flat-coated Retriever; sunny disposition but as daft as a brush. I swear that dog has brains he hasn't used yet.

As I drew closer, I could see Trotsky's playmate was a young-ish woman. Dark brown hair stuck out from under a woolly fisherman's hat. She wore a thick quilted jacket over a chunky Arran sweater, cord trousers and wellies. Trotsky was still going through his 'bounce and bow' routine and she was laughing.

"I seem to have found an admirer," she said.

Her voice was low and well modulated with just the trace of an accent I couldn't place.

"I do apologise," I replied, "I'm afraid he has no manners."

Magic wandered up, dismissed her as a source of potential food, and wandered off back to the water. She turned to look at me. Her eyes were every bit as piercing as Trotsky's.

"Who needs manners when you're beautiful?" She turned back to the dog, "You are beautiful, aren't you?"

He gave her his famous husky grin – all teeth and lolling tongue - then wandered back to me with a hint of innate superiority in his stride.

"I have not seen you down on this beach before. Are you a visitor?"

"Yes. Up for the weekend. I'm staying in the old Coastguard Cottage. It belongs to some friends. I take it you live here?"

"Yes. The tranquillity is good for me. Very few people come here after the summer."

"What do you find to do in such an out-of-the-way place?"

"I sculpt."

This made my ears prick up. There aren't too many sculptors that I haven't heard of. Sculpting is still largely a male preserve, at least among the commercially successful. The cogs whirled and something clicked into place. "Good God," I said, "I think I know you! I mean, I think I know who you are. You're Angela Sable." She smiled.

"I am, but how did you know? Someone in the village, perhaps?"

"No, no. I have three of your pieces. They're among my favourites."

“In a modest way. I always wanted to be a sculptor but I lacked that vital ingredient called talent. I’m Martin Booth, by the way, and this disreputable animal is Trotsky.”

“Pleased to meet you, Trotsky.” She laughed out loud as he wagged his great bush of a tail and gave her his best play-growl. “It is truly a horrid morning, this mist! What is the other dog called?”

“Oh, that’s Magic. You like dogs then?”

“I adore them. I would like to do this one. I’ve never done animals. I think he would look grand in bronze.”

I tried to imagine what Trotsky would like in a Bronze by Angela Sable. All her pieces were figure studies but were tortured somehow; both riveting and painful at the same time. She saw the look on my face.

“Oh no,” she said, “him I would do natural.”

“How long have you lived in Norfolk?”

“Almost ten years now. I came here when I came to England. It reminds me a little of home.”

“Where is home, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I am an Estonian, Mr Booth. What your newspapers would describe as an ‘economic migrant’.”

That explained her accent and slightly odd, formal phrasing. I’ve never visited Estonia so I couldn’t say whether the flat Norfolk coast would remind her of it, but I suppose the Baltic can be just as depressing as the North Sea in winter.

“Look,” I said, “I know it’s terribly forward of me, but would it be possible to see your studio? I am fascinated by sculpture; not just the finished article but also the process.”

She looked at me shrewdly and considered for a moment. “Very well. It is not inconvenient today. I live down there.” She waved a hand at a low building set back from the beach about a half a mile away. “Shall we say at Two O’clock?”

“Thank you, that is really very kind of you. Two O’clock it is.”

We chatted a little longer about the dogs, who were now getting bored with standing around, and went our separate ways.

I spent the rest of the morning doing some ‘reading in’ for a new case I’d been instructed on. It was fairly routine stuff on Capital Gains Tax and should be what Bernie, my clerk, describes a ‘nice little quickie, Mr Booth.’ The dogs were flaked out on the hall carpet so after a quick sandwich and yet another cup of coffee, I set out for Angela Sable’s studio. The wind had picked up during the morning, turning icy, and the mist had lifted, at least for the moment. I strode along the coast path. The grey sea was flecked with dirty white spume

and the light was already fading although it was early afternoon. I didn't need to have seen a weather forecast to know that we were in for a bit of a blow.

The studio turned out to be a little row of old fishermen's cottages that had been knocked into one. I supposed in the old days, whole families would have lived in two or three cramped rooms. Angela must have seen me coming for she met me at the door. "Very punctual," she said, "Please come in." Inside the hall, the extent of the alterations was apparent. To my left was a large room that served as her main studio. The ceiling had been taken out and large skylights set into the roof. It was a jumble of tool racks and trestle tables. Something I took to be a small electric furnace stood at one end with a high tech ventilation arrangement that looked like a space-age cooker hood. Through the open door on my right, I could see a small parlour with a couple of old but comfortable-looking armchairs and a very modern hi-fi system. There were a couple of other doors off the hall, which I took to be the rest of the accommodation.

She led me into the parlour.

"Which of my poor pieces do you own?" she said, folding herself into one of the chairs and indicating for me to take the other.

"Oh, 'Ivan#42', 'The Greek Woman' and 'Self Portrait'. And they are not 'poor pieces', they're masterpieces."

She laughed. "You flatter me, Mr Booth."

I shook my head. "Not at all," I said, "and please, call me Martin."

"Very well, it shall be Martin, then and Angela, too, I think?"

I smiled and nodded. Without the heavy layers of clothing I could see she was quite slightly built. Her dark brown hair was cut severely, framing her face. There were a couple of streaks of grey at her temples. Her complexion was pale but not unhealthy-looking. Despite the grey in her hair, her face was unlined. I guessed her age to be around thirty-two or three but I'm really hopeless at that. She could have been five years either side. The most striking thing was her piercing blue eyes. I want to say they were cornflower blue but that isn't quite right. They were harder than that, more steely. Her gaze seemed to reach inside me and search out all my secrets. She held eye contact all the time; it was quite disconcerting at first. I could see some men might see it as a challenge. I don't have that kind of ego.

We talked easily for a while. More accurately, she asked questions and I answered them. I may not be a trial lawyer but I'm still enough of a barrister to recognise cross-examination. I had the vague impression that she was testing me for some purpose of her own. After a while, she seemed satisfied and said, "Good! Come now and we will look at the studio."

We moved through into the larger room I had glimpsed when I arrived. It soon became apparent that it was a lot more orderly than my first impression had suggested. She explained the process she used for casting bronze.

“It depends on the size of the piece. Sometimes I use ‘lost wax’ and sometimes I cast in sand. The ancients used both methods, you know.”

She showed me how she started with the model and used this to make the mould. Some artists use modern materials for the moulds but she stuck to either plaster or sand mixed with motor oil. I was surprised at first but then she explained that it was like children playing on a beach. You need to moisten the sand so it sticks together. Water would just evaporate whereas motor oil has a naturally sticky consistency. Each of her pieces was a one-off so she didn’t mind destroying the mould to liberate the finished bronze. The whole studio was set up like a mini production line.

Angela answered my questions with patience and the semblance, at least, of real interest. I think she thought at first that my professed interest in seeing the studio was some reverse play on the ‘come up stairs and see my etchings’ ploy. Once she realised that I was genuinely absorbed by what I saw, she relaxed. It would be wrong to say she thawed for she was never unfriendly. She was just less guarded and more inclined to expound, rather than just limiting her answers to simple factual replies.

We must have spent over two hours in that studio. Suddenly she noticed the time and became flustered. It was nearly Five O’clock by then and full dark outside. To tell the truth I wasn’t relishing the walk home through the strengthening gale and the rain that set in at some point during the afternoon. As a result, I’d probably spun things out a bit. What was clear, however, was that I had suddenly out-stayed my welcome. I put on my coat and made my farewells. She recovered enough composure to see me to the door with a smile. She even agreed to accept my invitation to lunch the following day. I had a vague uneasy feeling that she had accepted too readily. We agreed to meet at the local Inn at 12.30 and I left. Her relief was almost palpable.

I butted my way back along the coast path against the wind and driving rain. I was pretty well soaked and chilled to the bone by the time I got home. The dogs were pleased to see me, of course, but then it was their dinnertime. I fed the animals and then myself, lit a fire in the parlour grate and settled down for the evening. There was an old TV in the corner but a quick scan of the newspaper told me there was nothing I wanted to watch. I decided to open a bottle of my favourite Gevry Chambertin, get a plate of cheese and spend the evening in the company of a good book.

The dogs reacted to the fire in their own characteristic ways. Magic got so close I could

as possible. Both curled up and went to sleep. Outside the wind was now distinctly audible and every now and again, another squall would drive the rain to rattle against the windows. I enjoyed some primitive atavistic satisfaction from being snug inside on such a wild night. I do enjoy a good storm – as long as I'm not out in it.

I couldn't concentrate on the book. My grasshopper mind kept flitting from Steph to Angela Sable and back again. I don't think it would be possible to get two more different women. I was going through that 'jilted lover' stage of finding fault with my ex; trying, unsuccessfully, to make myself believe I was best out of the relationship. I could admit to all her faults but still the pain stalked me in the recesses of the night. I confronted myself with the truth: I had always known what she was but loved in spite of it; maybe because of it, who knows?

Steph was tall and voluptuous. I don't know what her natural hair colour was as she seemed to have a standing appointment at Tony and Guy. Every time she came out of the salon, she was a slightly different shade of blonde. Highlights came and went. Her body offered no other clues, she had had all her hair removed by laser treatment and was smooth as silk. Her personality was essentially frivolous, purely hedonistic. Whenever I tried, I found it hard to think of a single thing for which Steph had ever evinced the slightest passion, other than herself, of course.

Angela Sable was something else again. Her hair was natural, even down to the odd streak of grey that she made no attempt to cover. She possessed an intensity; something smouldered deep within her. I felt she was driven. I was puzzled, however, by her sudden agitation and spent a little while trying to come up with an explanation for the rapid change in her demeanour. My ideas ranged from the banal to the fanciful; but nothing I could think of rang true. I would have to ask her outright when we met for lunch tomorrow. I sipped the wine and nibbled at the cheese and listened to the storm huff and puff around the house. One of the dogs was dreaming, giving out a series of muffled yipping noises as his paws twitched. What do dogs dream of? I bet their dreams are good ones. For one thing, they wouldn't involve Steph.

Chapter Two

I was up early the next day and braved the tail end of the storm to walk the dogs along the beach. The waves were high enough to deter Magic from swimming so he ran around in circles and tried to interest Trotsky in some rough-and-tumble. Huskies are the strangest beasts. That morning Trotsky was very much on his dignity and Retriever Games were not on his agenda. He stalked along the tide line, sniffing at the flotsam thrown up by the storm. I threw sticks for Magic to fetch but, in truth, he has never really got the hang of retrieving. He'd run off and grab the stick, bring it back to me and then plonk himself down on the shingly sand to chew it to death.

The wind was still quite strong but at least the rain had stopped. It was bitterly cold. We walked for about an hour before heading back to the warmth of the cottage. I packed up my things so as to be ready for the drive back to London after lunch. I dislike driving in the dark and hoped to be away by mid afternoon. Hopefully this would get me back into Town before the light failed entirely.

I had arranged to meet Angela in a pub called the *Lord Nelson*, named for Norfolk's most famous son. I was early and slipped into the warmth of the snug Saloon Bar, which was already starting to fill with lunchtime drinkers. Listening to the accents, it was obvious that few locals patronised the place at weekends. Most of the people were 'second homers', up from London, as I was. I ordered a pint of Adnam's Best Bitter and found myself a table where I could watch the door and be easily seen when she came in.

She didn't show. By One O'clock I decided I'd been stood up. It wasn't a great surprise after all; we'd only just met. I'd invited myself to her studio, which must have looked pretty intrusive. Normally it's one of those things you just put down to experience but for some reason, this time, I couldn't let it go. It nagged at me. I finished my pint and headed off over to the studio. Shock stopped me in my tracks as I reached the front door.

The place was wide open. Even from the doorway, I could see at a glance it had been trashed. I rushed in, thinking the worst. There was no sign of Angela but the studio had been totally wrecked. The casts she had shown me that waited burnishing had been smashed. The floor was littered with shards of plaster; even the furnace had been toppled onto its side. My relief at not finding Angela in the middle of all this mess was replaced by a sense of panic. I called the police on my mobile and waited outside for them to arrive.

Had this been the middle of London, I don't think they would have managed to raise any interest but this was rural Norfolk. Things like this don't happen there. They were with me in less than ten minutes. There were two uniformed Bobbies and a plain-clothes man who quickly took charge. I explained about Angela's no show at the Pub and what I'd done since

He looked narrowly suspicious but warmed a little when he took my details. There really wasn't much I could tell them so I told them everything. Meeting her on the beach, my visit the previous afternoon, her anxiety when she realised how late it had got.

So much for driving home while it was light. It was around Six by the time I finished giving my statement at the Police Station in Cromer. The traffic was really heavy when I finally hit the outskirts of London so it was almost Ten O'clock when I got back home. Angela's disappearance, they were now calling it that, made the main News. I got mentioned as the visitor who'd raised the alarm, not by name, thank God! There wasn't anything else I could do so I had an early night. Not that it did me much good. Between the intrusions of Steph and Angela Sable, I hardly slept.

I staggered into Chambers on the Monday morning, bleary eyed and panting from the cold. My Chambers are in the Middle Temple and not that easy to find so I was quite surprised when Bernie, the clerk, told me that I had a visitor. Bernie was clearly put out. A clerk to Chambers controls access to his barristers, hands out the briefs and keeps the appointments diary. I shrugged when he started pumping me. "All very 'secret squirrel', Mr Booth." I certainly hadn't made any appointments and found myself hoping, for one brief and glorious moment, it was Steph. This lasted only as long as it took Bernie to say "I put the gentleman in the juniors' office." Bernie wanted to say more but I nodded my acknowledgement and went in to meet my mystery man.

He had the sort of face to which it is easy to take an instant dislike. He was about my age with smooth features and slightly over-long hair. The tailoring was definitely Saville Row and the hand he offered me as he rose to greet me had been expensively manicured. The Jermyn Street shirt and Hermes tie only confirmed my suspicions. He was either a property developer or a senior civil servant. He turned out to be the latter. He introduced himself as Edgar Smythe and I had the strange certainty that this was not his real name. When he claimed to be from the Foreign Office, I knew exactly what he was: a spook.

"Mr Booth, I understand that you reported the disappearance of Ms Angela Sable to the Norfolk Constabulary?"

I agreed that I had and started to explain but he cut across me.

"Let me tell you a story about Angela Sable, Mr Booth. It's not her real name, of course."

"I knew that. She told me that she took it from the French word for sand. Apparently her Estonian name means 'sand'. She found the English word lacked something, so she used French. I'm not aware using an alias is yet a crime unless one sets out to deliberately deceive by so doing," I said pointedly.

“Quite so, quite so. My story concerns Ms Sable’s father. It appears he was a Colonel in the Soviet armed forces; in the *Spetsnaz* to be precise, whom, as you may know...”

“...Are the Russian, or should I say used to be the Soviet, Special Forces.”

“You are well informed, Mr Booth,” he said, with just the trace of sarcasm in his voice. I gave him my most urbane smile and refused to rise. He continued.

“The Colonel made a name for himself in the unpleasantness in Afghanistan. As you may also know, the Soviets used a lot of troops from the satellite states there. It was their way of managing the bad news and keeping the truth about their casualty rates from the Russian people.”

“As opposed to our own dear enlightened Government who just lie.”

“Ah, not a fan of New Labour, Mr Booth? I’d have thought that your profession would have taken them to your bosoms, seeing how very well you’re represented in the cabinet and elsewhere.”

I grunted. He was alluding to the fact that both the Prime Minister and his wife were once in Chambers not too far from my own. “You were telling me about Angela’s father, I believe.” He smiled again, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Yes indeed. The Colonel was a junior officer back in Afghanistan but a highly effective one. He gained promotion and a transfer to *Spetsnaz*. Our boy is, or rather was, a bit of a hard man. His only soft spot was for his two daughters, Angelika and Vika. We all know the wheels came off the Soviet Union in the early 90’s. It was a mad time, a touch of the Wild West about it.”

His eyes took on a distant look and I got the strong impression that he had been there when ‘the wheels came off,’ as he put it.

“To cut a long story short, the good Colonel turns out to have more than a passing resemblance to the Vicar of Bray. When the Reds were in the driving seat, he was a good communist; exit Gorbachev and our man is Yeltsin’s staunchest ally. I’m sure you get the picture?

“Rumours started to circulate in the late 90’s that a large amount of Russian Federation foreign exchange had gone missing, largely D-marks and sterling, which is odd because most of the ex-Soviet hoods went for US dollars in a big way. At this point the good Colonel drops out of sight. He re-emerged a couple of years later in Gothenburg. He lost a short but valiant fight against cancer in a Swedish sanatorium and officially turned up his little pointed toes two years ago. We thought at first that this was a ‘ruse de guerre’ but we checked and it seems kosher. However, there was no trace of the missing millions.

“At this point some particularly nasty gentlemen appeared from out of the woodwork

accompanied her dear Papa to Sweden. She turned up in a canal in Stockholm a few weeks back. Poor Vika. It appears she didn't know anything after all."

"How can you say?"

"The Knights of the Grail came after your Ladyfriend. Angelika seems to have been something of a black sheep. She split with the family at the beginning of the nineties and moved west, first to Barcelona, where she studied Art and then to Britain by way of Paris and Frankfurt. She settled in the UK at the beginning of '93. About this time she changed her name and became Angela Sable, talented but struggling sculptor. With, and this is the bit that has everyone jumping, no visible means of support. A quick check on her bank records shows someone paid the rent and slipped her £500 a month from a Bank in Liechtenstein. We were wondering if that someone was you?"

I almost laughed; the idea was preposterous. Instead I gave him my best lawyer's poker face.

"Mr Smythe, I told you and I told the Police, I met Ms Sable for the first time on Saturday, purely by chance. Prior to that, well, I knew of her. I bought three of her pieces through a Gallery in the Fulham Road. I can tell you no more. But you might tell me why Her Majesty's Government are interested. I can see that it is a matter for the Police but where precisely do MI5 or 6 come in?"

He gave a tight smile and bowed to acknowledge my identification of him was close, if not entirely accurate.

"Let us just say that the Foreign Office was asked for assistance by the Russian Federation Foreign Ministry in tracing a large amount of stolen currency. Thus far we have been unable to render that assistance. The man who introduced himself to you yesterday as a Detective Constable in Norfolk CID was in fact our own Inspector Willis from Special Branch. He went to Norfolk to interview Ms Sable. I believe he had an appointment to see her at around 5:30 pm on Saturday. That might explain the agitation you so acutely observed.

"Unfortunately, when he arrived at her home, she was not there. However, there were no signs of the disturbance you discovered on Sunday lunchtime."

It was clear to both of us that I could shed no further light on events in Norfolk. He didn't waste time with small talk and left shortly afterwards. Bernie rushed in the moment Smythe left the building.

"What did Michael the Mouth want with you then Mr Booth?" He spoke bitterly.

"Who, Bernie?"

"Michael-bloody-Cornell, that's who. Or Mickey the Mouth to his mates in Special Branch."

“Know him? ‘Course I bloody know him. He’s a fixer for SIS.”

SIS, more commonly, if erroneously, known as MI6, is the foreign intelligence branch of the British Secret Service. They aren’t supposed to have any domestic interests and the history of British Spydom is littered with cock-ups caused by interdepartmental rivalries. ‘Mickey the Mouth’ was obviously a liaison officer between the two branches and Special Branch, which is actually part of the Metropolitan Police. It didn’t surprise me that Bernie should know him. He had joined our Chambers from another that specialised in some of the high profile criminal cases, including those involving terrorism.

I told Bernie the full story. He listened in silence. Finally he said, “Sounds like Russian Mafia to me, Mr Booth. Best you stay out of it.” I assured him that was precisely what I intended to do but a small voice inside contradicted me even as I spoke.

Chapter Three

The rest of that week passed normally. I had a slightly uncomfortable interview with the head of Chambers. He'd found about my uninvited visitor and wanted to register his concern but was unsure quite what it was that should concern him. I was taciturn rather than truculent – we never have seen eye to eye. So it came to Friday and I was having a quiet glass of wine in El Vino's on Fleet Street. The old wine bar was once the haunt of the 'fourth estate' but since the newspapers had all relocated to Docklands; the legal profession now claimed it as their own.

I was chatting to couple of 'silks' – Queen's Counsels – when Joachim called me from behind the bar. "Telephone for Mr Booth!" He pronounced it 'Boot' but I'd heard his mangling of my name often enough to know he meant me.

"Hello, Martin Booth speaking."

"Mr Booth, thank Gawd I've caught you."

"Bernie! What's the panic?"

"There's a young lady to see you Mr Booth, here in Chambers!"

"Do we have a name, Bernie or have you been unusually coy?"

"She won't give no name, Mr Booth, just says it's very urgent."

"Let me see, Five foot Eight and Blonde?"

"No, Mr Booth, about Five Six and dark with very blue eyes."

"I'll be right there."

I dashed back to the Temple. It had to be Angela Sable. I didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. In the end I managed to be both at the same time. She was sitting in the cubbyhole that passes for a waiting room in our Chambers. She rose as I came in and stared at me intently, as if it were me that was out of place.

"Angela, this a turn-up. What are you doing here and what happened last Sunday?"

"Hello, Mr Booth."

"It's Martin, remember?"

"Ah yes. Martin. I have no one else to turn to. I need help, Martin. I'm sorry but you are the only person I could think of."

"OK. Let's get out of here and go somewhere we can talk in private."

She looked hurriedly about her and I indicated Bernie with a flick of my eyes. She gave the briefest nod of understanding and followed me out. I cudgelled my brain to think of somewhere we go where we could talk without being overheard. It was early Friday evening and the pubs and bars in that part of London were full of people celebrating the weekend. In the end I gave up and hailed a Black Cab. We went to my place

I have a small Mews house just off Queensgate. I bought it for a song years ago, unconverted and run down. It had been a bit of a money pit in the beginning and my Bank Manager had not looked favourably on a Pupil Barrister taking on such a pile of debt. Fat lot he knew! Modernised and tarted up, it's now worth around a million. It's no palace, three rooms, kitchen and bath, as the Estate Agents would say, but Freehold houses in SW7 are as rare as hen's back teeth, especially ones with integral garages. Apart from anything else, it's quiet. No traffic, no pubs, no shops. It suits me very well. I looked at it as being a good part of my pension. When I call it a day, London won't see my arse for dust. I'll settle in the country somewhere, the Cotswolds, maybe.

I showed Angela into the sitting room and asked what she wanted to drink. She shrugged. Well, if she couldn't be bothered, I'd decide. I opened a bottle of Chateau Lestage, a very respectable little Haut Medoc. Once she got the drink in her hand, she couldn't stop talking. It was like a dam bursting. The whole story of the last week came flooding out of her.

After I had left on the Saturday, two men arrived at her studio. She had been expecting them. They had contacted her earlier in the week, claiming to have to have been colleagues of her father. She had been suspicious, but not overly so. She had left Estonia years before and was not really aware of what her father had been doing latterly. She knew he had been in the Soviet Army, of course, but he had never spoken much about it and had been away a lot, when she was growing up. They hadn't been particularly close and rarely wrote to each other. She didn't know if these colleagues were from his Red Army days or more recent times. She only thought to ask after they had hung up.

The two men arrived, introduced themselves as representatives of the Russian Federation Ministry of Culture and started talking vaguely about offering her an exhibition. She grew nervous when it became obvious that neither had the slightest idea about her work. One of them mentioned 'your paintings.' Then they started to talk about her father. What a Grand Fellow he had been; how he must have been proud of his artist daughter. They were about as subtle as a charging Rhino. They kept asking her if her father had given her anything for safekeeping, just until his 'comrades' could reclaim it. She said she had nothing – had never had anything – of her father's.

They clumped about some more and left with vague promises of being in touch. Once they had gone, she called the Russian Embassy. They confirmed her suspicions that there were no Ministry of Culture representatives currently in the UK and that the Cultural Attaché was presently in Edinburgh with the Ballet. Angela said that she had lived long enough under Russian occupation to know that all of this meant trouble. She was scared, she said. She thought of coming to see me but didn't feel she could involve someone she'd only just met.

She worried late into the evening and decided it was high time to get out of there, to go to ground, so to speak.

She packed up her few valuable belongings into her old Ford Escort and left at around midnight. She knew some Estonian friends in Leicester and had arrived there in the early morning. She slept in the car until it was light and then went to call on her friends. They had seen the story on the TV News. They claimed to be worried for her. What had happened? She told them her story, foolishly, she now said, as they became very interested in what it might be the men were after. They pumped her about her father. She became paranoid, jumping at shadows, perhaps, but she had to leave.

On Tuesday she had made her farewells, unable to escape the feeling that they were desperate for her to stay but didn't know how to compel her to do so, without giving some kind of game away. She had fled, aimlessly. She stayed that night and the next in a Bed-and-Breakfast in Shropshire. Then, she reasoned, if people were truly after her, they would have her car registration and description. She sold the car for £500 to a dealer in Oswestry and caught a train to Birmingham. She stayed in Birmingham one night and resolved to find me. She had gone to the City Library and found me in a Legal Directory. She was afraid to telephone so she decided to come to Chambers. She'd waited in Temple Court until the area quietened down and had slipped into our Chambers just as Bernie was about to lock up.

She had a little money but not enough to live for long in London. Throughout her story she was calm, rational and held me with those ice eyes. Magic sat at her feet with his head on her lap, fixing her with his adoring gaze that he gives anyone who sits still long enough. Trotsky, being Trotsky, ignored us both. There was silence when she finished. My brain was whirling. There was something rotten about all this but I couldn't think what it was for the life of me. I'm a boring bloody Tax Barrister, for Christ's sake! I'm no James Bond. I liked Angela, admired her immensely as a sculptor, but that didn't seem enough to have me cast as the 'Knight in Shining Armour.' I suppose I must have just sat there with a stupid expression on my face for a full five minutes. She didn't say another word, just fixed me with her Nordic gaze. Eventually, I had to say something.

"You can stay here tonight, at least. I need time to think."

"Of course. It is most kind of you, Martin."

"Not at all, not at all. I, umm, I'm a bit stumped, to tell you the truth."

"Stumped?"

"Oh, puzzled. I mean, do you know anything about this 'thing' of your father's that you're supposed to have?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I haven't seen him in over ten years and we have not been

I told her about my conversation with ‘Mickey the Mouth.’ Unless she was a superb actress, the shock on her face was genuine. She hadn’t known about her sister, Vika’s death. I asked her about her appointment with the man from Special Branch. She was genuinely surprised. The only appointment she had was with the two Russians; she knew nothing of any British policemen. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would have said. I was now completely flummoxed. My instinct was to get straight on the phone to our friend Mickey and tell all. Something held me back, though. For whatever reason, the whole situation was starting to make my flesh crawl.

Angela hadn’t eaten anything all day so I suggested dinner. There are a number of little Bistros in the area immediately around Queensgate. She shook her head emphatically. She didn’t want to go out – she wouldn’t feel at ease. So we agreed to stay in and I nipped down to the nearest Waitrose in Gloucester Road and picked us up some steaks and a pre-packed salad. Fifteen minutes later we were tucking in and another bottle of Lestage was called for. She began to relax a bit as the wine went down and for the first time since Steph left, I found myself enjoying company over dinner.

I made her up the spare bed in my study and we parted for the night feeling quite mellow. She said the dogs made her feel safe. I didn’t disabuse her that they would both be utterly useless if anyone tried to break in. Trotsky would ignore any intruder and Magic would try to lick them death. I don’t keep them for their machismo!

I lay awake a long while trying to make sense of everything I had seen and heard. Item: Angela’s studio had been thoroughly trashed. Item: The police and presumably, the Security Services, were taking it very seriously. The opposition, whoever *they* were, were also playing hardball. They had apparently got to Angela’s friends in Leicester. I had just decided to go straight to Michael Cornell, aka Mickey the Mouth, when sleep finally claimed me.

Everything looked much better the next morning. It was one of those delightful, crisp winter mornings when the sun shone and the light had the diffused golden quality of a Turner painting. I was up early and Angela soon joined me in the kitchen where the dogs were bouncing vertically in their excitement at the prospect of the morning walk. We strolled up Queensgate and crossed the road into the Park. We wandered eastwards behind the giant wedding cake that is the Albert Memorial. There was hardly anyone about at that hour and we walked in companionable silence, like two old friends just out walking the dog. Angela threw a ball for Magic to practice his retrieving and Trotsky sniffed and pissed his way along a little in front of me. I was starting to feel that the whole thing could be cleared up very quickly. All we had to do was go and see Cornell, explain that Angela knew nothing, hadn’t seen her family in years. He could report that back to the Russians and the heat would move off in

A sudden thought struck me.

“Angela,” I said, “Cornell also said something about money. He said someone is paying your rent from a bank in Liechtenstein. I think he thinks it was your father.”

She shrugged. “He’s wrong. It is an old German Lady who chose to be my patron. Her name is Helga Meyer. I have her address in Frankfurt so he can check.”

I felt a sense of relief. The only mystery now remaining was why she did not know about the interview with Special Branch. We walked on around the gardens, cut up to Hyde Park and watched as Magic threw himself enthusiastically into the Serpentine for his morning swim. There were a few more people around now and I found myself growing more and more uneasy. I suggested we should head back home and was mightily relieved when we got indoors. Just because I’m paranoid doesn’t mean that they’re not out to get me.

I made coffee and we sat down in the lounge. It was time for a plan of action. I had barely begun to organise my scattered thoughts when the phone rang.

“Mr Booth? It’s Bernie”

“Bernie! To what do I owe the honour of a call on a Saturday morning?”

“It’s Mickey the Mouth, Mr Booth. I was having a couple of jars with some old mates from Kings Bench Walk and I happened to mention he’d been sneaking about Chambers. Well it seems our Mickey is no longer *persona grata* with our friends in Vauxhall.” (He meant the Security and Intelligence Service.)

“The bastard got the elbow, Mr Booth, and is now a freelance. The word is that he’s mixing in some dodgy company these days. I thought you ought to know, like, seeing as it was you he was sniffing around.”

I thanked Bernie for the information but didn’t know what to make of it. Only one thing was clear. We needed help. Someone was far too interested in Angela’s whereabouts for it to be healthy. For whatever reason, it now appeared that I was well and truly involved. You didn’t need to be a genius to figure out that Michael Cornell, and whomever he was now working for, could find me easily enough. I’ve never made a secret of my address and my number is the phone book. If they realised that Angela had made contact with me, it wouldn’t be too long before we had a visit. I decided it was time to send for reinforcements.

I immediately thought of the O’Farrell twins. Liam and Niall O’Farrell were old school friends and typical of the sort of ‘muscular Christians’ turned out by Ampleforth. I will never know why we became friends. They were robust, athletic boys and I was much more the academic type. For some reason, they ‘adopted’ me and I had good cause to be grateful for their friendship many times during my school days. Without them, I would have been bullied unmercifully.

They had joined the army after leaving school and attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. From there they had joined the Parachute Regiment and served with distinction during the Gulf War. They left the army in 1999 and had set up a Security Consultancy. I had loaned them the capital to get started and made a few introductions. They quickly gained a reputation for efficiency and discretion and had repaid my loan within two years. If anyone could help me sort out this mess, it was the O'Farrells. Within an hour of my phone call, they were on my doorstep.

If you met one O'Farrell, you'd be impressed. Meeting two can be intimidating. They were, of course, exceedingly fit and, apart from the odd tinge of grey in their black curls, looked ten years younger than their thirty-seven years. They stood a couple of inches under six feet and seemed to be almost as wide. Liam sported a spectacular broken nose but otherwise they were utterly identical. In another life they could have been absolute thugs but God had given them a different nature and they were possessed of sunny dispositions that seemed to shine out from their lively green eyes. I have never known them but they seemed to be always on the point of breaking into a smile. It was something of a shock, then, to see them so grim-faced when they arrived.

I had outlined the problem to Niall on the telephone and he had briefed Liam. Their first words were "You're being watched, old son."

Chapter Four

I had never seen Liam and Niall in action before. They walked into the house and took over. Half an hour later we were being hustled out of the door and into Niall's Range Rover. We had been instructed to pack a bag with spare clothes and were to be taken a 'safe house.' Niall gave his best impersonation of Michael Schumacher to shake off any tail and an hour or two later we were speeding down country lanes to the west of London. Trotsky and Magic in the back were not happy as the car made its split-ar-se turns through the winding roads. After a while we arrived at the house, a small picturesque cottage just outside that Berkshire village made famous for its concentration of racing stables. I should have guessed. The O'Farrells had that Irish passion for horse racing.

The place belonged to a well known Trainer and friend of the twins.

"Don't get too comfortable," said Liam. "We're only here for the night. You can bet the opposition will soon know you called us and they can make the connection to this place pretty quickly. Niall is sorting something else out."

Angela appeared to have gone into a state of shock, shaken, no doubt, by the speed of events. I just reverted to my childhood and let the twins take over – it had been like that in school – and they were the experts.

We sat around the dining room table and worried once more at the puzzle. Angela sat quietly and would only nod or reply 'yes' or 'no' when called upon to confirm some detail or other. Niall prepared some unidentifiable gloop in the microwave and we ate supper in silence. Niall produced a bottle of Bushmills and we sipped the whiskey as we carried on trying to find a solution. I was still in favour of going to the police but Niall and Liam were adamant. Until we knew just who was involved, that was not an option. It seemed clear that the mysterious plain-clothes man from Norfolk was in on the affair, unless, of course, that was just disinformation by Mickey-the-Mouth. The only thing that Angela could not, or would not, accept was that her father had stolen a large amount of money.

"It is not possible! He was a soldier not a banker. How would he gain access to foreign currency reserves?"

I had to admit it had us all perplexed. Liam and Niall agreed with Angela. As ex-soldiers, they had some feeling of solidarity with another soldier, even if he was a Colonel of *Spetsnaz*.

"She has a point," said Liam and Niall concurred.

"I don't see how he would have had the access or the contacts. It's been pretty hard to move money through the European Banking system since 1994. The anti Money Laundering rules are pretty tight now. You'd have to good contacts in the banking system or organised

crime. It's possible, I suppose, but I think it would need a team of people, not just one rogue soldier."

When I thought about it, I had to agree. I have a number of contacts with the financial world as a result of my profession. There are plenty of scams out there but they are usually the work of organised groups. One maverick acting alone would have little chance of pulling off such a major operation. But if we discarded the foreign exchange story, what were we left with? We packed it in at around Eleven. We weren't getting anywhere and Angela was obviously drained by the sequence of events over the last week.

There were two bedrooms in the cottage. One of the twins would keep watch while the others slept. Angela looked at me and said, "I stay with you" in a low voice. No one commented so we settled down in the larger bedroom. It had two single beds and I threw my bag on the one nearest the window. Angela disappeared into the bathroom with her bag. I heard the shower running so wandered back into the lounge. A half-hearted moon, shining through the light clouds, provided the only light and Liam was sitting in an easy chair drawn up to one side of the uncurtained window, where he could see without being seen. "Niall's getting his head down," he said, without turning his head, his concentration fixed outside. "Problems?" I asked. "Nah," he said, "precautions." I left him to it. He had the dogs for company and I was way out of my depth.

I heard the shower turn off and the bathroom door open and then close. I took a quick shower myself and headed back to the bedroom with a towel around my waist. Angela was tucked up in one bed with just her head peeking out of the covers. I turned out the light and, dropping the towel, slipped into my bed. Angela stirred slightly.

"Martin?"

"Uh huh"

"I just wanted to say I am grateful. This has been very frightening for me but with you I feel safe."

"I feel safer with the twins around."

"They are dangerous men, your friends. They remind me of the young men who used to come to see my father when I was child. They always smiled but I knew they were deadly"

"Well, Liam and Niall are my oldest friends and they are very definitely on our side. In fact, they are the only ones I know for sure that are."

"I know, but they still make me a little afraid. Or, I should say rather that it is because we need men like them that makes me afraid."

"I understand."

"Martin?"

“I really feel I would like to have your arms around me this night. Would you mind very much if we pushed these beds together?”

I did the honourable thing and obliged her. She snuggled up to me and laid her head on my shoulder. I found myself wishing I'd taken the time to put on a pair of shorts after my shower. She was wearing a T-shirt that had ridden up around her waist and the feel of her soft skin against my side and thigh was highly arousing. Her arm was across my chest and she clung to me like a crucifix. I knew from the first that I was attracted to her. OK, she didn't have Steph's blatant animal sexuality but I found her a lot less threatening because of it.

I lay still and tried to relax. She hugged me with an intensity that Steph never managed. After a while I felt some of the tension go out of her and her breathing became deep and regular. Unfortunately I was wide-awake, with a beautiful woman asleep on my chest and a raging erection. What was almost as bad was that my left arm was going to sleep and developing pins-and-needles. I eased myself away, trying not to wake her. She stirred briefly and rolled back towards me, flinging her arm over me and her naked thigh across mine. I could feel the tickling sensation of her pubic hair against my leg. My erection seemed to double in size. I felt ghastly, like I was the worst sort of prick imaginable. She wanted a bit of comfort and I wanted... It was hours before I finally fell asleep.

My dreams were dark and troubled and my rest was fitful. Each time I awoke, she was still there, crushing herself against me. Her warm, womanly smell seemed to fill the soft night. The last time I woke up, just before dawn, my resistance collapsed completely. Before I knew what I was doing, I buried my face in her hair and breathed the scent of her. I think I groaned aloud. She made a small sound of contentment and snuggled in closer.

“Martin? Are you awake?” I was stunned by the sound of her voice. I flirted with the idea of feigning sleep for a second or two before answering. “Yes, Angela, I'm awake.” She nuzzled my neck.

“I knew you were a good man, Martin, that day we met on the beach. Now you have held me all night and not slept I think, to protect me.”

‘If only you knew,’ I thought, ‘if only you knew.’ My unruly cock was stirring again and I tried desperately to think about something else. She ran her finger over the stubble on my jaw.

“Not so much the English gentleman now, I think. More like an Estonian peasant,” she said and giggled, a rough, throaty sound that seemed to connect all my sexual synapses together at once. Her hand suddenly brushed my burgeoning erection and we gasped in stereo. I expected her to leap back like a scalded cat but instead she gave another throaty growl and made a grab for it. I think I bounced off the ceiling.

I tried to stammer a denial but she silenced me with a kiss. It was gentle and sweet and reached down into the depths of my soul. I don't know if it was the tiredness or what, but I felt light-headed. She wriggled against me deliciously. My arms seem to go around her and draw her to me of their own volition. At the same time my brain was trying to scream a denial; No, don't do it! Something more primitive was telling my brain to go fuck itself. The primitive side won, hands down.

I could just say we made love and let it go at that but it was much, much more. Angela swung herself above me and pulled her T-shirt over her head slowly, teasingly. She was wearing nothing but a wicked grin as she straddled my chest. Her breasts were larger than I had expected and I was mesmerised by them. They were slightly pendulous until she arched her back like a cat and then her big, brown nipples pointed upwards. My hands moved to them of their own accord and I cupped the tender weight of her in my hands. She made that sexy, throaty, growling sound again as I touched her. I had the overwhelming urge to suckle and, as I lifted my lips towards her, she pulled me on to her, feeding her breast to me and making soothing noises as I licked and sucked on her nipple. I felt a sensation akin to worship as she swelled in my mouth and I flicked her lightly with my tongue.

My other hand kneaded her other breast. She made slow, undulating movements and I switched my hand and mouth from perfect tip to perfect tip. She ground herself against me and I could feel the wetness of her sex against my stomach. The pale light of dawn creeping into the room gave her skin the glow of alabaster but she was warm and soft; so warm, so soft. I reached down and cupped her buttocks, pulling her upwards until I could bury my face in the wild, soft tangle of her cunt. Her scent assailed my senses and I was overcome with a deep longing as I tunnelled with my tongue into her sopping core. She shivered, but it wasn't cold in that room. She was murmuring half-heard endearments and her hips began a snaking rhythm as I licked and nibbled at her. Her lips were quite pronounced and I sucked at each of them in turn before thrusting my tongue into her once more. She was absolutely dripping now and I found myself swallowing her offerings like a parched desert traveller, coming unexpectedly upon an oasis.

She moaned and pushed against me, her hands were tangled in my hair and she steered my efforts upwards to her clitoris. I needed no second bidding and fastened onto that sweet button, sucking it gently between my lips and rolling it with the tip of my tongue. Angela moaned and shuddered like a soul in torment and she gripped me tighter, urgent and insistent. It seemed that my entire existence was concentrated into that small area of contact between tongue and clitoris. I felt disembodied, aware only of the miraculous gem I held between my lips. She began to pant and suddenly stiffened, grabbing my head and pulling my mouth

squeezing her buttocks and trying to drag her even closer, if that were possible. She gave a sharp cry and then another. I was licking her like a man possessed and she shuddered again and then a third time.

“Ah no, stop please,” she moaned at last, “It’s too much, I cannot...” But she did and then collapsed over me, her head resting on the wall above the bed. I brought her back down gently, covering her mound with gentle kisses and stroking her back with my fingertips. At last she sighed and slid down my body. She trapped my erection between her thighs and eased down further until our eyes were level and my prick was stretched along the length of her crotch and nestling between the silky mounds of her buttocks. She had a slightly crazed look in her eyes, unfocussed and wondering. Then she smiled and my heart lurched inside of me. I stared into her incredibly blue eyes. I had the sensation of tumbling into their azure depths.

Angela started to clench her glutineal muscles and to exert a rhythmic pressure on my cock. I was overwhelmed by her sheer presence; the pulsing sensations she was now transmitting had me gasping for breath. Her smile turned into a wicked grin and with a deft flick of her hips, she engulfed my straining erection and I slid into her. Her eyes went round as we came together and she arched up once more, offering her breasts to my avid mouth and hands. She moved slowly, rocking her hips and giving me intermittent squeezes as she tightened and relaxed her pelvic muscles. I tried to match her rhythm but she wouldn’t have it, urging me to stillness with a hand on my chest and a gentle shake of the head. “My turn now.”

I confess I just lay back and let her wash over me, as irresistible as the tide. The heat in her loins was incredible and she seemed to be coming again and again. I could feel a succession of feathery, rippling caresses and her eyes were wild. Her mouth and breasts looked swollen, her nipples, bruised and wanton. A faint pink flush suffused the marble of her pale skin. It was the most erotic thing I have ever seen in my life. I couldn’t contain myself any longer and forced myself further into her, thrusting and driving upwards, beyond control or constraint. My orgasm roared through every fibre of my being, expanding, all consuming, utterly, mind-blowingly absolute. She felt me falling into that delicious abyss and matched me, hurling herself repeatedly down onto me with total abandon until we were both completely spent. It was quite some time until either of us could move.

We lay there for a while, holding each other in perfect silence, wrapped in a cocoon of languorous tranquillity, all of our own. For a short space, there were no monsters waiting to devour us. There was just us; and a new-discovered country called love.

Chapter Five

No idyll ever lasts and ours was shorter than most. We were summoned back to the real world by Niall hammering on the door. “Martin, get up! Looks like we’ve got company!” My heart sank and a sick feeling permeated the rosy glow. I rose and dressed as quickly as I could with Angela following suit. About two minutes later we joined the twins in the lounge.

Liam gestured to us to move to the side of the room. “Our friends are a little quick off the mark,” he said and gave us a humourless smile.

Niall asked, “How many?” and Liam grunted before replying.

“Just spotted another one. That makes five out here and three more we’ve clocked round the back. I think we can assume two or three to each side so a round dozen at a guess. Good job they’re amateurs!”

“Amateurs?” My voice sounded unnaturally loud.

“Absolute bloody amateurs,” said Niall, “We wouldn’t have spotted pros in this cover.”

He nodded towards the hedgerows that fronted the cottage and flanked the road on either side.

Angela spoke. “What are we going to do now?”

The twins laughed. “Put the fear of Christ Himself into their little black hearts!”

Niall glanced at Liam. “Everything Ready?”

His brother winked and when Niall nodded, pulled a small black object out of his inside pocket. He saw my quizzical look. “Remote detonator.”

He pressed a button and the peace of the Berkshire countryside was shattered by a series of loud explosions that seemed to ripple around the house. Angela grabbed me and hung on tight to my arm. It was over in seconds and before my ears had recovered from the shock, I heard men’s voices, panicked and shrill. The local rooks had also been disturbed and their harsh voices added to the general cacophony.

“Right, grab your things and let’s go,” said Liam, “I’ll take care of the dogs.”

Angela and I sprinted back into the bedroom and threw our stuff into our bags. Niall had the door open and shoved us through into the waiting car. Trotsky and Magic seemed to find it all great fun and they were bouncing around in the back as Liam gunned the engine, slammed it into first and we took off like a rocket. The big four-wheel drive rolled alarmingly as we exited the gates and swung onto the road. Angela and I were thrown together in the back seat and we clung on to each other. The dogs complained loudly as they were flung into a heap. I thought I heard a gunshot.

“That should wake the bloody neighbours!” Niall grinned back at us.

“What was that stuff?” I said

Liam laughed. "Thunderflashes, old son, all sound and fury! We keep a small stock."

Thunderflashes are military pyrotechnics, used for exercises. They make an incredible noise but aren't at all powerful.

"Scared the crap out of them!"

I smiled. "Scared the crap out of me, too."

We came to a crossroads and Liam turned right and then took an immediate left into a narrow lane. We were barrelling along at well over sixty and I found myself praying there was nothing coming the other way. We seemed to make several turns at random and the next thing I knew, we were driving into Hungerford and heading for the Motorway. To my surprise, we headed back towards London.

"Where are we going now?"

"Plan B, old son. Confusion to our enemies. We're going to pay Mr Mickey the Mouth Cornell a little visit."

"He wasn't there then, this morning?"

"Very much doubt it. Wouldn't have been so easy. Besides, he wouldn't sully his lilywhite hands. Leaves the rough stuff to the mechanics, he's the engineer."

"Do you know where to find him?"

"Couple of phone calls was all it took. We have friends in low places."

I knew I wouldn't get any more out of them so I settled back for the ride. Angela had recovered her equilibrium somewhat and she smiled at me.

"You are lucky to have such friends," she said. I nodded my wholehearted agreement.

Niall turned to us. "We're the luck ones, Miss Sable. If it wasn't for Martin, we'd be working for Securicor."

I shook my head. "Somehow I don't think so. I reckon you two could fall into a dung-heap and come up smelling of roses."

Niall gave me a withering look. "No money, no business," he said. "We both know it if you don't."

I waved a hand at him. "That's what friends are for. Not for getting your arses shot off by a bunch of bloody hoodlums."

The twins laughed uproariously. "Martin, we never knew you made a habit of this or we wouldn't have got involved!"

"Martin Booth, man of mystery! Seriously, old son, we couldn't wish for a better way to repay you. This is what we do. And we love it!"

I knew they were speaking the truth. They were loving every second of it. It was their element. I was scared shitless and they thought it was a huge game. In some ways, they

the irresponsibility, the boundless good nature. God only knows how they stayed out of jail. Oh yes, they were on the side of the Angels, but they raised Hell in the process, wherever they went. I'd hate to be up against them.

In a little over an hour we were pulling up on a quiet street in Bedford Park. It was a typical Sunday morning scene. People washing their cars, children playing football in a small park. The sheer normality of it was hard to take in after the start to the day I'd had. I'd been seduced, surrounded and shot at. This is not your everyday occurrence for a boring tax lawyer. Niall indicated a Victorian stucco villa set back a little from the road.

"That's our man, lets go spoil his breakfast."

Niall didn't bother ringing the highly polished brass bell. He just kicked the door in. We burst into the house like Gangbusters. I was shocked to notice that the twins were each clutching 9mm Browning automatics. I hadn't known they were armed but I suppose it was logical, in their world. I tried to shut out all thoughts of what the Bar Council would do to me if any of this ever came out. Handguns are banned in Britain but ironically, easier to get hold of since they became illegal. They have become the accessory of choice for half the street gangs in the inner cities. I salved my conscience with the thought that at least Niall and Liam knew how to use them.

Mickey Cornell was in his kitchen, a stunned expression on his normally too-smooth face. He seemed rooted to the spot as we crashed in and surrounded him in a moment. Niall and Liam stood each side of his chair. They never threatened him with their weapons but made sure that he saw they were armed. I took a seat beside him and waved Angela into the chair opposite.

"Mr Smythe! Or should I say, Mr Cornell. I think it's time you made the acquaintance of Miss Angela Sable. I believe we have a lot to talk about."

I may have sounded confident but my heart was racing and my palms were sweaty. I stared at him. Holding eye contact until he looked away. Then I went on.

"Let's start with your little farrago concerning Miss Sable's father. He was never involved in any currency scam, was he? Her Majesty's Government aren't trying to help the Russian Federation and, even if they were, your services are no longer required. What was it, Mickey, had your hands in the till?"

His face contorted with Anger and he made a slight move towards me. One large hand on each shoulder slammed him back into his seat. Niall punched him hard in the kidneys and he screamed in agony and slipped to the floor. The twins hauled him up and threw him back in the chair.

"Mind your manners, my old lad," said Liam.

I continued. "Let me make it easy for you, Cornell. You came to me with some bullshit about Miss Sable's father because you were desperate to get hold of her. Your associates ransacked her studio looking for something. She doesn't know what you want and doesn't have anything that could be of any possible use to you or your Chechen friends. But we would like to know why you have gone to so much trouble."

I was guessing his associates were Chechens but he didn't deny it. He was still gasping with pain but he raised his head and gave me a look of pure hatred.

"Fuck you, Booth! And fuck your friends!"

His tirade was cut off by another solid blow to the kidneys.

"Manners, Mickey! Ladies present."

It was Niall this time but the effect was equally devastating for poor Mickey. He lay on the floor, writhing in pain but was given no respite as once more the twins threw him back in the chair. I'm not good with violence but a glance at Liam and Niall told me to let it go. They were deliberate and cold, nothing frenzied or out of control. They seemed to know how to inflict serious pain without inflicting lasting damage. Niall gestured as much with one hand, indicating Cornell and giving me the 'OK' sign surreptitiously. I can't say I liked it but I understood their purpose. The ex-Intelligence man was clearly off balance now so I tried again.

"Let me make it as plain as I can, Cornell. We have no idea what it is you're after and we would like to know. All we want from you is to understand what this is all about. Maybe we could even save you a lot of time and effort. Certainly, talking to me is going to save you a world of pain."

He seemed to consider this for a minute and then he replied between gritted teeth.

"Ikons. More particularly, one 13th Century ikon. Three panels, painted on box wood."

"Explain, I don't understand."

"The good Colonel ran a security business in St Petersburg after the Soviet Union went tits up. Big business in Russia, now. Anyway, he was hired by some Swiss collector to guard a shipment of Ikons. Let's just say they weren't acquired through regular channels. Among the collection was a 13th Century Ikon, almost priceless. If I tell you the Swiss guy paid over \$5 million on the black market, you might get an idea. There are only two known to exist and our Swiss chum had one of them. Or rather he didn't. They were to be brought out hidden in a container through Tallinn. Never made it to the port.

"I don't believe in coincidence. The Colonel vanished at the same time. What he didn't know was that the Swiss was just a front. The real players were the Chechens. They were going to sell in the West to raise money for the cause. Like I told you, the Colonel surfaced in

Sweden, regrettably dead. The Ikons are nowhere on the radar. The logical place to look was with his daughters.

“What got us really very interested was a catalogue item for the auction at Hervey’s; something along the lines of Russian Triptych Ikon on box wood, believed to be 13th Century, the property of a lady.”

I looked at Angela. She shook her head helplessly. “I know nothing about any of this,” she said. I believed her, so, apparently, did Cornell.

“We’d more or less decided you weren’t involved but then, yesterday, you took off. That got us thinking again. Look, Booth, I don’t call the shots here; I’m just a fixer. I’ll talk to them; tell them you aren’t involved. I spent last week going over Miss Sable’s affairs with a fine-toothed comb. She came up clean. Anyway, as I told them before, it was too obvious. The Colonel was a pro. Also, I don’t think he’d endanger his daughters. Some of the hired muscle isn’t too bright. They put two and two together and make a dozen, provided they take off their socks to help them count that far.

“I’m sorry about your sister Miss, I wasn’t involved with that at all. I only handle things here in the UK. I made it clear to them that I wouldn’t sanction any violence – would shop the lot of them if they didn’t keep it under control. The Boss said he’d personally shoot anyone of them who stepped out of line, but I think that was just for my benefit. They won’t cross me on my patch, though. I have too many powerful friends. I think I can safely say they’ll listen to me and the dogs will be called off.”

He was starting to sound too much like his old smooth self for my liking. He wanted to clear his own yardarm. I knew there was something he wasn’t telling us but at least we had a part of the truth. I was thinking furiously. I gave a quick glance to Liam and Niall and they understood that they were to go along with anything I said.

“I don’t know how or why you became involved in this, Cornell, but I want your word that our part in this stops here.”

He nodded agreement. “Done!”

“Miss Sable and I are returning to Norfolk, to her studio. I’m telling you this so you will know where we are and can see we have nothing to hide. There is just one more thing I’d like to know. “Who *was* the plain-clothes police officer in Norfolk? Was he really from Special Branch?”

“I have no idea, but I very much doubt it. I just used Rod Willis’s name to see if I could stir you up. I know how nervous you lawyers get if you think you might be under suspicion.”

“Then how did you know it was me that called police?”

“Oh that! Easy, old boy. My associate noted your car number and I simply called in a favour from the boys in blue. You’re not a hard man to track. By the way, your bank account’s overdrawn.”

He said this last with a nasty smile, just to remind me that there are no secrets in his murky world. Liam topped him nicely. “”And your account at UBS has been frozen, pending investigation for money laundering.” Cornell gaped like a stranded salmon. Liam smiled sweetly. “No doubt you’ll be able to clear it up in a day or two.” Cornell was sprinting for the telephone as we left.

Chapter Six

The four of us walked the dogs in the nearby park.

“Did you really fix his bank account? I asked Liam.

He shot me a wicked grin. “Nothing too serious, but it will be a bit of a bind for him to sort it out,” he said.

My head was buzzing from what we had learned. The stolen Ikons story had a ring of truth. What I couldn’t figure out was why Cornell had used the elaborate charade about foreign exchange in the first place. Niall pondered the question.

“I can only surmise that he wanted you to believe he was still acting for the Government. He probably figured that an upright citizen like you would cooperate. It might have stretched your credulity if he’d told you that the UK Government was interested in helping the Chechens get their ikon back. And if he’d admitted he was freelance, you would have told him to take a hike and reported it to the police.”

I supposed he was right. I should have felt better but somehow, I didn’t.

“I’m sure he’s hiding something,” I said. Nobody argued, which was worrying in itself. “Well, I think we should go the police now,” I said.

Liam grimaced. “I’d rather we didn’t if it’s all the same to you old, son. Niall and I wouldn’t really like to explain why we were disturbing the peace in rural Berkshire and it might not go down to well that we seem to have kept a couple of NATO souvenirs.”

He patted the bulge under his jacket to indicate the Browning. “I’ve no doubt Cornell wouldn’t hesitate to drop us all in it, if he had the chance.”

We walked on in silence for a while. Magic and Trotsky showed no ill effects from our adventures. Magic kept worrying at us to throw something for him. There had been no time to pack his usual toys so we found some sticks and spent half an hour hurling them into the distance for him to semi-retrieve. Trotsky, of course, was above such games but spent his time trying to bite Niall’s backside. This is a sign of acceptance among huskies. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed a good idea to go back to Norfolk. It would be far more difficult for the Chechens to blend into the background in a village of no more than fifty or so people and Angela’s cottage was completely exposed, on the coast with flat, bare land all around. I voiced this to the twins and they agreed.

We wandered back to the car and then back to my house. I was relieved in the extreme to find it hadn’t been trashed.

“They’d have expected you to have taken the ikon with you when we left,” said Niall.

I burst out laughing. “Then they really are stupid! The ikon is safe in the vaults of Hervey’s and has been ever since that catalogue was printed. They had it brought to them for evaluation and once the sale was agreed, it would be kept on their premises. I can’t believe Cornell wouldn’t know that even if the Chechens didn’t.”

Niall looked grim. “Then that begs the question – what were they after when they turned over Angela’s studio? It seems unlikely, as you say, that Cornell wouldn’t have known where the ikon was.”

“That’s easy too. They were after documents of title, a receipt, a copy of the provenance, anything that might have tied Angela to the sale. Then they could lean on her to turn over the proceeds. They know it’s being sold, they just don’t know who by!”

The twins’ faces showed enlightenment slowly dawning.

“So let me get this straight,” Liam said, “The ikon is here in London at the auctioneers. The bad guys think Angela owns it and want to hit her for the money when it sells. Angela doesn’t know a thing about it but someone else does, from the catalogue description that ‘someone’ is a lady. You mentioned proof of ownership and some other stuff. Presumably a reputable firm like Hervey’s wouldn’t sell without knowing the history of the piece?”

“In the world of the auction houses, reputation is everything. However, they wouldn’t be the first to sell a piece of dubious provenance or where the ownership was, shall we say, a little muddled? Of course, they have to have enough documentation to satisfy themselves that it’s kosher but they wouldn’t dig too deeply. The 10% commission on a seven-figure sale tends to provide answers to a lot of questions!

“However, I wouldn’t mind betting that whoever is putting this up will have gone to some trouble to make it look whiter-than-white. There’s going to be huge interest in this sale – there always is when something fetches a big price at auction so you can expect some media attention. Hervey’s aren’t going to take a chance that some spectre at the feast will leap and say ‘I know that piece, it was stolen from such-and-such a collection!’”

“Any chance it’s a fake?”

“Very, very little, Hervey’s will have had it appraised by the leading experts in the field. They may even have taken a sliver or two for dendrochronology and they would certainly have had it X-rayed and probably spectrum-analysed as well.”

“Pardon my ignorance, old son, but what the fuck does all that mean?”

“Dendrochronolgy is a method of dating the wood the thing’s painted on to make sure it wasn’t knocked up in Taiwan last week; something to do with matching ring-growth patterns in the original tree against known benchmarks. They can also use Radio Carbon dating. One sort of Carbon is mildly radioactive. Apparently you can tell something’s age by measuring

Something like plus or minus fifty or a hundred years. That doesn't matter if you're dealing with an ancient artefact from the ice age but if you're trying to establish whether something is 13th or 14th Century, it doesn't help much.

"They use X-rays as a check to see if anything has been painted over. One of the cunning tricks of the forger is to take an old but worthless painting and slap their 'ringer' over the top. Thus the materials look the right age and make it harder to detect the fake. Spectrum analysis can tell you what exact compounds went into making up the pigments. Old artists used a lot of natural compounds they mixed up themselves. Modern pigments often contain synthetics as well, even if the forger tries to reproduce the original. It's not foolproof but it can give a pretty good indication of the age of the paint used and is another element of proving that something's real or fake.

"After all that, the experts will look at the brushwork and any peculiarities that the artist or the school were known to have. Of course, the really great forgers can reproduce that kind of thing to an extent. The point really is, if Hervey's are putting it up as genuine, then they are 100% convinced. If they are putting it up as 'believed to be' they are 99% certain. However, it's still a case of 'caveat emptor' – let the buyer beware!"

"How much could it go for?"

"I've really no idea but if the black market price was really \$5 million then it could be three or four times that."

There was a shocked silence all round. Niall gave a tight smile.

"Enough to kill for, then," he said. I could only nod.

"People have been killed for loose change," I replied.

I was suddenly aware of something that had been nagging at me since we spoke to Cornell.

"Look," I said, "I'm no expert but how many 13th Century Russian ikons can there be in this world? If it's as rare and expensive as it appears to be, someone, somewhere must know something about it. We need to speak to a specialist!"

You don't get too far in my line of work without getting to know the Inland Revenue very well and particularly the denizens of the Capital Taxes Office. The CTO have experts in just about anything. They can value any kind of asset known to man, from stamp collections to bloodstock. I'll call Ted Allen first thing in the morning, he'll know who the UK expert in Russian ikons is."

We packed up the things we need for an extended stay in Norfolk and I phoned Bernie to tell him I was taking a holiday early this year. He muttered some dark comments about 'getting mixed up in stuff where you've no call to do so' but agreed there wasn't anything that

shutting down for the holidays pretty soon. Liam and Niall agreed I should take my car so Angela and I put our things in the Volvo and Magic and Trotsky hopped into the back in their accustomed place. The twins said they would be back mid afternoon so we all could all drive up together so, as soon as they arrived, we headed northwards.

Since I'd deliberately told Cornell where we were going, there was no need to try and shake off any 'tail'. As it happens, if there was one, I never spotted it and as soon as we left the main roads and headed into the sticks, there wasn't another car to be seen. Angela had been pretty quiet so I asked her if there was anything wrong.

"I am having some trouble understanding all of this," she said. "I understand about the money but not why they make all this pretence."

"I think it's probably as Niall or Liam said. Cornell wanted to me think it was all official so I'd cooperate if I knew anything. What we seem to have is at least one robbery, possibly two or three. I think the Chechens probably stole all the ikons from a monastery in the first place then someone, perhaps your father, stole it from them. Who knows what happened after that. Of course, it could be a coincidence and the ikon up for sale is not the one that went missing in St Petersburg or Tallinn or wherever; I doubt it somehow."

"Yes, I understand all that but you did not know my father. He was not a criminal. I know he would not be involved in this knowingly."

"How well did you know your father? I mean *really* know him. By your own admission, you haven't been close lately."

"Yes, of course. Can one really know one's parents? I will not claim I knew him, you say, inside out? I do know that he was soldier and he did some bad things in the name of the old regime. He once said to me 'Angelika, I must do as they say. First it is my duty and second, they would hurt you and Vika if I do not.' But he was never a bad man."

I took her hand and squeezed it lightly. I could sympathise even if not truly empathise. I was raised in liberal England. How different it must have been for her, growing up in a country under the yoke of the Soviet Union. To even describe herself as an Estonian rather than a Soviet Citizen would have been an offence. I could understand, too, her father's position as a non-Russian in the Red Army. He would have been immediately suspect if anything ever went the slightest bit wrong. But why, then, did he stay in Russia after the collapse? I put that question to Angela.

"It must have been because he could get work there. Probably be paid in hard currency. After the Soviet Union broke up, it was very hard in Estonia. All our industry was geared towards the Russians and what they wanted. We couldn't compete in the West. Most people had no money and no jobs. I left because life was so bad."

“She stayed. She had a man, was getting married. She talked of going to Finland or Sweden but we didn’t stay in touch much. She was angry with me for leaving, for wanting to be free of it all. We were not so close, as sisters. She is older than me by five years. And now she is dead!”

I could see the tears welling up in those startling eyes and we drove on in silence. It was dark by now and I drove slowly through the narrow lanes. Angela had her eyes closed and her head was nodding forwards. I wasn’t surprised; we hadn’t slept much the previous night. This started me off thinking about sex.

Making love with Angela had been an amazing experience. She fucked with the same intensity with which she sculpted. Inevitably, this drew me into making comparisons with Steph. There was no denying that Steph had a body to die for. She should have, she worked at it hard enough and what nature couldn’t accomplish, the surgeon and the beautician made up for. Her body was hard and smooth. She had prominent breasts that had had a little help; not enough so you could immediately spot them as fakes but enough to ensure they never drooped or sagged to the side when she lay down. Her nipples were small and pink and she had a golden all-over tan, with no lines, that told of hours spent in a solarium.

As I said before, she had all her body hair removed with laser treatment. Her labia were slightly prominent and she had surgery to ensure they were perfectly symmetrical. Now that’s what I call vanity! She was not a generous lover. It was enough for her that she offered this perfect body for my worship. When we made love, it was very much for her benefit. It would be a lie to say I didn’t enjoy it. I did. I felt a tremendous sense of achievement when she arched her back and gasped into orgasm. Once she’d come a couple of times, she would rapidly lose interest and more than once I had to finish by hand with Steph yawning beside me.

I became a past master at timing my own climaxes to coincide with hers or follow very closely behind. That was acceptable and worked best for us both. If I couldn’t manage it, well, that was my problem. Sadly, Steph was as selfish in bed as out. It was just something else that, loving her, I’d learned to deal with.

Of course, I had only spent one night with Angela so far but, based on that, I was willing to bet she was the total opposite. Physically she was dark with pale skin and a luxuriant bush of pubic hair. Her breasts were completely natural and had swayed deliciously as she rode me. She had used her internal muscles to heighten my pleasure; and she had taken great pleasure in giving me pleasure. I knew it was only one time but I felt sure that she would be utterly different from Steph, generous and loving instead of demanding, soft and warm rather than hard and unyielding. Once again, an erection was straining my trousers. I couldn’t

We pulled into the village and Liam and Niall let me overtake to lead the way to Angela's cottage. It was a typical December evening with a cold east wind off the sea and we were all grateful to get inside. It wasn't too much warmer in the cottage but at least it was out of the wind.

Angela and I tidied up while Niall and Liam gathered firewood and lit the fire in the parlour. There was a back boiler in the flue, which heated the radiators. Once the fire was roaring up the chimney, it wasn't too long before the place warmed up. Niall had brought a cooler full of food and I prepared dinner, assisted by Angela.

"I really cannot cook so good," she said. "When I was little, when my mother was still alive, she would teach Vika. Vika cooks very, very well. Me, well I always wanted to do something else. I would sit in my father's workshop and watch him make things. It wasn't a proper workshop, just an old shed with no heating. My father would make things for the house. My mother would see something that she wanted but we couldn't buy so my father would make it."

"What was she like, your mother?"

"Very sweet, very, oh, traditional, I think you would you say. She always thought that a woman's job was to make the home for the man and the children. She always wanted a son but had Vika and me. She *needed* to look after someone. It made her feel, I think, valuable, somehow. Also, she was very brave."

"How so, brave?"

"My father was away often. Sometimes he'd be gone for two or three months, sometimes two or three years. She never complained. She just tried to be mother and father both, if you understand me?"

I thought of my own childhood. Packed off to Prep School at the age of seven, seeing my parents only in the holidays. First school, then University, then pupilage in Chambers down in Brighton. I spent my early years sweating on exam results. Common Entrance, 'O' Levels, 'A' levels, Degree, Bar Exams. Life had been a series of hurdles that had to be cleared. Of course, I was meant to feel privileged. One of the golden few for whom the secrets of success were revealed early and often. I don't really know how I felt at that age; my experience was little different from that of my peers. I accepted it as 'normal'. It was only later, at university perhaps, that I found myself unfitted for the real world. I knew little of the opposite sex, found it difficult to relate to people from other backgrounds. In summary, I was a social and emotional cripple.

I tried to explain this to Angela as we chopped vegetables for the stew I was making. She gazed at me like I was from another planet.

“I wasn’t a baby, I was seven.”

“Hah! That is still a baby. Why did they do that, were you very bad?”

“No, it was the system in England. Well, it was the system if you had money.”

“Much better to be poor, I think!”

“I don’t suppose they ever questioned it. My father went through it and so did my mother. Their parents too, I expect. It was, well, a tradition. I know that my great-grandfather was at Ampleforth; his father too, probably.”

“And you would do this to your child?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one so it hasn’t come up. It has its advantages too, you know.”

“Hah! Advantages – like it makes you rich but leaves you unhappy? I would rather be not so rich but more happy. In Estonia, in the old days, some children, if they were good at sport or the ballet, they used to be taken from their families and sent to special schools. We used to hear that you in the West thought this was cruel, unnatural. Now you say people here did this from their own choice. It is unbelievable!”

“I probably made it sound worse than it really was. We were very well looked after.”

“As good as a mother would? I doubt it.”

“Probably better than my mother could. She wasn’t really, well, ‘in to’ motherhood. I dare say she didn’t have much an example. I think the shock of having me was too much for her. She hasn’t really ever got over it. My parents were never ‘warm’ people. I suppose you might describe them as somewhat austere.”

Angela gave an exaggerated shrug to show what she thought of this. I could see her thinking furiously. Her brow was furrowed in concentration and she scrubbed at a carrot with almost manic energy. It gave me a sudden insight into her nature. Angela, for all her independence and avant-garde work, was very much a traditionalist. Home and family ranked very highly with her. What must it have cost her to sever those links? She life was bad but it must have been really terrible for her to leave what she obviously held so dear.

We carried on chatting in a desultory manner for a while as we finished up the preparations. I put everything on to cook slowly and opened a bottle of wine. It was something red and Australian is all I can remember but it can’t have been too pernicious as I did manage to drink it without comment. I made a mental note to ask Angela a bit more about her reasons for leaving Estonia. I felt sure there would be quite a story.

The four of us ate my stew, Niall and Liam displaying great relish. I wasn’t entirely sure it was sincere but I am a passable cook and the food was hot, tasty and filling; what more could you ask for on winter’s evening? After supper, the twins disappeared outside with a

holdall and a couple of torches to ‘secure the perimeter’ as they put it. When they reappeared, I asked them if they were concerned.

“Nah,” said Niall, “but better safe than sorry. I doubt we’ll be disturbed but we’ve just been making sure of it. Set up a bit of an early warning system. Shouldn’t need it, but just the same...”

Not for the first time, I was intensely glad that I had friends like Liam and Niall.

Chapter Seven

Angela's cottage had only one bedroom. The twins made subtle, but nonetheless obvious, hints that they expected us to take it while they sacked out in the parlour. Another khaki holdall produced two sleeping bags, which they proceeded to unroll.

"Sorry, old son, we're bushed," said Liam, "not too much kip last night!"

We murmured agreement and Angela and I headed off to her room. I was relieved to see a large old-fashioned brass bed with thick quilts. It would have looked inviting even without her beside me. I hadn't slept too well the previous night either.

Angela lit a squat candle and its pale glow lent an appropriate ambience. There was still a chill in the air so we hurried through our ablutions and dived under the welcoming quilts. The sheets were cold and we hugged each other close like a couple of children, giggling and tickling each other with cold hands. Of course, I was aroused but it wasn't urgent. I was happy to lie alongside her, stroking the velvety softness of her skin and learning the intimate topography of her body.

We talked in whispers, sharing little intimacies as new lovers do. The conversation turned to our first time. I recounted my own experience. It wasn't much to write home about. It had been during the summer between school and University. I had gone on holiday to Greece, riding slow trains and hitchhiking under the achingly blue skies of that magical country. After doing the cultural bit, Athens, Corinth, Mycenae, Cape Sunion, I had gone island hopping, catching the slow and crowded ferries that serviced the Sporades, Dodecanese and Cycladese.

One glorious, star-filled night on a beach in Rhodes, I had lost my virginity to a pretty Danish girl. Her skinny, tanned body had been an unexplored country and she let me find my stumbling, hesitant way without complaint. She was sweet and kind to a fumbling young Englishman and her done her best to make it memorable. Unfortunately, it was memorable only for its brevity. I still think fondly of her, for all that. She pretended she was not disappointed and had laughed gently at my chagrin. We stayed together for the rest of the summer and she taught me to please her and to control myself better over the ensuing weeks. I was more than a little in love with her when it came time to part. Looking back now, what I value most was her unfailing good nature. I don't think I ever saw her without a smile. I guess I was one of the lucky ones.

Angela listened in avid silence as I described it all. When I finished, she snuggled against me and said,

"She was a very nice girl, this Astrid."

I could only agree. "What about you?" I asked.

She sighed. "Once upon a time, there was this little, fat Estonian girl."

"Fat? Surely not!"

"Don't interrupt! This is my story. As I was saying, there was this little, well, chubby Estonian girl. When she was eleven, her breasts started to grow. When she was fifteen, they were still growing. She used to walk with her shoulders hunched so, so people wouldn't stare so much at her chest. Her sister was a little jealous, I think, because the men did not stare at her in this way. One day, a young soldier came to see my, I mean her, father. He was very dashing, very handsome in his uniform.

"He told her not to hunch her shoulders, to be proud of what nature had given her. He teased her and made her blush. When he passed her in the corridor, he gave her a squeeze, just here."

She took my hand and placed it on her breast.

"And then here"

She moved my hand to her buttocks and pushed back against it with a wiggle.

"Many times he did this and he made excuses to come often to her house. Once, she opened the door to let him in and he kissed full on the mouth, like so!"

Angela rolled on top of me and proceeded to kiss me passionately, forcing her tongue between my lips and undulating her entire body against mine.

"Of course, she was very confused. She liked the way the soldier made her feel but she knew what he did was not polite, not nice. Her body liked it but her heart did not. She could have hidden away, of course, when the soldier came to the house and, after he left, she told herself that this was what she would do, the next time. When the next time came, she couldn't wait to see him. It was very, mixed up? Is that what you say?"

"Then her father went away for a while and the soldier stopped coming to the house. She was very sad. She couldn't eat, did not want to go to school. She wanted to sleep all the time. When she slept, the soldier came to her dreams and touched her again. After about six months, her father came back. She was just sixteen, now, and no longer chubby. Her father was surprised and told her she looked like a woman now, no longer a little girl. The young soldier came to visit again. He, too, was surprised. She had changed very much."

I detected a sudden change in her mood. I had the feeling that she just made a decision. She rolled away from me and lay very still. Her voice dropped its teasing quality and became very small as if she was speaking from a distance. The gentle modulations that I had come to associate with her disappeared entirely and she spoke on in a flat monotone.

"One night, he came late to their house. Her father and mother had gone to Moscow for the week. She wasn't expecting him. He knocked on the door and stood there, in the rain. He

and made it good for her, at first. Then he wanted her to suck him. She didn't know about this, thought it was dirty. He made her do it to him. She was very angry. He laughed at her. Called her a silly schoolgirl. She spat at him. He beat her. Then he left. She never saw him again.

"When she was older, she came to think that he had used her innocence. She never told anyone. Until tonight."

"God, Angela, that's awful! He really beat you?"

"Yes, but he was clever, no bruises would show outside my clothes. He knew I would tell no one. For two reasons, first, I would never confess what we did and second, he was a Russian."

We lay in silence for a while. I could think of nothing to say and felt the sadness that was in that in her through the tension of her body. I simply held her and let her regain her equilibrium. All desire had deserted me. I was filled with a senseless fury. It had happened years ago. I would never meet the Russian soldier. Still I seethed and raged inwardly. In part it was my impotence to change anything that stoked my anger. She must have sensed this and rolled towards me, putting her hand up to my face and stroking it gently.

"You must not mind, my Martin. I was a silly child and played with the fire. It is simple. I was burned. But all that is in the past, now. It makes me sad sometimes, to think of this thing. Now I am with you and we are not children. I was not going to tell this but then I thought I must. I hate secrets, you understand?"

I told that I did and wiped away the solitary tear that glistened in the candlelight. We kissed, gently, without passion but with deep affection. She gave me a merry smile.

"There, you see, I am all better now."

We kissed again; this time had a more urgent quality and held the promise of something rich and wondrous. She trailed her kisses down my face and neck and put her head on my chest. Then she began to move slowly down my body, planting a succession of the faintest brushes of her lips over my ribs and stomach.

Mindful of the story she had just told me I whispered that she didn't have to do this. She hushed me gently.

"I want to," she said, "This is something for *me*, you understand?"

As the tip of her tongue flicked out and touched my glans, I couldn't have answered even if I wanted to. She swivelled in the bed so that she was now kneeling beside me. Her mouth was warm as she opened her lips and took me in. She pushed her head down very slowly, taking a tiny bit more and then another bit until she had captured about half my length. Was there ever a more willing captive? All the while she swirled her tongue around the head of my prick.

Her left hand came up and she gently grazed my sac with her fingernails. Electricity jolted through my frame, I swear I saw stars. She raised her head and slowly eased back down, taking more of me insider her mouth and imparting some sort of rippling sensation with combination of lips, palate and tongue. Again, her nails scratched slowly and softly and she sucked more firmly as she withdrew this time. Then, instead of taking me in her mouth once more, she licked in circles round the head of my prick and planted a line of minute kisses down the shaft until she came to my balls.

With infinite care and tenderness, she took one swollen orb into her mouth and suckled gently. I was gone, lost at sea without a trace. She switched her ministrations to my other ball and started to pump my shaft gently with her hand, her fingers loose and fluttering. All the while she continued the scintillating torment of my balls, first one, then the other, back and forth, until I was writhing involuntarily and my hips were pumping upwards of their own volition.

At last the exquisite torture ceased and she kissed her way back up my shaft. It was now so hard I really thought it was about to split, to shed its skin like a snake. Then she thrust her mouth down on me hungrily and began to bob her head with a deliberate rhythm. I put her out a hand and cupped her swaying breast. Her nipple was a piece of fiery agate in the palm of my hand. She was making a low crooning noise reminiscent of the sound a mother might make to her baby, a soft counterpoint to my harsh panting.

I felt my orgasm beginning to build, coalescing like a nebula, somewhere near the base of spine. I gasped a warning. "Oh, Christ, Angela, I'm going to come!" This seemed to rouse her to greater efforts for she sped up and her crooning became a moan, redolent of need. It was a haunting sound, the very encapsulation of desire. It tipped me over the edge.

I thrust my groin upwards, twisting myself towards to gain better advantage of that heavenly mouth that grasped me like some exotic orchid or diaphanous sea-creature. My head was filled with clouds and the candle light seem to be diffusing some esoteric essence, the distillate of a thousand times a thousand years of passionate human love. She flicked me more firmly with her tongue and I went over the edge. My seed erupted and she made a sound that was almost a howl of triumph as spurt after spurt poured into her mouth. My entire body was rigid. All my earthly existence was concentrated into that scant bundle of over-stimulated nerve endings that sent a vast surge of ecstasy coursing through me. It was though she had caught my very soul and drawn it out through the tip of my penis, leaving me utterly drained, devoid of even the slightest conscious thought, a slave to pure sensation.

She gentled then and continued to suck lightly on me for what seemed like an eternity, letting me soften, held lightly between her lips. All the while she massaged my balls with a

feathery touch, as if to make sure I had nothing left to give. I floated free, disembodied. I had never experienced the like.

I fell into a brief but deeply refreshing sleep. When I awoke, a few minutes later, her head was still resting on my stomach and her tongue still traced the faintest of circles around my glans. Her touch was so light I could barely feel it but it was enough to re-awaken my desire. Her movements became slightly firmer as I stiffened. I drew her up beside me and kissed her, tasting the salty, alien flavour of my own emissions on her lips. Her eyes smiled lazily into mine and I slipped softly into her.

We made love slowly, letting our passion build at its own pace. Her hips moved gently back at me and she arched her body like a cat, stretching her arms up and grasping the brass rails of the bed. This lifted her breasts and brought them just into range of my tongue. She sighed contentedly as I swirled my tongue over first one adamantine nipple, then the other. I could feel her vaginal lips sliding on my shaft and she squeezed me gently.

Our control couldn't last, of course. Her breathing became more ragged, my thrusting more insistent and I seized one nipple in my teeth and grazed it, sucking down hard with my lips. She made a startled noise that smoothed into a moan of pleasure and then she was coming hard, her pelvis jerking spastically, her eyes huge and luminous in the candlelight. That set me off and I galloped to my own finish with her legs clasping my hips and urging me on, pulling me deeper in, if that was possible.

Once again the lights flashed behind my eyes and the seed surged out of me, hosing into her in five or six juddering spurts that seemed to carry my heart with it. The pleasure was almost too much; it had a manic edge, overwhelming. I was grunting like a wild beast. Constellations of shattered candlelight spun in my half-closed eyes and the room receded from me as I floated free. We clung together for a long time afterwards, descending from our ethereal high like a pair of feathers, swooping and side-slipping back into the real world until all that remained of our love-making was an abiding sense of peace.

Chapter Eight

We were up early the following morning. It was one of those rare bright winter days where there is no wind and the world looks made anew under its carpet of shimmering frost. The sky was an aching blue vault with the only clouds a couple of puffs left over from God's cigar. It isn't possible not to feel glad to be alive on such a morning, whether you're Man or dog.

Liam and Niall strolled off in opposite directions through the dunes to spy out the land while Angela, Trotsky, Magic and I headed down on to the beach for an early morning walk. Magic ran in circles in his own loopy, uncoordinated way while Trotsky paced beside us, ears erect, his great bush of a tail held high and curling over his regimentally straight back. Periodically he would spot a particularly brazen seagull that refused to concede his passage and he'd charge off in full hunting mode until the offending bird took to the air, leaving him with a lolling tongue and slightly sheepish air.

Angela held my hand and we talked lightly as we strolled. Once I saw Liam standing watching us at the edge of the dunes and he raised a hand, as if in benediction. Angela waved back gaily and he disappeared from view, a cell-phone clamped to his right ear, the picture of a professional. I found a piece of driftwood and hurled into the sea for Magic. He plunged in, unbounded joy showing in every fibre. His two favourite occupations – swimming *and* retrieving, he must have thought Christmas had come early.

We walked for an hour or so. Ours were the only prints defiling the pristine sand. The sea was that particular hue of green that characterises that stretch of coastline. It was only marred by the silty brown stain that marked the river's effluence. The North Sea is too shallow ever to be truly blue, whatever the weather. This is the Wash, where legend has it King John lost the Crown Jewels. The land and sea lie constantly at war. One can imagine hearing the faint tolling of bells in drowned steeples when the wind rises. All around, the flat country recedes from the eye, interrupted only by occasional evidence of human habitation and the odd stump of a church tower. The coastline sweeps away to east and west, vanishing into a blurred and low horizon. It is a bleak place, bleak and beautiful.

The seductive smell of frying bacon greeted us on our return. Niall was busy in the kitchen and Liam was stacking fresh-hewn logs in the outhouse. His shirtless torso glowed with health. The muscular perfection of his body was only spoiled by two livid people marks of puckered flesh just below his ribs. I knew these to be the legacy of a fierce night engagement on Tumbledown Mountain in the Falklands War. Neither brother would ever talk much about their experiences but I had seen the citation for Liam's Military Cross. He had been hit twice early in the fighting but had continued to lead his platoon throughout the night.

He was hit once more later on and was eventually persuaded to go to the First Aid post. He walked out; four miles over rough country in the darkness. It was later discovered that the last bullet had broken his ankle. Recalling this, I was once more grateful those two lunatics were on our side.

Over breakfast we made our respective plans for the day. Angela and I had to go to the police station in Cromer to settle the matter of her disappearance. We decided to stick to the truth but leave out the inconvenient bits. Angela had found her place trashed, got scared and come to London. There was nothing taken so it could just be a case of vandalism. Then I had to speak to Ted Allen at the Capital Taxes Office to find out who might know a bit more about this ikon. Liam and Niall offered to come with us to Cromer but it was clear that they were merely being polite. They agreed, instead, to do a bit of ‘snooping’ locally, just in case the opposition were about. Half an hour later I loaded Magic and Trotsky into the Volvo and we set off, surrounded by the pungent aroma of wet dog.

The Cromer police were icily polite and made no secret of their annoyance. Like most policemen, they trod warily around a lawyer, punctiliously correct but no more. We breathed a sigh of relief when they eventually let us go after Angela had given a statement. I doubted very much we’d hear from them further. We drove back to the cottage slowly. Angela pointed out various places of interest. This was her manor; I was the visitor. I felt a certain reluctance to get back into the world of Russian ikons and Chechen Mafia. The morning walk, the weather and, not least, our growing intimacy, had lulled me into a false sense of well-being. Now it was time to plunge back into the murk once more.

Ted Allen was all cheery bonhomie. “Christ, Martin,” he said, “Never saw you as the devotional type. George Allardyce is your man. You might not remember George, bit before your time. George took the hump when the Department moved out of Somerset House. He started up a little gallery in Chester. I think he still does valuations for some of the esoteric stuff. He’s quite brilliant but a prickly old sod. If George doesn’t it then it doesn’t exist.”

We chatted for a couple of minutes more about mutual acquaintances and I thanked Ted and hung up. I got the number for the Allardyce Gallery in Chester from Directory Enquiries and placed the call.

A voice as dry as old parchment with more than a hint of irritation answered. I explained who I was and what I was seeking. The timbre of the voice changed utterly and enthusiasm poured down the wires.

“13th Century Triptych on Boxwood, eh? The most famous one, and there are only four we know of, was given by Rapsutin to the Czarina. That one is in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, another is owned by the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Moscow. That

Nikolaides, owns it. He doesn't part with anything. That leaves the fourth and that has a very interesting little history.

"Now this one was brought out of Russia by a Wermacht Officer during the latter stages of World War Two. Unusually, for those times, it wasn't looting. Seems that this German chappie had saved a monastery from the attentions of the SS. Apparently he was the religious type and he lined up his tanks and threatened to blow all the Blackshirts to Kingdom Come. They wanted to fire the place as nest of partisans. Our hero wasn't having any. The Abbot or whatever presented him with this ikon as a sign of gratitude. The Nazis shot him eventually, of course, but the ikon was passed on to his sister."

"What happened then?"

"Old Fat Herman grabbed it for his collection at Karenhall. There was the dickens of a fight after the war with the Reds wanting it back. However, Fraulein Sussmann or somesuch had the provenance. She got it back, has it still, to my knowledge. Hmmm. Advertised as the 'property of a lady', you say? My money's on this one."

"Any ideas how we might contact this Fraulein Sussmann?"

"Frau Meyer, she is now."

"What did you say?"

"She got married, boy. Her name is now Meyer. Mrs Helga Meyer. Rich as Croesus and a patron of the Arts. Mad as a bat, of course, but then women of that age often are. Hope that answers you're questions, I've got things to do. Goodbye."

And with that, he hung up. I sat there in stunned silence for a full minute. Angela was gazing at me, her eyes brim full of concern.

"What did he say?"

Her voice had a nervous edge. I repeated what Allardyce had told me. It was Angela's turn to be stunned. "Frau Meyer?" She kept repeating the question softly to herself. Liam and Niall came in and we told them the full story.

"It doesn't make sense," said Niall.

I shook my head. Something was stirring uneasily at the back of my mind. I wasn't there yet but I had the first glimmerings. We kicked it back and forth, worrying at it like Magic gnaws a stick. That elusive little tickle at the back of mind came and went. After a while, Angela said, "Let us summarise." Niall pulled out a note pad and wrote as Angela spoke.

"Frau Meyer is my patron. She has bought some of my work. I think she has supported others but she doesn't speak of it. Her brother gave her the ikon before he died. The Soviet Government contested her ownership after the War but she won. We think she is now selling

We all affirmed that this was accurate thus far.

“This is where I don’t understand,” she went on. “Some people, who we think are Chechens, break into my house looking for something. Then Martin has a visit from this Mr Cornell. He tells Martin lies about my father. Later, he changes his story and says they are looking for a stolen ikon. Martin says Hervey’s won’t sell an ikon if the seller can’t prove where it came from. This, I believe. But if it is Frau Meyer’s ikon, then what has my father got to do with any of this? He doesn’t know Frau Meyer. She became my patron *after* I left Estonia. It makes no sense at all.”

From the glum looks all around, I could tell we were all equally flummoxed. Niall threw his notepad onto the low table between us.

“These are the notes I made,” he said.

He had drawn a diagram with the word ‘ikon’ in the centre. A line ran to Frau Meyer and, through her, to Angela. Another line ran from the ikon to the name ‘Cornell’ then onwards to ‘British Government’ and then, in dotted form, to ‘Russian Government.’ Another dotted line linked the legend ‘Chechens?’ with both ‘Cornell’ and ‘Russian Government’.

We studied Niall’s chart like soothsayers reading the entrails of a sheep.

“The truth is, me darlin’,” said Liam, “your father doesn’t fit into the pattern at all. Either the ikon is the bloody red herring or your father is. I just don’t get it.”

Again, I felt that faint nudge from my subconscious. We talked on in circles for a while. Angela was becoming heated. She marched to the sideboard and pulled a batch of letters out of the drawer. She shuffled through them, extracting one. She pulled the phone towards her and dialled a long number. A conversation in German ensued. The only words I understood were ‘Frau Meyer’ and ‘ikon’. After a while she hung up and turned towards us, a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

“It is Frau Meyer’s ikon,” she said. “It seems she has recently decided to get rid of all her religious pieces. She has a quarrel with God, it seems.”

A smile played briefly around her face.

“She has found me a quantity of bronze and she is shipping it over. It should have been here last month but there was a problem with the shipping firm. Finally, she wishes to commission three new pieces from me; they are to be of my own choosing.”

We all congratulated Angela on her new commission. I knew, even if the twins didn’t, how hugely important such things were to relatively unknown artists.

“Well,” I said, “we now know the ikon is for real. I don’t see how that helps us, though. One thing we can do, however, is tell Cornell. It might get them off our backs once and for all.”

The others agreed and I rose and crossed to the phone to call Cornell. My call was answered on the second ring. “Chief Inspector Howard,” a disembodied voice announced, “Who’s speaking?”

“My name is Martin Booth,” I replied, “I’d like to speak to Mr Michael Cornell.” There was a snort from the other end of the line.

“Then you’re going to need a bloody ouija board, Mr Booth. I hope he wasn’t a close friend of yours because Mr Michael Cornell is dead.”

I was shocked to silence. The policeman carried on speaking as if he’d said ‘it’s raining in London today.’ I stammered through an explanation, winging it but basing it loosely on the truth. Cornell had come to see me asking about ikons. I’d promised to enquire among my contacts. I assumed it was a Government matter. He sounded narrowly suspicious as he questioned me further. I didn’t mention Angela, Chechens or anything else. He thawed a little when I said I’d been in Norfolk with friends since the previous evening. I agreed to call him when I returned to London. He barked his number at me and rang off. The others sat in silence as I relayed the conversation. I think we were all thinking furiously but no one had a single thing to say.

At length we drifted away from the parlour. Angela gave me a tight squeeze but shook her head when I started to say something. She gazed into my eyes with a look that was almost fierce with the love that was in her. “Not now, my Martin,” was all she said. I knew she was right. We needed time to think. We both noticed the grim look that passed between the twins. Something unspoken was agreed upon and I thought I knew what it was.

We spent the afternoon separately. I returned to the beach with Magic and Trotsky, to walk and think and try to clear my head. Angela went to her studio and, assisted by Niall, began to repair the damage in preparation for the new commission. Liam patrolled the dunes, keeping an eye on me and the approaches to the cottage. I noticed, with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, that his jacket bulged beneath his shoulder once again. I had been right with my interpretation of that grim look.

Chapter Nine

I walked back to the cottage through the fading light. A man and a boy were making their way down to the beach. They were festooned with the arcane gear of beach fishermen. Long Rods, tackle boxes, paraffin lamps and the like seemed to hang everywhere and they were making heavy weather of it, trudging through the soft sand. The boy was animated, obviously excited. His father, for such I supposed the man to be, was patiently plodding in the child's wake. I looked up and tried to spot my guardian but Liam couldn't be seen. All the same, I knew he was there. It was both reassuring and terrifying at the same time.

I had been trying to work out who had killed Mickey the Mouth. I didn't like the man much but wouldn't have wished him dead. The obvious suspects were the Chechens, if that was what they were. Cornell's ikon story seemed to have been fabricated for our consumption. He knew of the link between Frau Meyer and Angela and learned of the sale. He probably guessed that I would keep digging, discover the link and then back off to protect Angela. It was subtle and would have been effective apart from that false start involving Angela's father. I couldn't believe the currency story. It just didn't fit. There was only one conclusion I kept returning to. Angela's father was alive and someone wanted to find him rather badly.

I decided to keep my speculations to myself. It was just a gut feeling. I hadn't a scrap of evidence but whenever my thoughts turned down that track, the little warm prickling sensation at the back of my mind grew stronger. The evening was as calm and still as the day had been. The clear skies promised another hard frost and the temperature was dropping by the minute as the sun dipped to sleep behind the land. I stopped for a moment just to take it in. I breathed in the promise of the night. My mind quietened. The spinning thoughts slowed and died, one by one. I looked for a moment of tranquillity. Resentment crept over me instead, catching me unawares. I suddenly found myself thinking, 'why me?' This was soon followed by the old childhood saw 'it's not fair!' No sooner had the phrase formed in mind the spell was broken. I could laugh at myself again, mocking the self-pity. After all, I now had Angela.

She was coming out of the studio as the dogs and I came in. Magic launched his soggy length towards and she knelt to fuss him. Trotsky looked in an interested fashion, too aloof to prostitute himself for an ear-scratching. She smiled up at me. "Hello, my Martin," she said and my heart gave a funny lurch. She was dressed in some sort of loose-fitting overalls and her hair was scraped back and held her at her nape with a band. Some loose tendrils of hair had escaped and she blew them from her face with puffed cheeks. Magic's tail was thumping

rump level other than reinforced concrete. Angela sighed and rose. She sniffed at her armpit unselfconsciously. “Phew, I smell like an old bear,” she said and grinned. “Time for a shower.”

We took that shower together. I washed her hair and then minutely washed every inch of her, first with the soap and then with kisses. I wanted to make her come then and there but she eased away from me gently. “Later,” she said. She giggled at my erection and then proceeded to ‘wash’ it enthusiastically. I groaned as my semen spilled out over her hand and splattered her thigh. Her eyes were soft with emotion, as if I’d given her an expensive gift. She languidly washed the pearly drops away then leaned her head on my chest. I held her close for a brief space as the water ran down over us. It was a perfect moment of peace in a strange and disturbing day.

Over a plain dinner we discussed Angela’s forthcoming commission for Frau Meyer. By tacit agreement, we did not discuss the death of Mickey the Mouth or any other of the day’s events. It was still all there, though, a spectre at the feast. I think we were all too worn down by the experience of living inside an enigma to face it yet again. Angela decided that she would honour her intention stated when we first met. She would ‘do’ Trotsky. A completely naturalistic piece, she promised. No tortured soul clawing its way through the twisted bronze. She threatened to do the twins but they refused with a laugh. “Sorry, darlin’, we don’t get our kit off for anyone but our wives,” Niall had replied. Angela had been surprised; she didn’t know they were both married.

“That leaves Martin,” said Liam. “You could just twist some of those bronze rods into a big knot of spaghetti and say it was a portrait of a lawyer’s mind.”

This sparked off a series of ‘Lawyer Jokes’ at my expense. I responded with Irish Jokes, which Angela insisted had originally been Russian Jokes. We then got to plumb the depths with old Essex Girl Jokes. Angela needed some translations as the significance of Ford XR3i’s was lost on her. No joke is funny when you have to dissect it so the evening petered out with Angela still plaintively pleading with me to explain why the answer to “How does an Essex girl turn off the light before sex?” was “She shuts the car door.”

Niall and Liam had rigged up camp beds for themselves in the Studio. They complained that sleeping in the parlour was ‘too noisy’ and winked suggestively. Angela coloured up a nice bright shade of red as she caught their meaning. The head of the brass bedstead must have been hammering on the parlour wall, the two rooms being adjoining.

“Apart from that,” said Niall, “your dogs fart abominably. At least, Liam claims it was them...”

We could hear their good-natured banter receding as we readied ourselves for bed once more. I knew they would take it turns to keep watch through the night, after the events of the day.

Angela once more tumbled me into our private world of soft embraces and thrilling touches. We made love twice before sleeping. The first time a gentle, loving, lingering journey to ecstasy, the second a raunchy, passionate gallop doggy-style, with Angela gasping harshly in Estonian as orgasm wracked her for the third or fourth time that evening. I haven't been with that many women, but Angela's capacity for orgasms was a brand new experience for me. She seemed to hit a plateau and then, out of the blue, she was scaling the peaks, hardly dropping down between one pinnacle and another. Sometimes, she seemed to be coming almost continuously with no break discernible between one climax and the next. I loved it. There can't be any better tonic for a man's ego than to have his woman trembling in a constant state of orgasm.

Afterwards, we lay chatting about it. Angela laughed at my wonderment.

"Sometimes," she said, "It never happens at all. If I'm tired or if I feel low, there is nothing. But when I feel safe and loved, my Martin, then, poof! I am like a string of firecrackers, one explosion following another. But you must not mind if it doesn't go that way every time. Sometimes, I might want just to make you happy and that will be enough for me."

I didn't really understand but claimed I did. It seemed the wisest thing to do.

Angela drifted off to sleep. She seemed now to have adopted a particular position, head on my chest, one leg flung over me. I have to say I loved it. My mind wouldn't let me go, however. It was a roiling mass of thoughts and theories that echoed round and round in my over-tired brain. It was maddening, whenever I felt I just might be dropping off, this thought would re-emerge to the forefront of my consciousness like a line from a song that you can't get rid of. 'He's alive! He's got to be alive!' To this day, I have no idea from whence this conviction had come. It was a certainty, as irrefutable as the dawn. Angela's father was at the bottom of this. I didn't know who had died in Gothenburg wearing his identity but I knew we would find no answers there. He'd covered his tracks well enough to fool British Intelligence and we weren't in their league.

I tried to think of something else, something dull and neutral, like tax, but it didn't work. When I eventually fell asleep it was through sheer exhaustion. I woke several times during that night. Once I heard a muttered exchange as Liam relieved Niall on watch and felt guilty. I ought to be taking my turn. Then I felt guilty that, if I did so, Angela would be left alone. I salved my conscience with the thought that I was protecting her. It was still dark when I woke for the last time. I heard one of the twins in the kitchen, filling the kettle. There

was speaking; I couldn't hear the words but could tell, by the inflection, that someone was talking to Magic. The wagging thump intensified. It sounded like the dog had just conned someone into providing an unscheduled early breakfast. The pure familiarity of the sound relaxed me and I slept properly at last.

When I eventually woke up, it was full daylight and Angela was sitting naked on my chest. Her full breasts fell towards me and I lifted my head to gently kiss a nipple. She leaned forward more to offer herself to me and I suckled like a newborn babe. It wasn't particularly arousing but it was enormously comforting. I suppose that says something about my affection-deprived childhood. If it does I don't give a toss. I enjoyed it and so did she. We must have carried on like that for several minutes. I was just getting interested in taking matters further when there came a knock at the door. We were summoned to breakfast.

I shaved while Angela showered and then showered while she dressed. We arrived in the kitchen almost together, I can move fast when I've a mind to. As we all ate, Niall indicated the morning copy of the *Daily Telegraph*. Michael Cornell had made the inside page. Saddam Hussein still had all the headlines to himself. I scanned the article quickly. It didn't tell us much new except that he had been killed on Monday morning at around Six O'clock. Police were appealing for anyone who might have seen something suspicious in the area. Cornell was described as a senior civil servant. He had been killed on his doorstep, the cause of death: a single stab wound to the throat. The milkman had found the body and called the police. The only other detail of interest was that a Foreign Office spokesman stated Michael Cornell had been on leave of absence from his position at the time of the murder. There was some veiled speculation that sex had been the motive; it was hinted that Cornell might have been gay.

I wondered aloud to the others as to who had planted that piece of disinformation. According to Bernie at least, Mickey the Mouth was very much a ladies' man. Liam and Niall were holding a conversation sotto voce. My raised eyebrow brought them up sharp and Niall said,

"Professional job. Amateurs slash or hack. It takes practice and a bloody cold heart to do someone in with a single thrust. This is no crime of passion."

Liam nodded his agreement. "Question is," he said, "Whodunit, the Russians or Mickey's erstwhile employers? That little planted 'gay' thing smacks of Vauxhall. Stupid bastards still think it's a stigma."

"It is, if you read the *Telegraph*," I replied.

Angela looked at me questioningly and I explained. "Very right-wing, middle aged, middle class newspaper."

“Gets bloody messy if it was the Vauxhall funnies,” Niall said.

You couldn’t put it more succinctly than that. If Cornell had been taken out of the game by the Security Services, well, we were ‘up shit creek in a barbed-wire canoe’, as Liam put it. I almost groaned aloud with the weight of it. Angela looked from one face to another and saw how seriously we were all taking this possibility. Her chin came and there was steel in those fabulous eyes where I was just becoming accustomed to find love.

“They cannot kill us all,” she said simply.

Looking at her defiant expression raised all our morale.

“By Christ and all His saints, that they can’t!” Niall roared, “bugger them all and their donkeys too!”

And we grinned like schoolchildren plotting their next prank.

Liam and Niall decided it was time to call for reinforcements.

“You won’t know they’re there. It’s only a couple of mates from Hereford.”

I explained to Angela that he meant ex-SAS men, a number of whom are recruited to the Special Air Service from the ranks of the Parachute Regiment. Liam went off to make a call and Niall disappeared to patrol the area once again. Angela and I were left alone in the kitchen with the dogs. Magic wagged idly and Trotsky looked at me with an enquiring air, as if he understood the situation and was awaiting his orders.

“I don’t think you two will be much help,” I told them.

Magic seemed to agree and lay down again; eyeing the breakfast things in case we had missed something. Trotsky made a rumbling noise in his throat and came to stand by Angela. She had obviously made a friend. She patted him absently and he licked her hand, the height of affection, from a husky.

Two pairs of startlingly pale blue eyes were staring at me. I looked from the woman to the dog and back again. I made some feeble joke about their swapping eyes while I was asleep, just to confuse me. Angela gave me a weary smile. The strain was showing in tight lines around her mouth. I had a glimpse of the woman she would be in, say, twenty or thirty years. Tension ages you.

On instructions from the twins we stayed indoors all morning. The dogs weren’t that happy about it but I admit I was relieved. Around lunchtime Liam came in accompanied by two hard-looking men in their thirties. They weren’t that tall but had a spare muscularity and their eyes were distant and carried a vague aura of danger. He introduced them as Steve and Bill. Steve was slightly the taller with cropped sandy hair and freckles. Bill was stockier and had a marked ‘Five O’clock Shadow’ on his prognathous jaw. The effect was to make him look slightly simian but those dangerous eyes held a lively intelligence. He smiled at us

“Get yourselves something to eat,” said Niall, indicating the kitchen with a slight head movement. “Briefing in here in fifteen minutes.”

In less than ten minutes they were back. Liam pulled what looked like a wad of rubbish out of the pocket of his Barbour.

“I think we can assume we’re under surveillance,” he said.

His voice was crisp and authoritative. He saw me start to ask the question and cut in.

“I think I found where someone has been lying up. This stuff wasn’t there last night.”

Bill came forward and poked through the rubbish. He sniffed at a piece of crumpled silver foil.

“Chocolate,” he said, “very careless.”

There was some cellophane and a single cigarette butt. In place of a filter tip it had a tube of cardboard.

“That’s a Russian cigarette!” Angela exclaimed.

“Quite right, Miss,” Bill replied. Steve said nothing but grimaced.

Liam and Niall established a patrol routine. Bill and Steve would go out after dark to do a ‘sweep’ at some distance from the house. In the meantime, the twins would follow the same routine as the day before. If the watchers thought they had been spotted, they would be more on their guard. Angela asked if it was safe for us to walk the dogs on the beach. Liam agreed it was, provided we stayed well away from the dunes. We would be fine out in the open, he opined, and any way, they would all be watching over us.

The tide was out as we walked that afternoon and we left deep bootprints in the muddy wet sand. The low sun sent streaks of bright fire into pools of seawater and they flickered where the wind ruffled the surface with a soft, lover’s touch. It was one of those bright, fierce days where you feel you can almost see the cold in the freezing air. We were well wrapped up but still Angela’s nose and my ears were turned scarlet by the icy breeze. I love those days, dry, hard and brilliant. They invigorate me. The dull, damp, cheerless days that typify an English winter are all depression and drabness that seem to seep through your coat and into your spirit. The clear, dry frosty days are a rarity and I welcome them; even in their chill, they seem to carry the promise that the warmth of summer will return.

We didn’t talk much. I think we were both too preoccupied with our own thoughts. The sense of danger was palpable now. Cornell’s death put a different complexion on things. We knew we were in good hands with the twins but the two ex-SAS men lent a brooding presence. There was something about the way moved or held themselves when at rest that spoke volumes. Their world was one that comfortable, middle-class men in early middle age might fantasise about but, faced with the reality, shied away from. I felt a sense of impending

For her part, Angela seemed to have found some inner reserves of strength. She exuded defiant determination. Regardless of what was coming, she made her preparations for her new commission. Maybe it was to keep herself from dwelling on our predicament but it seemed more like she was waving two fingers at fate as if to say “Do your worst. Only art is real – the rest are phantasms.” I wished fervently that I had some all-consuming avocation to seize my attention. My focus was on keeping her safe.

Magic and Trotsky were unconcerned by such considerations. Chasing sticks or stalking seagulls was occupation enough for them. Their joyous, carefree spirits lifted ours after a while. We walked back to the cottage considerably lighter at heart than we left.

Chapter Ten

The two SAS men slipped away from the cottage as soon as it was fully dark. The four of us ate dinner together in a strained atmosphere. Liam and Niall were almost visibly quivering with anticipation. They were preternaturally alert. The speculation and the good-humoured jibes at me had vanished. Now they all business. No alcohol for them tonight. Somehow we could sense that a line had been crossed. Before, they had taken it seriously but not felt we were in any real danger, not mortal danger at any rate. All that had changed. The word ‘operational’ popped into my head. We were now ‘operational.’

I took the dogs outside for a last pee before turning in. The sky was crystal clear, a halo hung around the moon that was just a couple of days off being new. Ice particles in the atmosphere made the stars shimmer and dance. They appeared unusually close that night. I was standing in the small untidy garden at the back of the cottage, taking all this in and breathing in the tangy sea air when I felt, rather than saw, Trotsky stiffen. I could just make out his pale coat in the feint light. He stood tall, head erect, the posture tense and guarded. I tried to pick out Magic but his black fur blended perfectly into the deeper shadows by the low wall.

I called them to me and pulled them quickly inside, shooting the bolts on the door, someone was definitely out there. The dogs sensed it and I caught their mood. I muttered the news to Niall and he gave a quick whistle for Liam. They waved me out of the room and then crouched, one each side of the door, against the thick stone walls.

There was a light tap on the glass and a laconic voice said,

“It’s Steve, I think you’d better let us in.”

Niall moved away, to be behind the door when it opened. Liam pushed the bolts open, taking care to keep his head and body in the cover of the wall. The door swung inwards with a crash and Steve was propelled into the room. A tall figure stood just outside of the pool of light spilling from the open doorway. A harsh voice called out, “Angelika!”

Angela flew into the room, thrusting me to one side in her rush.

“Papa? Papa?”

She let go a rapid-fire burst of what I took to be Estonian. The half-hidden figure answered in the same tongue. She turned to me, her face drained of all colour.

“It’s my father,” she said, “he wants to come in and talk. He says it’s very important.”

Niall looked at me and I nodded. He grimaced and then told Angela to tell her father to come in. Steve was looking sheepish. Niall raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Sorry, boss,” he said, “I fucked up big-time.”

I then muttered a terse “Later.”

All our attention was on the tall, slim figure that emerged from the darkness into the lighted kitchen.

It was his eyes that I noticed first. They were incredibly like Angela's but not the same. There was a feral glint to his that Angela's lacked. His face was grave and unlined. He had short grey hair that showed just a hint of curls. It was cut high on his forehead, emphasising the regularity of his features. He reminded me a little of the English actor, Terence Stamp, even down to the cleft in his strong chin. His face was transformed when he smiled at his daughter. He looked at the rest of us and gave a sort of short bow. Liam shut the door and the Colonel turned and smiled at him, one professional recognising another.

We all sat down at the table and the Colonel began to speak. Angela did her best to give us a running translation but at times, she was so shocked, she would utter another burst of lightening-quick Estonian before turning back to us. He spoke for about half an hour. When he finished, we were all in shock.

The Colonel told us he had been watching us for about a day and a half. He had come at first to rescue Angela but had quickly realised, this with a nod in my direction, that she was among friends who were protecting her. He had never meant for either of his daughters to become involved. When Vika had been murdered in Gothenburg, he had vowed to take revenge. He traced the man who killed Vika to London. He had found him and killed him, early on Monday morning. Mickey-the-Mouth. Then he had driven to Norfolk to make contact with Angela. The Colonel had seen Bill and Steve arrive. He had guessed what they would do; it was what he would have done. He set up the decoy observation post and had baited the trap with the assorted rubbish Liam had found, knowing that someone would have the place under surveillance. He had dug a scrape a few yards away, covered himself with camouflage netting and tussocks of marrom grass, and waited. Steve had obligingly showed up. The former SAS man shrugged and mouthed, "sorry, boss." Liam shook his head. No use crying over split milk. Steve had been careless, overconfident.

Angela's father had related all this in a light easy, matter-of fact tone. Then Angela had asked him the question we all needed an answer to, 'Why?' His voice had grown flatter, harsher somehow, as he told us his incredible story. It had started when the Colonel returned from Afghanistan in 1986. He had been bitter, disillusioned by his experiences. A group calling themselves the Estonian Democracy Committee had made contact with him. At first he had resisted their courtship but the more he thought about it, the more he realised they were right. The USSR was rotting from within. It couldn't last too much longer. One day soon, Estonia could take back the freedom it had lost in 1941.

He did nothing, but stayed in touch. When the Berlin Wall came down and the Russians

became self-governing once more; it was the Estonian Democracy Committee who moved to fill the political vacuum left behind. Now, as the legitimate government, they approached him again. Would he go to Russia, they had asked him. He was to take a job, keep his ear to the ground. They were particularly worried about the amount of former Soviet armaments that seemed to be flooding out of the old USSR. He agreed. His daughters had left home, one to marry; the other had fled to the west to be a 'bohemian'.

He had set up his 'security consultancy and waited. Inevitably, his clients had been of a dubious nature, crooks, conmen, people on the make. He had picked up snippets here and there, had reported back to Tallinn. Some shipments of small arms and explosives, bound for who-knows-which 'liberation' army, had been intercepted and impounded. There had been a handful of arrests, no-one significant, of course, just couriers and low-grade operatives. The work was easy, he was making a good living and he had a comfortable life in St Petersburg.

All that changed about a year and a half ago. He was urgently summoned home to Tallinn. The government were in a state of near panic. It had come to light that 20 tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium had gone walkabout in the old USSR. Originally, it was ascribed to inefficiency, poor record-keeping, that sort of thing. Then someone caught a whisper. Someone else heard talk of an 'Islamic Bomb'. Little accretions of evidence emerged here and there. Not proof positive, you understand, but enough links in the chain to get the politicians shitting themselves. He was sent back and told to dig some more.

It had taken him a while, almost a year. He had it all now. The Chechens, of course, were deeply involved. Some were in it in solidarity with their co-religionists but the majority were in it for the money. Half a billion dollars. A certain Arab country whose leader had pretensions of leading the great Jihad against Israel and its supporters provided the money. He traced the links out of Russia into the West; Germany, Spain, Britain, even into the USA. There were those, some of whom worked in their own government agencies, for whom the lure of half a billion dollars overwhelmed any scruples. He had pretended to be one such. They had rumbled him. He had fled to Sweden, faked his own death. Somehow Vika had learned of her father's death and followed him to Gothenburg. He believed she had been sent as bait to trap him. He had avoided her. It hadn't saved her.

At this point, the Colonel took out a roll of papers, wrapped in oilskin to protect them from the damp. He tossed it on the table.

"Five good men have died for this," he said and looked grim. "It is all there, names, places, facts and figures."

We all stared at the bundle. The room was completely silent. We were all shattered by the enormity of what we had heard. The Colonel's mouth was a hard, compressed line; his

“The problem I have is to know who to trust. There are Estonian names on that list, too. Everywhere, there are people prepared to sell their country. No! To sell the World! They must be stopped.”

I had a sudden thought.

“Ask him what he has to do with the ikon,” I said to Angela.

He laughed when he heard the question and Angela smiled when she heard the reply. She turned to us and when both father and daughter were smiling, the resemblance between them was clear.

“My father traced me through Frau Meyer. He went to see her after reading an article about her and he saw my name mentioned as one of those artists she patronised. The article had also said that Frau Meyer was a great opponent of extremism in the new Germany. He thought she would be disposed to help him. He explained a little of the situation and suggested that she might help. They hit on the idea of putting the ikon up for sale in the UK to mislead Cornell, who was getting too close.

“Frau Meyer wanted to do more so they agreed that she would send me some bronze to work with. Hidden in that shipment is about one hundred pounds of plutonium. My father thinks it will be at Felixstowe Docks tomorrow or the next day. He stole it from a shipment and substituted plain lead rods. The plutonium is wrapped in a lead sheath and a thin skin of bronze.”

“Why send it here?” I asked, puzzled.

Angela smiled again, “It is his evidence. Anyone could come up with a list of names and things on paper. He needs our help. He wants someone to contact, someone above suspicion. Everything in the East is too corrupt; he doesn’t know who’s involved and who isn’t. Do you know anyone in the Government, Martin?”

I admitted I knew one person, an MP I had once done some work for. I hadn’t liked him much but as far as I knew, he was straight but didn’t know too much about him. Then Liam chimed in.

“Do you remember Rollo Yeates?”

I did, he had been Head Boy at school when we were there.

“Rollo’s now a half-colonel in I Corps, he might be the very man!”

I had to agree. If Rollo Yeates was now a Lieutenant Colonel in Army Intelligence, he could certainly point us in the right direction. All of this was explained to Angela’s father and he thought for a moment or two before answering. He puffed out his cheeks and then grinned. “Good, a soldier!”

It was agreed that Liam should contact Rollo Yeates and get him to meet us at

They were written in a variety of languages but I saw a few names I recognised, Cornell's among them. Another I recognised was a former MP, well known for his venal nature and habit of attracting scandal and a third was a high-profile radical journalist with a history of penning attacks on Israel and the USA. There were other, obviously Western, names that didn't ring any bells. The one name that brought me up short was that of a prominent European Industrialist. How the Hell could someone like that involve themselves with this bloody mess? I voiced this aloud and Angela's father understood instantly. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Gelt!" he said, money.

It had got pretty late by this stage and we were all starting to flag a bit. I left Angela alone to talk with her father and retired to our bed alone. I could still hear the soft murmur of conversation as I drifted into a troubled sleep. At least I now knew what was going on. At any rate, I thought I did.

Chapter Eleven

Angela woke me sometime later, sliding into the bed beside me and assuming her usual position, head on my chest, one leg thrown over me. She nuzzled my neck and whispered that she was very happy. Her father was alive and not a criminal: she'd never believed that he could be. I grunted some sleepy reply and lapsed back into unconsciousness. She wasn't having any of this and proceeded to wake me again by the simple expedient of grabbing my cock and starting to pump it lightly while lightly caressing my face with her lips and tongue. Her eyes gleamed in the dim light and I could see the flash of her teeth as she smiled down at me.

"Martin, I want to make love. There is madness all around us. I want you inside me, to make me feel real again."

I have never been able to refuse a polite request from a beautiful woman. I rolled her onto her back and kissed her gently. My fingers found her opening, wet and ready and I slipped into her in one smooth movement. Whether it was the situation or whether it was simply my love for her, I couldn't say, but I was seized by the need. I slammed myself into her with uncontrolled passion. Her legs went around my back and she bucked her hips to match my frenzied pace. We didn't say a word; the only sound was our rapid breathing. This was a different type of lovemaking. Up until this moment we had been gentle, thoughtful lovers. This was animalistic; fucking is the only word to describe it.

I could feel the wetness dripping out of her and soaking my pubic hair, my balls and my thighs. Her head was thrown back, her eyes half shut and her mouth was contorted into a feral rictus that parodied her normal sweet smile. I felt rage boiling within me. Rage that we had been placed in this nightmare, rage that we had not been allowed to just be lovers, anonymous, happy, untroubled. The rage fed my passion and pounded away like a man possessed. She was gasping now, getting close to orgasm. I pulled away and turned her over, seizing her around the waist, I hauled her buttocks back towards me and rammed myself into her again. Reaching under her, I grasped her breasts and rubbed her nipples between fingers and thumb with one hand and slid the other down to where we joined.

Angela was panting now and uttering a continuous low moaning sound that I could somehow feel deep down in my balls. I rubbed her clitoris with the knuckles of my right hand, pressing firmly. My other hand still alternated between her breasts, squeezing and rolling the erect nipples. She came with a huge shudder and her fists drummed on the bed as the climax gathered and roiled. Her vaginal muscles went into spasm and she clamped down hard on my thrusting, hammering prick.

A measure of sanity returned and I slowed my pace, giving her long slow thrusts as she came down from her high. She was sobbing quietly, murmuring endearments. My rage returned and I set off again, pounding and pumping until my own orgasm shook me to the core and I poured all my anger, love and fear into her. I cried out as I came that I loved her. She slammed back at me, swivelling her hips and buttocks, milking me with her contractions.

Afterwards we lay side by side in the spoon position. I hugged her and stroked her hair, telling her over and over again that she was wonderful, glorious, that I loved her. She turned towards me and planted kisses all over my face.

“I love you, my Martin,” she said. “I love you when you are gentle and I love you when you are fierce, like a lion, just now. How did you know that was what I wanted?”

I had to admit that I hadn’t known, that I had been following my own driven needs. I tried to explain about the rage and the love but she hushed me with a kiss. “

It will be all right,” she said. “You will look after us. Always you keep me safe, yes?”

I didn’t reply but uttered up a silent prayer - please, God, let it be so.

We slept then. No dark dreams troubled my rest and I awoke the next morning feeling utterly refreshed and ready for anything. I woke Angela with a light kiss and she smiled up at me, her hair a dark storm spread on the pillow and love in her blue, blue eyes. We could hear the sounds of others up and about in the kitchen so we showered quickly and dressed, to see what the day might bring.

Angela’s father was with Steve and Bill in the kitchen. Steve had obviously got over being duped and the three of them were conversing in what I took to be Russian. Bill looked up as we came in and said “Morning, all. Just been chatting to the colonel here, miss. Swapping old soldiers’ stories.” He had an engaging grin and twinkling eyes. They all looked completely at ease, like old friends. It would be too easy to forget just how lethal these three men could be.

Niall and Liam were out patrolling the perimeter that they had set up around the cottage. It had been agreed that they would stay in the area while the rest of us went to meet Rollo Yeates. Angela and her father went into Cromer, taking Steve with them as a bodyguard, to photocopy the colonel’s papers at one of those little printing and stationery shops. I walked the dogs with Bill as my guardian. He told me something of their history with Liam and Niall.

Niall had been their company commander in 2 Para – the 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment. Liam had commanded another company but they saw a lot of him too. The twins were known in the regiment as ‘the gruesome twosome.’ They were very well respected by both officers and men. Apparently, they had a reputation for bringing their troops back alive.

“Bags of low cunning, those two,” said Bill.

After Desert Storm, Bill and Steve had volunteered for the SAS and had undergone the gruelling selection process in the Brecon Beacons. Niall had helped them prepare, training with them and encouraging them to use their initiative whenever the situation allowed.

I had often wondered why neither Liam nor Niall had volunteered for Special Forces and voiced this question aloud. Bill shrugged.

“They would have walked in if they’d bothered,” he said. “I asked the Boss meself, once. He said it wasn’t for them; that they were regimental officers and preferred it that way, but I don’t think that was the reason. There was a rumour that they objected to what the SAS was doing in the Six Counties. They’re both ‘left-footers’ and Irish to boot, so it could be true, but I reckon it was something else.”

“What?” I asked.

Bill grinned. “They wouldn’t have been allowed to serve together. Those two have always been joined at the hip. The SAS wouldn’t have let them both in at the same time. One wouldn’t go without the other. Sometimes it’s like they’re two halves of the same person, if you get my meaning. Finishing each other’s sentences, knowing exactly what the other is going to do. In combat it was brilliant. I mean, imagine the advantages you get when one company is supporting another and he *knows* exactly what his brother will do when the wheels come off! I think it was Napoleon who said ‘no plan survives contact with the enemy.’ Well, the Boss and his brother could make it up as they went along.”

I sort of understood. I’ve never been a man of action but I thought I could grasp what the chaos of the battlefield could do to pre-prepared plans. Just as life itself can sometimes bowl you a bouncer, only in war, the consequences could be a lot bloodier than mere inconvenience and wasted effort.

Bill was trying to get Magic to act like a proper retriever and bring him back the sticks he hurled into the sea. Magic, being the daft dog he is, would rush off full of enthusiasm and return with the stick. As soon as Bill went to pick it up, he’d dash off again and then lie down on the sand to chew the offending stick to splinters.

“He hasn’t really got the hang of his trade, has he?” Bill said with a chuckle.

I laughed and told him that Magic was not the brightest bulb in the box.

“What about the other one?” Bill asked.

“Trotsky doesn’t do retrieving,” I said, “it’s far beneath his dignity.”

Bill tried anyway and was rewarded with one of Trotsky’s ‘are you completely mad?’ looks. He then stalked off in the opposite direction, a disdainful tail held high. Bill laughed out loud.

“I guess that told me!”

We made our way back to the cottage after an hour or so and were just in time to meet the others on their return from Cromer. We loaded everyone into the Volvo. Steve insisted on driving and Bill sat beside him. Angela sat in the back flanked by the colonel and I. There wasn't much conversation as we drove south through Norfolk and into neighbouring Suffolk. Angela's father questioned me, via Angela, as to my job, my income and, to Angela's intense embarrassment, my intentions towards his daughter. To this latter enquiry I said simply that keeping her from harm was my immediate priority and he beamed at me like a schoolboy.

Then he wanted to know if I spoke any other languages. I admitted to bad French and passable Greek. I had learned Classical Greek at school and had taken evening classes with a mad old Cypriot in demotic Greek. He spoke Russian, Swedish and German so we had no common means of communicating. I asked him why he did not speak English, as I knew many in the Russian military learned the language of the 'enemy', particularly during the cold war. He laughed and said that as an Estonian, he wasn't trusted not to listen to the BBC or the Voice of America. He made it into a joke but there was a bitter undertone to it. He then struck a desultory conversation in Russian with Bill. I couldn't make out a single word so I sat in silence, holding Angela's hand.

Felixstowe has an interesting history. At one time it was the base for many of the great Flying Boats of the pre-war era. It was from here that the Mayo-Mercury combination flew to South Africa in the 1930's. The Mayo was a large Flying Boat that carried the Mercury, a fast four-engined seaplane, piggyback. The Mercury would then be launched while airborne to continue the journey. It was revolutionary at the time. Flying boats went out of fashion with the coming of the jet engine and for a while, Felixstowe lapsed back into a sleepy little fishing port on the Suffolk coast. Then came the great Container revolution and the port became the busiest in the UK.

The modern Dock area is enormous and we had to drive around for a while and ask several times until we found the right part of the terminus. I recognised Rollo Yeates instantly even though I hadn't seen him for twenty years. He was a tall, gangly individual with thin sandy hair and a pink complexion. He obviously recognised me too, for he walked briskly towards the car, hand outstretched, as soon as he saw me emerge. Rollo ushered us into one of those temporary office huts that had a sign reading *HM Customs & Excise* on the single door.

There were three men inside, one in the uniform of a senior Customs Officer, the other two, like Rollo, in business suits. I made the introductions and noticed Rollo did not reciprocate. Whoever his companions were, we didn't need to know. I gave a quick summary of events to date. The others listened in complete silence. Rollo nodded once briefly when I had finished and then turned to Angela's father and began to question him closely in fluent

scanned the top few sheets. His face went pale as he started on the list of names. He shoved them into the hands of one of the other suits and turned to study us.

“If this is true,” he said, “and I have to say I believe it probably is, then we are in a world of shit.”

That struck me as a particularly accurate summary. The other three said nothing but I could see by their faces what they were thinking. Either we were all mad or it was really true. The customs man was the first to react.

“We’ve isolated the bronze shipment. How do we tell which of the ingots contains this supposed plutonium?”

Rollo asked the colonel and he replied that the manufacturer’s mark was stamped lengthways on the bars as opposed to horizontally. About a quarter of the shipment was comprised of the false bars. He had had to spread the plutonium thinly to allow for the lead sheathing and a thin skin of bronze over the top. They were otherwise identical in size and weight.

The Customs officer said, “right, we’ll take it from here” and departed shouting rapid instructions into a walky-talky. We were left alone with Rollo and the suits. One of the anonymous men, the one Rollo had given the papers to, looked at us. His face was set and he held our eyes in turn with an unblinking stare.

“I don’t suppose I have to tell you how much panic this would cause if it were to become public knowledge,” he said. “I am going to have to ask you all to sign the Official Secrets Act, of course. This matter is now classified. If any of you chooses to divulge this information to anyone else, anyone at all, there will be the severest consequences. And I do mean severe. Do I make myself plain?”

Bill gave him a grin.

“Bollocks,” he said. “If this gets out, pal, the last thing you’ll be worrying about is the Official Secrets Act. Anyway, me and Steve have signed the bloody thing so often we could recite it by heart. As for the colonel here, what are you going to do him? He is a representative of the Estonian government. Miss Angela’s an Estonian as well and that only leaves Mr Booth here.”

He turned to me, his eyes twinkling with enjoyment at the suit’s obvious discomfort.

“Looks like you’re bound for the Tower of London, sir!”

He winked broadly as he said it. Bill turned back to the two men. His smile had gone and his tone was curt and dismissive.

“We have come to you with this information because we understand what a bloody mess this all is, chum. You can take your Official bloody Secrets Act and your little threats

He gave Steve a brief look and went on.

“Come on, folks, we’re leaving.”

Rollo Yeates put a hand up and caught my shoulder.

“I know you will keep it quiet, Martin,” he said.

I nodded. Rollo compressed his lips in approximation of a smile that didn’t touch his eyes.

“We really owe you people a debt if all this turns out to be true.”

I shook my head. “Rollo,” I said, “I just want my life back.”

He looked like he was about to say something else but just shook his head. “

I understand,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

We drove back to Norfolk in silence, sunk in gloom. I'm not sure what it was that affected us so; it was maybe a combination of things. The attitude of officialdom certainly hadn't helped but we all had the feeling that somehow nothing had been resolved to our satisfaction. We had told our story and were now out of the loop. We had no idea whether the plutonium had been found. We had even less of a clue as to how the authorities would now proceed. We could only hope they would act rapidly to address the appalling situation. The thing that bothered me was that there were at least a dozen armed Chechens running about free as birds in England's green and pleasant land. No one had seemed concerned in the slightest by *that* fact.

It was already full dark by the time we pulled up outside the cottage. Heavy cloud cover obscured what moon there was so it was black as ink. There were no lights showing in the windows and my heart sank. Supposing something had happened to Liam and Niall while we were away? I got the dogs out of the back of the car while Angela opened the door. Niall's voice rang out.

"Get inside, don't touch the lights and keep away from the windows!"

Needless to say we complied with alacrity.

Once inside, Niall told us what had been going on.

"We were hit by about twenty of the bastards at dusk," he said. "They're out there somewhere. I think we winged a couple but these pop-guns aren't that accurate over about twenty yards."

Bill muttered something to Steve and they disappeared into Angela's studio. When they came back they looked to have enough armament to start a small war. They each carried some sort of sub-machine gun and Bill had a rifle with a large nightsight fitted to its long barrelled frame. Steve was carrying a holdall that contained more sub-machine guns and a load of spare ammunition clips taped together in pairs. When one clip was empty, they could simply turn it over to insert the other. They offered me a weapon but I declined.

"I think I'd be more dangerous to you than anyone else," I said.

The colonel took a weapon and proceeded to strip and reassemble it with obvious expertise. "Good!" His smile was wolfish.

Angela and I went into the inner hall and sat down. There were no windows and the thick stone walls of the cottage would protect us from any stray bullets. I felt useless but knew it was best to leave it to the professionals. I said as much to Angela and she gave me a weak smile.

"You are right, my Martin, and it is brave of you to admit it."

I didn't feel very brave at that moment, just very useless.

The odd thing about tension is that it can't last. The human brain can only take so much, and then it begins to shut down. It's absolutely impossible to stay scared witless and with every nerve stretched taut and humming with dread for an extended period. After about an hour of squatting there in the darkness with my arms around Angela, I began to yawn. The old soldiers obviously knew a trick or two because every so often they would exchange their positions. Fresh eyes always surveyed the scene outside. I guess it kept them from staring for too long at the darkness and starting to imagine things. What really struck me was that they seemed not to need words to communicate. A look, a brief nod and everyone moved in unison. It was as though they had been working together for years.

"Here they come!"

It was a harsh whisper but I recognised Bill's voice.

"This side, too."

That must have been Steve. The next thing the enclosed space of the hall was filled with the harsh chatter of machinegun fire and the stink of the explosive propellant. The flashes from the short bursts of gunfire split the darkness and scarred their images onto my retinas. Angela made a dive for me and I wrapped in her my arms, trying to shield her from the awful reality with both my body and my love.

Over and above the cacophony within the house I occasionally caught the fainter sound of fire being returned and glass smashing in the windows. Once there was a shrill scream. Liam, Niall and the rest fought in complete silence. I let Angela go and crawled forward. I had this overwhelming desire to make myself useful. Shit-scared though I was, I grabbed the holdall and slithered about the floor, passing out fresh ammunition clips. Magic was whimpering in a corner of the parlour. He hates fireworks so God knows what gunfire at close quarters was doing to him. There was a sudden almighty BOOM!!! It felt like the house rocked on its foundations and glass cascaded from all the windows at the back of the place. I was so stunned I was frozen in mid-crawl.

"Bastards have got a grenade launcher," I heard Liam say, or it might have been Niall, I couldn't tell in the darkness.

Steve had the rifle fitted with the nightsight. "Got him," he said and the flat crack of the rifle cut across the yammering of the sub-machine guns. Steve fired again, once, twice in quick succession.

"Got his mate, too. I think they're pulling back."

The firing died away as suddenly as it began. I was suddenly conscious of the sound of my own breathing, harsh and rapid, like I'd just run a marathon. My eyes smarted from the fumes and my head was ringing. Angela's father said something to Bill in Russian.

“Colonel says they won’t be back. Took too many casualties. They’re mercenaries, no commitment. Least ways, something like that.”

The colonel nodded his head and I had the sneaking suspicion that the old bastard could speak English after all.

We waited about half an hour with Steve surveying the surrounding area through the nightsight. He shook his head.

“Nothing moving, Boss.”

Liam and Niall slipped out of the front door and vanished into the darkness. The three ex-soldiers waited with apparent total calm. I was beside myself with nerves until they reappeared. Liam grinned and said,

“Eight down for sure. Another couple, possibly more, wounded. Blood trail withdrawing into the dunes. We counted twenty earlier. I think we got a couple first time around. Best guess is they are down to about eight or nine effectives. They won’t like those odds, not now they know our fire-power.”

We heard the sound of approaching sirens in the distance.

“Trust the Old Bill, “ said Steve, “Bloody late, as usual.”

The ‘Old Bill’ – a cockney nickname for the police – duly arrived. Several white-faced young constables and a couple of old hands in flak jackets ringed the cottage. Niall called out to them.

“It’s OK, gentlemen. The bad guys have already left. Do come in!”

There was a hasty consultation until someone who has seen too many cop movies yelled for us to come out with our hands up. Dutifully, like any law-abiding citizens, we trooped outside. We were bundled into the back of assorted police cars and rushed off to Cromer Police Station, sirens still wailing. They tried to split us up inside the station but we weren’t having any.

Niall stuck his face into that of the senior police officer and almost spat out his angry words.

“Listen, sunshine, you have a bunch of Chechen nasties running all over your manor. They attacked that cottage twice tonight. We defended ourselves. There is something going down here that constitutes unbelievably serious shit, well out of your league. I suggest you ring Lieutenant Colonel Rollo Yeates of Army Intelligence immediately. He is aware of the situation and will tell you as much as you need to know.”

The policeman was not intimidated in the slightest.

“Been listening to the news, have we, sir?”

The ‘sir’ was dripping with icy contempt.

“Lieutenant Colonel Yeates and two companions were killed by a car-bomb late this afternoon. Special Branch thinks it was your countrymen, sir. Now what do you to say to that?”

His eyes flickered a little with surprise when he saw the genuinely shocked looks on all our faces. I stepped forward.

“My name is Martin Booth and these gentlemen are in my employ. They have been assisting me to protect this lady. We met with Rollo Yeates at Felixstowe Docks around noon today. The senior Customs Officer for Felixstowe and two other gentlemen were also present. As my friend here told you, there is a gang of Chechens in the area who are trying to kill Miss Sable and her father. Her father is a representative of the Estonian Government who has come to this country bringing evidence of a terrorist plan of almost inconceivable dimensions. We handed over the evidence to Lieutenant Colonel Yeates and his companions earlier. We were also given strict instructions not to discuss the matter with anyone.

“As you can see, Colonel Yeates’s death has come as a great shock to us. Even more so perhaps because these gentlemen – I indicated the twins – and I were all at school with Rollo Yeates and knew him personally. I should also point out to you that these same gentlemen served this country with distinction in the Parachute Regiment and you have no right to cast any slurs on their character simply because they are Irish. Such an attitude is both inappropriate and offensive in the extreme.

“Be that as it may, you are wasting time. I would suggest that you contact the security services as a matter of some urgency. We are all prepared to render such assistance as we can to the proper authority. I would also suggest that you send some armed police back to the cottage. You should find the remains of some eight Chechen gunmen. In the cottage you will also find two frightened dogs. I would be grateful if someone could see to them for me while we remain here.”

The policeman was visibly taken aback.

“Just what the fuck is going on here?” he said.

I took the question to be rhetorical. At any rate, they stopped trying to separate us and brought more chairs into the interview room. A young constable in an ill-fitting blue uniform came in with a tray of mugs of tea. Angela giggled.

“How very British,” she whispered in my ear. “The world is going to Hell and your police make tea!”

I grinned back at her. “Don’t knock it,” I said, “It’s a sovereign remedy for frayed nerves, gunshot wounds, bombs, fire and flood. The country wouldn’t function without it.”

We all sat around and drank our tea, which turned out to be a singularly pernicious brew

We sat around for about three hours. The police left us alone but nobody was in the mood for small talk. I could see Liam and Niall were starting to get a bit antsy and did my best to calm them down. Eventually the door opened again and two plain-clothes officers came in with the local senior officer. The elder of the two newcomers introduced himself as Commander Swann of Special Branch. We rehearsed the entire story for his benefit and he listened attentively, sometimes interrupting to get clarification or to check a detail here and there. When we'd finished he gave a low whistle.

"We'd heard rumours in the last year or so but nobody thought it was for real," he said. "You say the Felixstowe Customs were dealing with this shipment?"

He turned to his subordinate and told him to contact Felixstowe immediately. The man gave a brief nod and hurried out.

When he returned a few minutes later, his face was grim.

"Bad news, Guv," he said. "It seems someone got to the shipment before Customs. They can verify meeting with these people earlier today and they are quite convinced they're genuine. Seems that Colonel Yeates gave them a clean bill of health."

Liam glared at the local policeman with an 'I told you so' sort of expression. Swann thought for a moment or two. He came to a decision and turned to face us all.

"The difficulty we have is that there is no corroborating evidence. We have the gentleman's list, of course, but, with respect, he *could* have just invented it. The local force found no bodies out at the cottage, either. They did find what appears to be bloodstains and some spent cartridge cases but that is all. Don't misunderstand me. I believe every word but we have no concrete evidence."

There followed a hurried consultation between the three policemen. The local man was arguing vehemently with Swann but eventually threw up his hands in a gesture of resignation. He came across to us.

"Against my better judgement," he said, "I'm going to let you go. I don't begin to understand what is going on, and if I had my way, I'd keep you banged up safe until this is sorted. The Commander here has other ideas, however, and he insists upon your release. I will certainly require the pleasure of your company again so kindly keep yourselves available. I am releasing you on police bail in your own recognisance. That doesn't mean you're off the hook!"

The bastard wouldn't even have us driven back so we had to get a taxi. It was well past midnight when we finally got in doors. A young policewoman was playing with Trotsky and Magic in the parlour.

"Are these your dogs, sir?" she asked me. "They're really lovely."

Angela and I were too exhausted to do anything except cuddle. I fell asleep with her cradled in my arms. I didn't sleep at all well that night and woke several times in the darkness. Angela seemed blessed with the ability to sleep anywhere at any time. It really was as if that simply having my arms around her was enough to make her feel safe. I had learned that she had not had many lovers; certainly not for a woman of thirty-five. I don't think it was because of her early experiences with the Russian soldier. It was more that she needed to feel the emotion of love before she could let her obviously passionate nature come to the surface. For her, sex without love was hollow and counterfeit somehow. I have always felt that love itself is the best aphrodisiac so I certainly could relate to her feelings.

I don't class myself as any sort of stud but I reckon I know how to please a woman. I had the very good fortune at the age of twenty to meet an older woman. It was really quite strange, looking back. Jane was thirty-four, divorced and had a couple of children. She had a lovely face but it was hard, somehow. I think she had had a bad time in her marriage and there was a hint of bitterness etched in the fine lines around her eyes and mouth. We met when I walked into her father's pub. A friend of mine was having a birthday party just down the road. It was one of those weekend-long affairs and I had wandered off to the pub for a change of scenery. Then as now, I'm not really a social animal so it was a relief to get away from the crowd.

The pub was relatively quiet and we started chatting. It turned out that she was just there for the weekend and helping out behind the bar. I invited her back to the party at closing time and we spent the night together in severe discomfort in the back of my car. She asked me to visit her at her place a week or two later. She'd sent the children away to friends for the weekend. I drove over from the University to the town where she lived on Friday afternoon. She didn't let me out of her bed until the following Sunday. I mean it. I only got up to take a piss or use the shower. She fed me steak and eggs in bed to keep my strength up. I wasn't complaining; it was every young man's fantasy.

Jane had inverted nipples and she encouraged me to suck them out. She loved having her nipples sucked and swore she could come from that stimulus alone. She taught me how to eat her pussy, showed me the divine mysteries of the clitoris. She helped me to control my own orgasm and helped me to learn how to make sex last. Every lover I have ever had since Jane should club together to raise a statue in her honour.

I suppose the overriding lesson I really learned from Jane was that sex can have many moods. It can be funny, passionate, slow, gentle, raunchy or what-have-you. There are no rules. We did it every way and in every possible mood or combination of moods over the next few months. I didn't love her but I was crazy about her. It was one of the few truly reciprocal

got an eager young man with bags of stamina who was willing to be moulded. It was never going to last but it finished without any trauma or regrets. We simply had each taken from the affair what we both needed. When we stopped needing it, we drifted apart. There were no recriminations. I think she found someone to be a father to her children and I soon put my new expertise to good use with a fellow student.

I think word of my prowess must have spread throughout the female contingent at the University. I never had to look too hard to find someone to share my bed. It was largely mechanical but nonetheless fun for that. I wasn't looking for true love and, in the most part, neither were the girls. There were one or two sticky moments when some girl or other would confuse the experience of her first orgasm with falling in love and once or twice it happened the other way about. I would proclaim undying love and the object of my affections would disappear rapidly over the horizon. Nobody got really hurt; I reserved my first experience of that particular emotion for Steph. What staggered me was how Angela had healed that wound so fast. I had thought it terminal. Angela appeared in my life like balm from Gilead. OK, I accept the circumstances were unusual and we were rather thrown together by events. It didn't matter. I loved her and I was healed.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning began with a Council of War. The Chechens appeared to have withdrawn from the game, at least for the present. What we were left with was the colonel's papers. The theft of the bronze shipment weakened our position a bit but we weren't looking for admissible evidence. That was a job for the police. We were in the dark as to how they would now proceed. The talk went round in circles and led nowhere. The colonel was the most gloomy. He had pinned all his hopes on British Intelligence. Swann of Special Branch hadn't been too encouraging. Elsewhere, the news was bleak. The main story on the bulletins that morning was the car bomb that had killed Rollo Yeates and his two companions, now identified as 'members of the security services.' I thought the Chechens, assuming it was them, might have done us a favour. Murdering three men to keep the story quiet and then trying to kill us would surely prove something big was afoot.

According to the News stories, the police were pointing the finger at some splinter group from the IRA that had 'claimed responsibility' as the saying goes. Claimed responsibility – admitted their guilt, more like; but not on this occasion. There was no Irish connection in the colonel's lists. This seemed to be a piece of opportunistic publicity seeking on the part of some murderous bunch of thugs. Nothing made any sense. We wondered aloud how the opposition had cottoned onto the bronze shipment in the first place. We didn't have any answers for that one either.

"We need to find that bronze," Liam said after a deal of further aimless discussion. "If the Chechens took it, where would they take it? It's not small, you couldn't just hide it in the boot of the car or something."

The colonel then let fly a volley of excited Estonian. Angela translated:

"My father says that they would have to have had help, need contacts here in England. We should look at his list and see if we can see someone who might fit."

Of course, once she'd said it, it was obvious. The Chechens needed a base of operations. Mickey Cornell couldn't have been their only helper in the UK. He wouldn't have had the resources on his own. We needed to find someone with access to storage facilities. Someone who was wealthy and had underworld connections or, at very least, was known to be unscrupulous.

We pored over the colonel's lists and identified four or five who might fit the bill. Two were Asian businessmen who had come to prominence in a scandal a couple of years previously. They had been discovered to have links with Palestinian terrorist organisations. They would certainly be up for something like an Islamic Bomb but Niall thought they would be under surveillance; they were too obvious, somehow. The colonel's notes showed them as

having helped finance the project but with no other involvement. We decided to discount them for now. Another man was a known head of an organised crime gang that operated out of South London. His involvement in the affair was suspected rather than proven. There was a large question mark against him because he was avowedly racist and unlikely to support Middle Eastern causes. On the other hand, there was a lot of money involved, which would certainly tempt him.

I had a thought.

“Look,” I said, “I’ll bet Special Branch are doing the same as us. I can’t believe it would be anyone obvious. Let’s have a look for the least likely looking ones. They’d still have to be rich, of course, but those on record as having the type of places that could be used are bound to get a visit from the police. I think this calls for some lateral thinking.”

We went back to the list and came up with three names. One was a senior civil servant, one was an MP and the third was a newspaper tycoon of dubious origins. All three had become involved, according to the notes, simply for money. They were linked together and, more importantly, all had the possibility of being linked to Michael Cornell. We needed to find out more about them. Information in the public domain was one thing but we needed the hidden stuff. I thought immediately of Bernie. If anyone would know how to get the dirt on someone, Bernie would; and if he didn’t personally then I was willing to bet that he had the contacts.

I called him and explained what I wanted.

“You’re fishing in bloody deep waters, Mr Booth,” he told me. “I don’t know about this Travers geezer (Travers was the civil servant) but Charles Brownlock, MP, is a right nasty bastard. And as for Renfrew, you’ve only got to read that rag he calls a paper to know what he’s about. Bloody thing ain’t nothing but porn and attacks on decent people. If you go after him and he finds out, your name will be splashed all over that scandal sheet. Probably accuse you of cheating the taxpayer and throw in some allegations about child-abuse or drugs for good measure. You must remember what he did to Mr Young?”

I did remember but somehow it didn’t matter what happened to my reputation. Three weeks before it would have bothered me. It didn’t any more. The situation was too awful to let small things like personal reputation get in the way. Anyway, if he were involved, he wouldn’t be in any position to blacken anybody’s name for quite some time to come, if all went according to plan.

Bernie agreed that he would do some ‘devilling.’ He promised to get back to me as soon as he had something but said I wasn’t to hold my breath. I reported the conversation back to the others and we agreed to let things take their course. There was always the chance that

Special Branch would find the shipment before Bernie or his pals dug up anything interesting. All we could do was ‘hurry up and wait’ – as the saying goes.

Angela, Bill and I walked the dogs. Bill was determined to get Magic to act like a proper retriever but he had little luck. I told him Magic was simply a disgrace to his breed. He was simply too daft to get the hang of it. He treated the whole thing as a huge game. He’d fetch the stick Bill hurled far out into the sea but as soon as Bill approached him to pick it up, Magic would grab it again and be off down the beach. It was hilarious to watch. Bill was getting more and more and frustrated. Just at the point we thought Bill was ready to explode, Magic would drop the stick at his feet. He wanted Bill to throw it again and start off another round of ‘tease the human.’ Angela and I fell about laughing. The look of controlled fury on Bill’s face contrasted perfectly with Magic’s daft grin. He has this habit of curling his upper lip back to expose his teeth. It’s supposed to be a sign of canine intelligence but I reckon Magic was the exception that proved the rule.

It was a dull, dampish morning with curtains of rain sweeping across the flat grey sea. All the rain seemed to be falling a mile or two offshore so we were spared a soaking. Even so, the damp was penetrating and with it came the cold. We were glad to be back in the warm and we shook out our coats and settled ourselves by the fire. It was far too early to expect to hear from Bernie and there wasn’t much else we could do until we had the missing information. Angela decided to start work on a new sculpture so I went along to watch her. It is one thing hearing a process described but quite another to see it put into action.

She started to make some sketches of Trotsky. She sketched quickly. She never drew the whole dog, just portions of his anatomy; the curve of his leg, the line of his shoulders and the like. Then she did his face and captured him perfectly. One never thinks of sculptors as being draftsmen but she had real talent. I found myself staring at Trotsky’s face on the paper. She had caught his expression perfectly, slightly disdainful but alert. The artist’s model wandered over as to have a look for himself. He put his head on Angela’s knee and gazed at her soulfully. After a minute or two of ear-scratching he decided his beauty had been sufficiently recognised and had received sufficient compliments for him to go back to his position away from the fire. In all truth he had probably just got too hot but it is easy to ascribe human reasoning to a dog like Trotsky, he’s so damned bright.

Once Angela had made enough sketches, we went through to the studio and she began to make the clay model that would eventually form the mould. She worked quickly at first, throwing great handfuls of clay into position and roughly shaping them with her hands. Eventually she had a Trotsky-sized mass of wet clay that was only very roughly the shape of a dog. Now things slowed as she shaped and scraped until the outline of a husky was

unmistakeable. Suddenly she said something in Estonian that didn't need translation and crumpled the whole thing back into a lump of shapeless clay. She smiled at me ruefully.

"It was the wrong proportions."

She started over, moistening the clay and her hands from a wooden tub of water she kept nearby for the purpose.

It was obviously very physical work and soon beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead and upper lip. She paused long enough to strip off her sweater and continued. She was wearing a sleeveless sort of vest under the sweater and now I could see the play of her muscles as she kneaded and pounded at the clay. It was a fascinating sight and I was utterly enrapt. Once more a recognisable husky appeared out of the clay. It was almost as if there was a real dog inside, pushing his way out through the clinging earth.

Angela's face was a study in concentration. She didn't frown as some do. Her expression was grave, her eyes focussed and lively. I felt I could almost see the force flowing out of her hands into the model, bending the wet clay to her will. At length she was satisfied. She had produced a replica of Trotsky in size and outline. Now she began the delicate task of sculpting the detail. She worked with what appeared to be a cross between a spatula and a scalpel. Soon I could see Trotsky's face appearing under her hands. It was perfect. She captured the flare of his nostrils and the way his blunt muzzle sort of blended into the rest of his broad face. She worked faster; the clay was beginning to dry. I knew this was the critical time.

We had been in the studio for nearly six hours without exchanging more than a handful of words. The time had flown by. I had risen only once to turn on the lights as dusk fell. I heard the others making dinner but felt no hunger myself. I was utterly absorbed watching the woman I loved doing the thing she was created for. At long last she stood back and plunged her hands in the water butt to wash away the clay. Her face was streaked in sweat and her arms must have been aching like the devil but she showed no signs of slacking.

"Now we must fire the model," she said and strode across to the electric kiln to bring it up to the required temperature.

Her skin was glowing and her eyes danced with a bright and feverish light. She was exalted, lit by the creative fire within. Strangely, I didn't feel excluded. I felt a part of something wonderful and, to me, utterly mysterious. I had watched some ancient esoteric rite, had seen the goddess summoned and the sacrifice performed. It was, in short, like magic. Angela stalked the model she had made. She stared from all angles, moving closer once or twice to administer the finest of finishing touches. At last she pronounced herself satisfied and asked me to assist in moving the model on its specially designed little trolley into the kiln.

We eased the model into the kiln and she gently shut the door.

“Even the draft from that door can disturb it,” she said. The firing was to be slow at a low temperature.

If the heat was too fierce, we ran the risk that the clay would shatter or be too brittle.

“Now we wait.”

Angela smiled at me and came to rest her head against my chest. I could feel the tension in her back and shoulders so I made her sit in the chair from where I had watched her and began to massage her. Her singlet was soaked in perspiration and she stripped it off. I used my fingers to prod and pummel the knotted muscles and watched her visibly begin to unwind. Her fair skin was smooth and silky to the touch.

She got up once to dim the lights and then slid back into the chair.

“Where were we?”

She murmured dreamily and looked back at me, her eyes soft now, the fierce light dimmed to a residual glow. The depth of my feeling for her consumed me, could there ever have been a more wonderful creature? I moved around the chair and encouraged her gently to lie back. I began to work on her shoulders at the front and then switched my attention to the corded muscles of her stomach. It was easy to understand now how she remained so firm and toned. The effort expended had been more than Steph could have managed in a month of workouts. “My legs, also, Martin, please,” she said and obliged by lifting her hips so I could ease off her jeans. I went and locked the studio door and returned to start work on her in earnest.

I started at her feet, manipulating each of her toes and massaging the soft balls of flesh beneath each one in turn. She sighed dreamily as I squeezed the insteps of her feet and stroked my thumbs over the soles of her feet. Then I took each leg in turn. I rubbed her calf muscles and kneaded my hands deep into their softness. She was utterly relaxed now, looking back at me with hooded eyes. When my hands reached her thighs, her legs fell open and I worked my way into the soft tissue of her inner thighs. She shifted her bottom forwards in the chair and grinned at me. I leaned up to kiss her lightly on the nose.

“Don’t stop now,” she said.

I used a lighter touch to stroke her thighs and gently rubbed the backs of her legs, lifting each one in turn. I was conscious now of the musky scent of her body. Little tufts of pubic hair were showing each side of the crotch of her panties and I made a show of tucking them back in, not quite but almost, touching her sex in the process. We were both now well aware of the game and were playing it with all our might. Her eyes had a misty cast now and a languorous smile played about her full lips; she moistened them with a flick of her tongue and

just showed above the waistband. Then I worked on her abdominal muscles, gently pressing my thumbs into her yielding flesh. I leaned forwards and flicked my tongue into the sweet hollow of her bellybutton. She sighed deeply and stroked my hair as I trailed kisses over her stomach and chest, pulling up short of her swelling breasts that seemed to be engaged in battle with the straining fabric of her bra.

Skipping over her bra, I kissed the swelling upper slopes of her breasts and nibbled softly at her neck. I climbed her body like a vine, nuzzled her ears and then our mouths sought each other and we kissed slowly and deeply, our tongues wrestling and competing. I slipped my hands behind her and, after a brief fumble, unhooked her bra. She eased it off with a shrugging motion. Her nipples stood out proudly. I wet my finger and circled it round and round her areola. Her breasts seem to swell visibly under my hands and she arched her back to offer more of them to my touch. Still I stayed away from her nipples and placed a line of silken kisses on the underside of each breast. Each time I would approach her nipples but shy away at the last minute, giving the barest flick with the tip of my tongue.

Her skin had the tangy taste of salt and I covered every exposed inch with little licks and kisses. I could tell I was really getting to her and her hips began a slow undulating dance of their own. I made a sudden grab then and captured both her breasts in my two hands, stroking my thumbs over the rock-hard tips and she gasped. I caught her breast in my mouth and sucked in as much as I could cram into my eager mouth, flicking her nipple with rapid strokes of my tongue. At the same time I pushed her panties to one side and slipped first one and then two fingers into her wetness. She bucked against my hand and I rotated it back and forth against the swollen nub of her clit. All the while I was sucking on one breast and cupping the other in my free hand. She started to come and I dived between her legs to suck on her clitoris. This drove her over the top and she grabbed my head, pulling my face hard into the junction of her thighs.

She seemed to be coming non-stop. Her hips were rearing and gyrating furiously and her fingers tore at my hair so hard it made my eyes water. At length, she pushed me away.

“No more, please, I can’t stand any more, my Martin,”

Her skin was flushed and there were bright pink patches at her throat and on her cheeks. Her eyes were wild and unfocussed and her hair was matted with a fresh batch of perspiration. I don’t think I have ever felt so pleased with myself. There is something totally marvellous about pleasing one’s lover to the point of delirium. I lay across her body as she came down, tracing kisses up and down her ribcage until she giggled.

“Ah, that was wonderful,” she said. “Now it is my turn to drive you mad!”

I shook my head. I felt no desire at all for myself just then. I had had my satisfaction

“Later, my love,” I told her, “That was enough for me just now.”

And if it hadn’t been, the beautiful smile she gave me then was more than enough for any man.

Chapter Fourteen

We waited all the next day for Bernie's call. There was nothing on the News, no big stories of mass arrests or a conspiracy uncovered. The papers were still running with the car bomb story although there wasn't much new to report. They had discounted the claims of the IRA splinter group and fingers were pointing towards Bin Laden and his gang. At least they were now fishing in the right pond even if they were still wide of the mark. What we were dealing with was even out of Bin Laden's league; it had to be State-sponsored in a big way.

I went through the lists again with Angela to translate those entries in Estonian, Russian and German. The likely picture that emerged was of a core of individuals at the centre of the plot with a lot of others who had been suborned to look the other way or otherwise collude with the schemers. Some probably didn't even know what they were involved in. A minor official on a border post somewhere paid \$5000 to look the other way when certain lorries passed. He probably thought it was contraband of some sort but wouldn't dream he was turning a blind eye to the deaths of millions.

Apart from the central characters, it wasn't easy to see what many of those listed had to bring to the party. Our three prime suspects were a case in point. Perhaps the civil servant could provide false documents to allow stuff move cross border without too many questions but the MP and the tycoon didn't seem to offer much at all. We puzzled over this for a while until Liam had the idea of looking on the web to see if we could gain any clues from what these two posted on their official web-sites. I'm hopeless when it comes to computers but Liam and Niall don't go anywhere without a laptop. They plugged into the telephone line and we had the usual www – worldwide wait – while they searched. Renfrew's newspaper had its own site and we trawled back through its archived stories. These were mostly prurient celebrity tittle-tattle and attacks on the Government, The Europeans, illegal immigrants and single mothers. Most of the site was devoted to softcore images of vapid-looking naked girls with surgically enhanced breasts. A real intellectual, our Mr Renfrew.

He also had his own web page where he rambled on about his philosophy and the need for freedom of the Press. It didn't tell us a thing as to why he should be involved but his name was on the list. Charles Brownlock, MP had a strident site. It was full of the usual politicians' rubbish but with the slant of always portraying Charlie Boy in the best possible light. The most interesting thing to us was a section that contained transcripts of all his speeches. We read the turgid maunderings of this spiteful little man without too much enthusiasm. He had one cause, it appeared: to trample on those who made money. Profit was the root of all evil. He was rabidly anti-capitalist and unashamedly socialist. That wouldn't make him too popular in his Party, these days.

Travers, the civil servant, had one of those free-hosted sites with pictures of his prize-winning begonias or something. I'm no gardener but Travers was an absolute fanatic. Nothing political or inflammatory there. They seemed strange bedfellows, the right-wing newspaperman, the left-wing politician and the begonia grower. I couldn't see a link for the life of me. It was Niall who found it. He flicked back and forth between the various sites. His face was a study in concentration. Finally, he turned to us with three pages cascaded side by side.

"There, you see?"

I had to confess I did not and the others looked equally nonplussed.

"The lapel buttons," he said. They all have some little flower badge in their lapels."

We all stared hard at the photographs on the websites. Each man had a formal picture of himself in a business suit, smiling at the camera. Each had a little emblem in their lapel. It looked like a carnation or something similar. Angela's father told us that he he'd seen this badge before. He'd noticed it a couple of times being worn by other people on his list. It hadn't been worn by everyone and the meaning escaped him. We tried searching under 'carnation' or 'pink' but nothing helpful showed up on any of the search engines. There is an old saying: 'once is chance, twice is coincidence and three times is enemy action.' The little flower obviously had some meaning. We checked out a few more on the list who had websites. We found two others who displayed the badge in photographs of themselves. One was a German politician and the other an American radical who had made a name for himself for attacking big business and tying up major corporations in complicated lawsuits. The German didn't seem to have done anything much more than get himself elected and was pretty anonymous even in his own country. It was hard to see nay connection between these five other than the little emblems.

"Could it be an international charity?" I asked.

Liam shrugged. "If it is," he said, "It's bloody ineffective if none of us recognises its logo."

"I think it is some sort of sign," Angela said, "it helps them recognise each other."

Liam agreed. "And if anyone asks, it's a charity or political club or a branch of the bloody Lions or something. It makes sense but it is insecure."

"Not necessarily." Niall disagreed. "If there is absolutely no other connection. But it doesn't conform to any normal pattern of the terrorist cell, I grant you."

Even I understood that. Terrorists usually organise themselves in such a way that each little group doesn't know any other little group. That way, if one lot get arrested, the damage is limited to that cell alone. It's classic Che Guevara.

I dialled his home number and he answered on the second ring. He didn't have too much to report but he had found out, through a contact in Land Registry, that Charles Brownlock had purchased a small farm near Southwold in Suffolk. He had bought the place a couple of years ago but it wasn't listed as either of his addresses and wasn't remotely near his inner-city constituency. We were all immediately struck by the proximity to Felixstowe.

"Right," said Niall. "I'm going to take a look. Bill and Steve, you come with me. Liam, you and the colonel stay here with Martin and Angela."

Nobody argued but just as they were getting ready to depart in the Range Rover, I pulled Niall to one side.

"This has gone way too far, Niall. If you find anything, I want you to promise me that you'll call Swann at Special Branch and let them run with it. I feel bad enough about getting you and Liam involved. All right. I know we're friends and I know you think you owe me. Consider all debts more than paid in full. And please, be bloody careful!"

"Martin, there are old soldiers and there are bold soldiers. There are no old, bold soldiers. We'll simply check the place out and if there is anything amiss, I promise I call the boys in blue."

With that, they left. I still felt uneasy but could see no alternative. We couldn't go to Swann with what were, let's face it, just a bunch of suppositions and conjecture. Angela and I walked the dogs along the beach. We held hands and talked quietly about what the future might bring once this was all over.

"I don't want to stay here afterwards," Angela said. "It will never be the same. I felt at peace here but now that is gone."

"You could come to London," I said.

She smiled. "Where would I work? It is too expensive in London. I could not afford a studio and Frau Meyer is already too generous."

"We can sell my house, move out of town a bit and buy somewhere that has the room for a studio. Somewhere with a garden and green fields nearby to walk the dogs in."

"What are you saying, my Martin, that you would like us to live together?"

"Yes. I would like very much for us to live together. If you want to, that is."

"I think I would like that very much, too."

"Then it's settled. As soon as we get back, I'll put the house on the market and we start looking for somewhere. It will need to be near a mainline so I can get to London easily. Maybe in Kent or Sussex."

"It will need to be near a river or a lake. Magic must have his swims!"

"Of course. We should be able to get somewhere with a good-sized garden so they can

We walked on, planning our new life together. I could work from home quite a bit, so we would need a study. Angela would need a big room or out-building that we could convert to a studio. There would have to be nice walks nearby and a good train service within easy reach. We were both aware that something was hovering in the air between us, unspoken but implied. My mouth went dry and my stomach turned over. I turned towards her. Her eyes were huge and she licked her lips, a quick, nervous gesture.

“I, uh, shall we make it official?”

“Official?”

“Um, I mean to say, er, that is. Oh shit! Angela Sable, will you marry me?”

She didn’t say a word. She stared at me with those huge eyes brimming with unshed tears and gripped both my hands tightly in hers. Suddenly she burst out with a bright peal of delighted laughter. “If my father will permit it, my Martin!” She flung herself against me, rocking with mirth. Tears streamed down her cheeks but her face was alive and radiant with happiness.

“When we were small, Vika and I would sit and discuss who we would we marry. When my father heard us, he would growl. ‘I will not permit any daughter of mine to marry any man who does not pass the TEST’ he would say. But he would never tell us what this ‘test’ was. ‘You will see when the time is right,’ was all he would ever tell us.’ Now I will find out!”

We walked back to the cottage. The colonel had been watching us all the while and he rose out of the evening gloom like an apparition. Angela started to tell him but he held up his hand. I could see that he was trying hard not to smile and keep his face stony but he couldn’t keep the merry twinkle out of his eyes.

“Colonel,” I said, “I suspect that you understand English very well, I have asked Angelika to be my wife and would like your blessing on this marriage.”

The old soldier stared at me. “Why you think I speak English?” he said in a slow, accented voice that sounded like brick rubble sliding down a metal chute.

“Sometimes you seem to have understood things before Angela finished the translation,” I said.

He nodded. “I don’t speak good but some I understand. I speak now to Angelika. She say my words to you.”

He fired off some rapid Estonian. Angela gasped and started to argue but he cut off with a gesture of his hand. He repeated something very slowly and she shrugged.

“My father says that you must prove yourself worthy of marrying his daughter. He says, to do this, you must beat him. I try to tell him that you are not a soldier; you do not fight. He says he understands this. He says you will know what to do. I don’t understand.”

“Tell him I’ll beat him at Chess,” I said, “Tell him I’ll wipe the board with him.”

She looked at me as if I was mad but the colonel had understood ‘Chess’ at least and was grinning broadly.

“I don’t have a Chess set,” Angela wailed.

“I don’t need one,” I replied. “Pawn to king four.”

Throughout my schooldays, I had been a Chess fanatic. I had spent hours ‘playing’ without a board with a similar fanatic. Of course, when you’re playing in the middle of a Latin Lesson, you don’t have a board so you play in your head. It takes a huge amount of practice but I’d had plenty.

The colonel followed me for about five or six moves and then, like most who haven’t played this way before, he lost it. I had him in checkmate after eleven moves. He started to protest but I repeated each of our moves to him verbatim. He laughed and shook his head. Then he shook my hand.

“Clever man. You have Angelika and good chance!”

“Good Luck,” Angela corrected him, “In English, you say Good Luck!”

He grinned. “Good Luck, Good Luck!”

He then spouted another burst of Estonian that had Angela blushing crimson. I asked for a translation but she refused. Her father roared with laughter. Then he leaned forward and kissed her on both cheeks and said something in a low, serious voice. Angela nodded, muttered a reply and gave him a shy smile. She turned to me.

“My father asks if you make me happy, if you are gentle with me. I told him you are the gentlest man in the world.”

She turned back and spoke some more with her father and they walked off together, his arm draped protectively over her shoulders. He looked back and beckoned for me to follow. Placing his other arm over my shoulder he smiled at me with great warmth. His big hand squeezed my shoulder and he spoke softly in Estonian, leaving Angela to translate.

“I have not been a good father. I was not a good husband. I spent my life as a soldier playing men’s games. I am happy you will be my son. You are not a soldier and will not always be leaving Angelika as I did. One daughter is dead. I thought that I had lost this one as well. Now it is time to end this thing that I began so you may marry and live your lives in peace. Peace is the job of the soldier, not war. You have had to be like a soldier and I am sorry for this. We must fight for a little time more. We must win or there will be no peace for you. There will be no peace for anyone. You must put aside any thoughts of tomorrow while it is still today. You both have my blessing. I think you are good for my Angelika. You love her and wish to look after her?”

“I know my daughter. We have grown apart in recent times but still I know Angelika. I saw the way she was with you, saw that she loved you and you loved her. This is good. This is a good thing for a father to see. I wish her mother could see it too. But now we must be ready to fight. Do you understand?”

I understood all right. He was telling me that we mustn't get distracted, that there was still danger out there. I didn't need reminding.

Chapter Fifteen

The colonel must have been prescient because that was the night all hell broke loose. Not that we were involved, at least, not then. I got the story from Niall and, later, Commander Swann. Some of it was published in the newspaper accounts but an awful lot got suppressed by the authorities. The Establishment looks after its own and I reckon there were too many red faces in high places. I doubt even that we ever learned the full extent of the conspiracy.

Niall, Bill and Steve had made their way to Southwold. They had located Brownlock's farm and parked the car about a mile away where it wouldn't readily be seen. They had gone in under cover of darkness on foot. Bill said it was just like the old days, a three-man patrol in hostile territory. The farm was in darkness but they had the feeling it was occupied. They lay up under cover and watched for about two hours. Patience had its reward. A door in one of the barns opened and spilled a patch of light out into the farmyard. Niall was looking through a nightsight and he thought that the man who emerged from the barn was Brownlock himself. He looked furtive, closing the door quickly and hurrying away out of sight behind the house. Moments later, they heard a car start and a large Mercedes crept out of the farm with its lights off. It negotiated the farm track in darkness and only switched on headlights once it was on the public road. Then it speeded up and drove off in the direction of Southwold. They made out only person in the car.

After Brownlock had gone, those who remained seemed to relax and got sloppy. The barn door opened again and this time stayed open. Three men came out. One of them lit a cigarette and Niall could make out the submachine gun he had slung over his shoulder as he stooped over the flame. They had found the Chechens. Niall stayed where he was but sent Bill and Steve to circle the farm buildings. They were better at silent movement than he was and he wanted to keep an eye on the barn. They could make out at least two more figures inside, through the open door. Bill went off to the left and Steve to the right. Niall swears he lost sight of them before they had covered twenty yards. Steve came back first. He'd discovered a Dutch barn – one of those things with a curved roof supported by steel stanchions but no walls – it was full of hay. This struck them as odd because there was no other sign that this was a working farm.

They waited for Bill to come back. He had found a sentry and 'taken care of him.' The three of them then moved around the perimeter to the Dutch barn. The hay concealed a shipping container! Niall said there were no prizes for guessing that this was the shipment of bronze that had disappeared from Felixstowe. The container was still on a road trailer but there was no sign of the tractor unit that had hauled it. The customs seals were broken so it

had been opened. They decided to check on the contents before informing Swann. As Niall said, there wasn't much point in sending for the cavalry if the thing was empty.

They slipped inside the container and pulled the door to behind them. Inside, they found the piles of bronze ingots. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed but they started to go through the piles, looking for those with the foundry mark stamped lengthwise. Sure enough, in the second pile they examined, they found four such ingots. Niall decided to pull out then and send in Swann and his men. It was too late. Steve opened the container door and stepped through. The night exploded into violence.

Steve was almost cut in half by a hail of machinegun fire before he was halfway through the door. He was dead before his body crashed to ground. Niall and Bill threw themselves behind a stack of bronze bars and readied their weapons. They couldn't see much so Bill hurled heavy bronze bars at the door until it stood open. Niall called the police on his mobile and got ready to die. He said he was convinced that their 'number was up.' The Chechens tried to rush them. Bill and Niall fired at the gun flashes. They certainly hit a couple and the Chechens withdrew. Someone threw a grenade at the container and it exploded on the roof. It sounded like the clap of doom to the two men inside. Their ears rang and their senses reeled. Bill loosed off a short burst 'to keep the bastards honest.' Niall saw them bringing up some kind of rocket launcher. He shouted a warning to Bill and the pair dived behind the stacks of ingots.

They were only just in time as the projectile struck beside the door and exploded with stunning force. The noise made the previous grenade explosion seem like a tap on a child's drum by comparison. Bill and Niall were completely deafened. The shock would have disabled most people but those two were pros. The Chechens followed up with another wild rush. Once again they had to retreat as the two ex-soldiers poured a concentrated fire into the running figures. Niall signalled to Bill, neither could hear a thing still so they couldn't talk to each other. They made a dash for the door and flung themselves out. One rolled left and the other right, firing as they went.

As Niall told us later, they were fighting mad by now. They got to their feet and ran at the enemy, switching clips as they went. It was over quickly. Bill took a round to the shoulder and another in the fleshy part of his calf. Niall had seven bullet holes in his parka but was, by some miracle, unhurt. Two Chechens remained alive but they were both badly wounded. Much of the damage had been done when one of the terrorists was hit in the process of trying to throw another grenade. It had slipped from his grasp and exploded among his fellows. "Typical bloody amateurs," according to Bill. Niall applied field dressings to Bill's wounds and fed him a couple of morphine tablets. He then treated the wounded Chechens. After all,

the various buildings. The Chechens had obviously used the lighted barn as accommodation for he found two more inside, both badly wounded but having obviously received medical treatment. These must have been hit during the attack on the cottage. The farmhouse itself was almost empty. Only one room was furnished and this looked like it had been their operations centre. Maps of Eastern England hung on the walls and there were a couple of computer terminals. The room smelt strongly of stale tobacco smoke.

Niall then got Bill and the other wounded men into the barn. He made them as comfortable as he could. Bill was in good spirits but light-headed from the combined effects of blood loss and morphine. Niall gathered up Steve's body and laid him out in one of the empty rooms in the farmhouse. Then the reaction set in and he began to shake. He threw up a couple of times and then went outside, breathing deeply to try and clear his head. After a while, he phoned Swann again. The Special Branch man was approaching Southwold by helicopter. An armed response unit had been summoned from Ipswich and they would be there soon. Swann asked Niall to illuminate a landing area. He gathered piles of straw and laid them out in an 'H' pattern on a large open area of grass he supposed to be a paddock. He doused the straw in diesel oil and set fire to the pattern. He watched the helicopter land by the light of the flickering flames.

Swann hurried from the helicopter, head bent and his coat flapping in the downdraft. A dozen heavily armed Special Branch officers quickly followed him. They rigged up portable floodlights while Swann took Niall into the house. Niall told him everything we had surmised, how we had identified the farmhouse and all that happened since the three of them arrived there. Swann wasn't best pleased and kept demanding to know why we hadn't called him earlier. He'd been wasting his time in South London. Niall got mad at him and him and spat back that it was Swann who had said he couldn't act without evidence. Now he had all the bloody evidence he'd ever need.

All the wounded and Steve's body were taken by helicopter to a nearby RAF base.

"No need to hang out our dirty washing in public," Swann said.

He walked away from Niall and boarded the helicopter. Niall sat alone in the farmhouse 'operations room.' Reaction set in and he started to shake uncontrollably and wept. The task force from Ipswich had arrived by then and took over the investigation on the ground. Niall was asked to write an account of everything that happened since taking that fateful telephone call from me on Saturday morning. He finished his statement and slipped away. He walked back to the Range Rover, got in and drove to the nearest pub. He told us later it was though his brain completely shut down. He was going to call us but first he needed a drink. One drink became five or six and then a dozen or more. He floated away from consciousness on a sea on

Bushmills. The pub landlord sighed and helped to a bedroom for the night. ‘Another bloody drunken Irishman,’ he thought and left Niall sprawled, fully clothed, on the narrow bed.

Meanwhile Swann had been very busy indeed. As soon as the helicopter had landed at the RAF base, he had dashed into the communications centre and demanded a secure line to London. He had then spoken at length with New Scotland Yard and with the duty officer at MI5. They must have loved him! Anyway, as a result of Swann’s phone calls, beds were emptied all over Europe. Weary police and security personnel dragged themselves to their various Head Quarters and almost two hundred arrests were made, if you believe the newspapers.

In the cottage in Norfolk, we were totally unaware of what was happening. Angela celebrated our ‘engagement’ with a bottle of ‘the widow’ and she got very giggly as the vintage champagne went straight to her head. Liam and the colonel drank our health in mineral water. Liam was gloomy all evening and cursed himself for letting Niall go off without him. His mood was infectious so Angela and I left him to it and went down to the studio to check out how the model was doing. The kiln was on a timer so it had switched off hours before but the process demanded that the fired clay was allowed to cool at its own rate and couldn’t be moved until it was ready.

Angela pronounced herself satisfied and said that the next day she could begin the delicate task of covering the model with a fine, even layer of wax. She promised me hard labour, mixing sand and old motor oil for the mould. Then she would heat the bronze into the mould, melting the wax in the process. The wax would run out of prepared drainage channels and the bronze would replace it. Once the bronze had cooled in its turn, she could extract the model, which by then would be inside the bronze casting. She would simply shatter it to remove it; she produced ‘one off’ pieces and would have no further use for it. Then her work would start again, burnishing and refining the raw piece until it was the finished article.

I have probably given the impression that Angela worked exclusively in bronze. Although that was her main medium, it was not exclusively so. She worked in other metals and stone as well but her favourite was always bronze. That metal never seemed cold to Angela. Somehow, she imbued each piece with life and movement. The rich colour of the metal added to the impression of something vibrant. I could only stand back and admire. Lacking any talent whatsoever in that direction, I cannot do justice in any words of mine to the creative process that she engaged in. I have made it sound as though it is nothing more than a simple matter of physics; of one substance having a lower melting point than another. It was much, much more than that. You’d have to witness her at work to understand.

It was around midnight by the time she was finished and satisfied that all was well. It had taken over two hours to extract the model from the kiln and clean and prepare it to Angela's demanding standards. I found myself looking at a life-sized statue of Trotsky. It was a bit like looking at a photographic negative. The clay lacked that special quality that bronze brings. It was Trotsky to the life but life was the one thing that was missing. It must have showed on my face for Angela gave me a hug.

"It looks like his funeral mask," I said.

She laughed and agreed. "At this stage, it does not live, it is true. The clay is dull. You will see; bronze will bring fire to him. Then it will come awake."

I knew she was right but it didn't stop me from giving a vague shiver as if someone had walked over my grave.

Liam was extremely anxious by the time we came back into the kitchen. He was trying to disguise it but he couldn't sit still. By contrast, the colonel was like one of Angela's bronzes, immobile but filled with blazing power. There was still no word from Niall and the other two. We sat around discussing all the plausible reasons for not contacting us but every one sounded hollow. After a while, Angela and I went to bed. I heard the colonel and Liam discussing in Russian as to who should take the first watch. Even without speaking the language I could guess that Angela's father was urging Liam to get some rest while Liam was protesting that he couldn't possibly sleep so the colonel should go ahead. Immovable object meets irresistible force. I gave up worrying about who would prevail. I trusted either one to keep us safe.

We made love very tenderly that night. It was almost a transcendental experience. I had the sense that we became very much a single being. A rich aura of warmth surrounded us. Our love was a liquid essence that flowed between us. Love is a deep mystery that only the initiated may understand. That night, we proved ourselves to be higher adepts of the rites. It wasn't our most athletic or gymnastic display, it didn't need to be. There was a quintessential purity about our lovemaking that made us weep with the utter sweetness of it. We didn't need pyrotechnics. Angela transported me to places I have never been, whose existence I had never guessed. Yet it was soft and slow, dreamlike at times and breathless at others, when her orgasms rolled and crashed like great ocean breakers.

The darkness of the night itself had the quality of warm velvet. Our bed was an island was in a sea of dreams and hopes for the future. At times, when my brain was tumbling and spinning and my body poured out its seed into her, I could catch glimpses of our coming life together, or so it seemed. The magic was strong that night. It hummed and crackled between us. Unicorns pranced and dragons flew and fauns danced in the meadows of Norfolk. Time

I could breathe her scent. Her very presence consumed every conscious thought and seared them from my brain. For a while, we didn't notice that a thunderstorm had stolen up the coast. Once we realised, we pulled back the curtains and revelled in the display. Angela's body looked unearthly in the harsh white flash of the lightning. I saw her as a sprite, ethereal and fascinating in the oldest sense of that word. The smooth roundness of her buttocks and the curve of her breasts; the slightly convex swell of her belly falling towards the central altar at the junction of her thighs seemed to be dusted with a phosphorescent glow. It was as though she was lit from within by the love that burned there. And I knew that love was for me. My heart swelled in my chest so that I could hardly breathe. My vision swam and I caught my breath. She looked so lovely that it hurt. A physical longing consumed me that had nothing at all to do with bodies and lust. I yearned to be joined to her, soul merging with soul and mind with mind. I wanted to see through her eyes, feel with her senses the loving invader penetrating her, filling her and finding its release.

It was a long time later that we finally fell asleep, satiated and happy.

Chapter Sixteen

The thunderstorm had gone by morning and patches of blue sky were doing their best to pull apart the low drape of cloud that hugged the sea. We walked along the beach again though I swear we left no footprints. Some of the magic from the previous night seemed to linger about us still. It may sound callous, but I wasn't particularly worried about Niall. Angela made me feel immortal – that protection had to include my friends. It sounds lame now but I really felt that. Of course, there was no justification and anyone who wasn't consumed by the madness that had seized me could see it. Even Angela, a fellow traveller in never-never land, was concerned. I dismissed her fears with a lofty "If anything's wrong we'd have heard by now."

I'd missed the early morning News when we went out so when I did turn on the radio on our return, the main story had really gathered a head of steam. The clipped matter-of-fact tones of the BBC announcer seemed fantastically at odds with the story he was relating.

"Police forces across Europe have made hundreds of arrests following what appears have been to a plot by international terrorists. Sources in the Home Office have indicated that this is the result of an intensive investigation by the Security Services and Special Branch. Special Branch officers have made a number of arrests in London and elsewhere in the UK. Prominent among those arrested was Alexander Renfrew, the media tycoon. A spokesman for Mr Renfrew said that he was cooperating with the authorities voluntarily and was innocent of any wrongdoing.

"Reports have been coming in of a gun battle near Southwold in Suffolk. Local police report that a number of bodies have been recovered from the scene at isolated Newgale Farm. Those involved are believed to have belonged to an organised crime syndicate with links to Chechnya. Unconfirmed reports suggest that members of the security forces were also present. A news conference has been scheduled for midday.

"Elsewhere, it has just been announced that the body of Charles Brownlock, the controversial MP for New Malden, was discovered in his car in a lay-by on the A12 early this morning. Police are not treating his death as suspicious. Mr Brownlock, an MP since 1987, was frequently associated with left-wing causes and in recent times had become a marginalized figure on the Labour back benches."

The announcer then switched to more on the deepening crisis in the Middle East. Liam rose and switched the radio off. He looked around at us.

"It's over, then," he said.

I can't really describe my feelings at that point. I certainly didn't feel triumphant. I can't even say I felt a great sense of relief. It was more like a feeling of calm descended on me. I

looked at the others. The Colonel was nodding his head. Angela looked stunned. Only Magic seemed to react appropriately. He heaved himself up from the corner where he had been lying and stalked across the room towards me. His tail was wagging so furiously that everything aft of his shoulders was wiggling. A large wet nose pressed into the back of my hand and an even larger paw landed on my knee. His long, tatty ears twitched forward and he gazed at me as if to say “what was all that about?” Angela leaned over and hugged his neck. He look bemused; then again, he usually does.

We’d just started to discuss what had happened to the other three when Niall phoned. I took the call but Liam snatched the phone out of my hand and began to berate his twin in extremely salty language. His voice trailed away as he listened to Niall’s replies until he stood in silence, face grave. After a brief interval he put the receiver down slowly and turned to face us.

“It got bloody,” he said. “Steve’s dead and Bill took a couple of rounds. They found the shipment but got caught before they could send for the cavalry. Niall’s OK and thinks Bill will pull through.”

“Where’s Niall?” I asked.

Liam pulled a face. “On his way back. He said he got pissed and passed out when it was over. He’s sorry he didn’t call. Couldn’t think straight. He’ll be here in about half an hour.”

“Oh! Poor Steve!”

Angela looked close to tears. The Colonel said something filthy in Estonian. It deflated us all. Liam was blazing with fury:

“The stupid bastard!” He was almost spitting with rage. “They found the container hidden in a barn. All three went inside. The Chechens rumbled them and opened up when Steve started to leave. They are lucky they weren’t all killed. Why the fuck didn’t one of them keep watch?”

“Bad,” the colonel muttered but his face was a picture of understanding. He knew Liam’s anger for what it really was: relief that his brother was alive. Liam rounded on him.

“How the fuck do you know? You weren’t there!”

Then he caught himself and gave a wry smile. “At least the stupid git is all right.”

The colonel nodded, his normally flinty eyes full of sympathy. We lapsed into silence. Angela took my hand and held it like it was a crucifix. Then we heard the sound of a car approaching.

“That was quick,” I said, thinking it would be Niall.

Liam shook his head, it wasn’t the Range Rover’s V8. Someone knocked at the door. Angela let go of me and went to answer it.

Fowler walked into the parlour. He was about my age and height with silvery blond hair and a clean-cut look about him. His suit was elegantly tailored and looked expensive. I made the brief introductions and he smiled urbanely before producing his warrant card from a leather wallet.

“Look,” he said, “I’m terribly sorry to bother you but my guvnor, Commander Swann, asked me to drop by.”

He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out the photocopied pages of the colonel’s list.

“The thing is, this isn’t an original document.” He gave me another dazzling smile.

“As I’m sure you know, sir, we have a ‘quality of evidence’ issue. The guvnor asked me if you could let us have the original? We’ll also need an affidavit from the good colonel to explain its provenance. We’ve got a special sitting at Bow Street Magistrates Court at six this evening and the CPS (he meant the Crown Prosecution Service) will need to get this one right. We can hold them all under the Terrorism Act but we are going to have to produce the real McCoy.”

I nodded understanding. Evidence Rules are such that copies of documents, rather than originals, can cause problems. He produced a transfer of evidence form and asked the colonel to sign. Angela translated; the colonel’s English wasn’t up to the arcane mysteries of the British legal system. The old boy wasn’t happy about it but he handed over the oilcloth roll with good enough grace. He asked, via Angela, for an assurance that the documents would be returned. He would need them back home in Estonia. Fowler flashed his pearly-white teeth again and promised this would be no problem. He tucked the oilcloth into an inside pocket and patted the resulting bulge.

“Great stuff! Well, I won’t keep you any longer. I just have to tell you that you have done an outstanding job. I dare say there will be some more official recognition in the not-too-distant future.”

I don’t know why but he grated on me. The bonhomie was just a tad overdone. He came across as an oily bastard. He made more effusive goodbyes and headed for the door. The four of us stood there. I had the feeling we were all glad to see the back of him. Angela had a strange look on her face. She suddenly paled.

“Martin!” she grabbed my arm. “He is one of them! He had that badge! It was on the inside of his lapel!”

We stared at her for a second or two.

“Are you sure?” Liam asked.

“Yes, yes!” her voice was desperate.

All four of us ran to the door and rushed outside. Fowler was halfway to his car. I shouted after him

“Hang on a minute!”

He turned. He must have realised we had rumbled him because he started to run towards the car. Just then, Niall appeared in the Range Rover. Liam made frantic hand signals. Niall apparently understood for at once the Range Rover accelerated off the winding track and started bucketing across the grass, cutting off the angle.

Fowler spun around again, his lips working as he cursed us. He rapidly calculated that Niall would reach his car before he could. He turned and started to run off along the edge of the dunes. We took off in pursuit. I might not be as strong or as fit as the twins but I have always been faster. I was also better dressed for running in soft sand than Fowler, I was wearing trainers and jogging pants whereas he was in a suit. I halved the distance between us in the first hundred yards. He was now no more than twenty or so yards ahead of me. He put on a spurt and opened up a bit more of a gap. I knew then that I had him. The only sport that I had ever been any good at at School was cross-country running. Even though I didn't run much these days, I still knew how to do it. Chopping and changing pace takes it out of you. It's much better to set a cadence, get into a rhythm.

We must have left the cottage door wide open because suddenly I was joined my Magic and Trotsky. They thought this was a great game. Magic bounded along beside me while Trotsky obviously thought it would be an even better game to catch up with the stranger ahead. Fowler threw a backward glance over his shoulder and his face showed alarm as he saw the husky bearing down on him. If you don't know your dogs, a running husky can look pretty scary. They do look like wolves even if their nature is quite the opposite. Fowler didn't know his dogs; he looked terrified.

He angled left onto the beach. Trotsky was going flat out by this point and skidded on past for a few yards before starting to turn. I leapt to my left over a tussocky mound and went crashing down the edge of the dunes onto the beach. Magic kept pace with me until he suddenly swerved in front, causing me to attempt an elaborate side-step that didn't quite come off. I stumbled on for a couple of paces, arms wind-milling for balance. The slope was too steep and the surface too soft and slippery. I tumbled to the ground with a thump that knocked the wind out of me. I dragged myself to my feet; nothing seemed broken. Magic was in close orbit around me. His body language seemed to suggest he loved this game. I cursed him for a useless sod and staggered after Fowler.

Trotsky, in the meantime, had approached Fowler via the Great Circle route and was rushing up on him from behind. Fowler must have heard the huffing breath or the pounding

the first time ever I was grateful that that dog has no manners. Fowler recoiled, throwing up a protective arm to guard against the imagined teeth. Two great husky paws impacted on his chest and he lost his balance, falling flat on his back on the sand like a kid making a snow-angel. Trotsky danced around a couple of times then took off like a cream and brown rocket after some seagulls that had caught his attention.

I'd got my breath back by then and was less than thirty yards from him. He saw me coming, struggled to his feet and set off again at a stumbling run. Looking ahead, I saw he'd made a fatal mistake. He was running towards the estuary where a fierce ebb was rushing into the North Sea. I turned back to the others and waved them to stay on the dune path, to head him off if he tried to cut back in land. Liam, or was it Niall, waved a hand in acknowledgment and carried on at a determined jog trot. Fowler had recovered and was moving more easily but I was into my running again and was reeling in him steadily. I saw him look around wildly. His position had obviously just hit him. He pulled something white out of his pocket and began to shred it frantically as he ran. Small pieces of white confetti snowed on the beach and dispersed in the stiff onshore wind. He headed closer to the sea.

A series of low wooden groynes lay along this stretch of beach. The sand was piled high on one side and had been excavated on the other by the ceaseless tide. We hurdled the barriers like athletes in a steeplechase. Fowler angled his run out onto a low spit of sand that curled like a protective arm across the mouth of the estuary. This spit was hidden at high water so I guessed we were about halfway through the ebb. The 'rule of twelfths' sprung into my mind. One twelfth of the water ebbs during the first the hour, two in the second, three in the third and fourth, two in the fifth and one in the sixth. The tide would be at its strongest about now. There was no way he could get across the estuary. There was something like a seven-knot tide running. If he tried it, he'd be swept away.

I was barely ten yards away now. Fowler skidded to a halt. I saw his arm come back and caught a flash of yellow tumbling end over end against the dull grey loom of the sea. He had flung the oilskin roll of documents out into the turmoil of water that marked where the wind-driven waves did battle with the rush of the tide. Sandbanks and currents further confused the sea into a nasty chop of broken grey and white, shot through with the muddy silty stream of the river itself. He turned to face me, a look of triumph on his face.

"No fucking evidence!"

His scream was high and joyous but his right hand was fumbling with the latch of a shoulder holster.

A black shadow flashed over the dirty ochre of the sand. Magic hurled himself into the water, jumping to breast the breaking waves. Fowler's triumphant look vanished in a flash. He

Angela told me afterwards that they saw me take off in mid run and launch myself at him. He must have been turning back towards me because my head smashed into his nose and I heard and felt it break. We crashed to the ground. Fury of a type I have never experienced must have lent me wings. I was incandescent with rage. The bastard was shooting at my dog! I lost it completely. I was howling like a soul in torment as I leapt on him. I smashed my fists into his face. I bit, gouged, kicked and thrashed. I didn't hear the crack of the revolver or feel the wind of the bullet that blasted past my face. I didn't feel the pain of the resulting powder-burn nor was I aware of the skin on my knuckles splitting. I just kept pounding him until Niall arrived to pull me off his senseless body.

"Christ!" Niall said, "remind me never to upset you, Martin. You've damn near killed him."

My vision swam back into focus and I looked down at Fowler. His face was not recognisable as that of a human being. Blood oozed from his shattered nose and from a number of cuts around his eyes and mouth. I had driven his front teeth through his upper lip and bitten off the top of his right ear. He was breathing harshly through the open mess that had been his mouth. I spun away from him, sickened by what I'd done and vomited onto the sand.

Suddenly I remembered Magic and stood, gazing frantically out to sea and bellowing his name. I could see no sign of him. Angela and her father arrived, panting heavily. Angela had run back to call Swann and her father, typically had run to get a weapon. He stood there now, a heavy black automatic trained unwaveringly on Fowler who had started to groan and twitch as consciousness returned.

"There!" said Angela, "there he is!"

I followed her pointing finger and could just make out a small black dot in the confused sea. He was about a hundred yards out and being swept further by the tide.

Some instinct must have told him that he couldn't fight the current. He was swimming parallel to the shore. The tide pushed him further out to sea but he kept going.

"Oh my God, I've lost him," I groaned.

"No!" Angela said. "He's trying to get out of the current. If he can get to the shelter of the spit, the tide will be less without the water from the river. I've seen the little fishing boats do it lots of times."

We watched in agony as Magic fought the roiling water. He swam on strongly though still receding further from the beach. It must have taken him ten minutes or more to claw his way out of the current and a further twenty to creep towards the spit where we stood, yelling encouragement. I could see the yellow roll clamped in his teeth and I knew he was going to

“Good Dog!” I called to him. “Good Boy! Come on Magic!” Then I laughed again. “You know, when he gets that roll ashore he’s just going to chew it up. He never got the hang of retrieving.”

The others stared at me. Magic staggered as a wave caught him and then he tumbled over as it broke over his head. Angela gasped. A soggy black shape reappeared in the foam and then he his paws touched bottom and he was struggling out of the backwash. His flanks were heaving with effort and he looked, if you’ll excuse the expression, dog-tired.

He came across the sand at a shambling trot, dropped the oilskin roll at my feet and subsided onto the sand. He was panting and his pink tongue lolled out of one side of his grinning mouth. He didn’t even have the energy to shake himself. A bright red furrow ran across the deep black of his back where one of Fowler’s bullets had scored him. I flung myself down beside him and hugged him. Trotsky decided to rejoin the party at that moment. He walked up jauntily, sniffed at the still-prostrate Fowler, raised one aristocratic back leg and pissed all over him. He wandered over to where Magic and I were crouched on the sand and began to lick Magic’s injured back with gentle delicacy. Magic gave him a look that seemed to say ‘thanks, mate.’

We walked back to the cottage. Liam and Niall half carried, half dragged Fowler between them. They had secured his hands behind him with his own handcuffs. He didn’t look in any state to try anything. Angela sat me at the kitchen table and bathed my burned face and injured hands. I winced as he pulled a splinter of tooth out of my right knuckles. My hands had started to swell and the skin was rapidly turning the colour of an aubergine where it wasn’t just raw flesh. I’ll never make a boxer. The whump-whump of helicopter blades announced the arrival of Swann. I left it to Liam to explain. I was in that state of post-adrenalin torpor. I could hardly keep my eyes open. Swann took possession of the oilskin roll. He knelt down beside Magic, who was as knackered as I was. Magic opened one bleary eye and managed the faintest twitch of his tail. “Good boy,” said Swann. He made his farewells and left after extracting a promise from us all to attend him at New Scotland Yard the following afternoon.

I yawned loudly. “I guess it really is over this time,” I said.

“Yes,” said Liam. “At least is for us. I have the feeling Swann’s work is just beginning.”

Epilogue

Last night, Angela and I made love for the first time in our new home. I managed to sell the mews house in Kensington within a week of it going on the market. That stirred us up a bit and we found this place. It's not all that big but it is pretty and the acre and a half of gardens is perfect for the dogs. Just down the road is Battle, where William the Conqueror beat Harold Godwineson in 1066. The coast is a mile or two further on. A small lake bounds our house on the northern side and as I write this, a local builder is restoring a low stone outbuilding. It will make a very fine studio.

Commander Swann was, as predicted by Liam, very busy indeed in the weeks that followed and the papers have been full of revelations about the depth of the plot. At our own request, our names didn't appear anywhere. Only the colonel, identified simply as a member of the Estonian Security Service working under deep cover, got a mention. Swann decided to take no action against Niall, Liam and Bill for their illegal actions and the last I heard from the twins, they had just got a government security contract. Bill has recovered from his wounds and has joined Liam and Niall full-time. Liam has just about forgiven Niall for getting pissed and falling asleep.

Two days ago, before we moved out of London, Angela and I took Magic and Trotsky for a last walk in Kensington Gardens. We were wandering along towards the Round Pond when I heard someone calling my name.

"Martin! I say, Martin Booth!"

It was Steph. She was sitting in the passenger seat of a very expensive piece of Italian engineering. We strolled over. Angela's arm was firmly gripping mine and she leant into me slightly. I could almost feel her hackles rising. Steph smiled sweetly up at us. The man beside her could have been a male model. He gazed at us disinterestedly.

"Hello, Steph," I said. I gave my feelings a quick once over. Nothing.

"A little bird tells me you're getting married, Martin, can this be true?"

"It is."

"And is this the lucky lady? Do introduce us, darling."

"Steph, meet Angela; Angela, Steph."

"And how did you two love-birds meet? Somewhere boring, I expect?"

"Oh yes," said Angela. "It was very boring; walking the dogs."

"I see you still you still have those smelly animals, Martin."

I grinned. "We couldn't want for better," I said.

Steph sniffed. "Back to his own? Dog-dealing must suck."

Trotsky ambled up, sniffed at the Ferrari and pointedly pissed on the front wheel. I let him finish before pulling him away. Angela and I walked off laughing, the shout of outrage ringing in our ears.