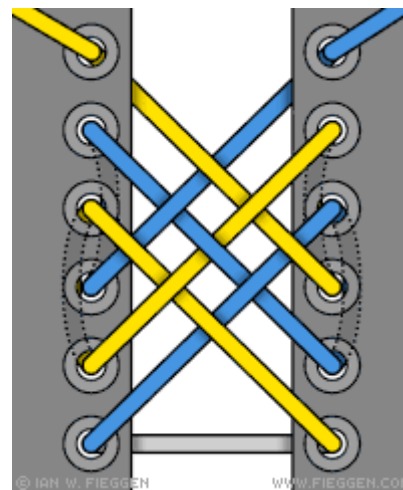


Vox Dei

Valentin Fortunov

with Andrew Carey

Part 4: Tuesday



TUESDAY

31——

“Hush brother. Don’t say these things. He loves you. Our lord loves us all. He has come to wake you from your sleep.”

“I have not been asleep. I am not asleep. I was not asleep. My head has been crushed full of blue. Blue dye. What has he done to me?”

“Miriam, leave your brother with me. Go and fetch water and lemons as I told you.” “El’azar, be at peace. We had to show these people. We had to show them this. Look at them.”

“I can’t look at them. I can’t see a fucking thing. What have you done to me?”

“El’azar, you have been asleep for four days. They thought you were dead. You were dead. You have been in the cave. Martha, untie him.”

“See, you have the bandages of a dead man. You have been asleep for four days. They thought you were dead. You were dead.”

He remembers this. He was not dead. He was not asleep. It was his daughter’s birthday. His beautiful daughter. And he has business to do.

“Lord, I was not dead. I was not asleep. What have you done to me?”

“Come with me El’azar. Come to the house. We will sit in the shade together.”

Floating again. Faces. Weeping faces. The weeping faces of weeping Jews. When will they ever stop weeping?

Sherlock looked around him and saw what he took to be the reserved table. He headed towards it humming '[On a Slow Boat to China](#)', upon which a young jazz quartet in the middle of the room was improvising very satisfactorily. A waif of a waiter appeared beside him.

'Sir?'

'I have a table reserved in the name of Lazar Palin.'

The waiter nodded and led him to the table. It was half-screened from its neighbours, like all the others around the outside of the semi-circular amphitheatre of the night-club. Sherlock took his seat:

'Two large Passports with soda... I'm expecting a guest.'

'Yes, sir. Mademoiselle Brasseur.'

Sherlock took off his spectacles and carefully polished the lenses. When he replaced them he saw two large crystal glasses on the table, each with an inch of Scotch and two separate glasses fizzing with soda.

Sherlock was an accomplished drinker but in the last two nights he had only slept for about four hours and this one was headed the same way. So, as insurance, he gulped down two 'Party Time' tablets, his preferred absorber of alcohol. *How long before it's a little blue diamond on a night like this?*

He started to look around with the focused curiosity of a man sitting alone. He had expected to see men, by and large, but he noticed that it was mainly women that occupied the tables. Coincidence, he decided. The trumpeter was good. Loud applause followed each of his solos. For the jam session, three girls, who had been sitting near him, climbed on stage and started to play: piano, double-bass and drums. Sherlock's attention was immediately drawn to the thighs of the newly-installed pianist whose tight office skirt had ridden gratifyingly high. But it was a slim young thing with long curly blonde hair who stole the show for him as her breasts moved just out of time with her furious drumming sessions.

So it was that Michelle Brasseur, smiling archly, identified him just before he saw her. She wore brown leather trousers, high-heeled boots laced up the front and a leather jacket thrown over her shoulders. Her hair was in a bob and he calculated that the rich chestnut colour, distinctively French, was not from a bottle. Sherlock remembered having read that women wore leather as a defence and wondered what it might be that she was defending herself against. If it was the attention of men, she had signally failed.

The waiter stood on his toes to whisper in her ear, pointing to Sherlock's table. She nodded slightly and walked towards the Chief Analyst with a smile that seemed reserved for him alone, though she could not have been unaware of the glances from around the restaurant.

'Mademoiselle Brasseur, enchanté,' Sherlock stood to greet her.

‘I see the drummer is enchanting you also. But you are not Lazar,’ she observed in perfect, but heavily accented, English as she took a seat opposite Sherlock.

‘That is correct,’ grinned Sherlock, falling comfortably into English himself.

‘In which case...?’

‘Call me Sherlock,’ the Chief Analyst continued smiling at her. ‘Two more Passports, please,’ he turned to the waiter showing him his empty glass.

His guest raised one eyebrow:

‘Is it to be a race? Surely we are not in Australia?’

She indicated her untouched glass.

‘Not a race, mademoiselle. But l’égalité is one of the pillars of your great republic and I



wouldn't wish our relationship to begin on an unequal footing.'

She turned to the waiter, paused, drank a mouthful of whisky, nodded and returned her attention to Sherlock.

'Poor Lazar, not only does he have to endure the insolence of his staff but, as a reward for his work, he is now being accommodated in a police cell – on the instructions of your American masters, no doubt?'

'Rumour has long legs.'

'Rumour has always been a long-legged seductress, turning heads as she goes, but in a...' she snapped her fingers, 'she is forgotten.'

Sherlock leant forward and whispered confidentially:

'Mademoiselle Brasseur, I want you to know that you will remain in my thoughts for a very long time to come.'

‘Disappointing. You were doing well until then. May I suggest that your compliments database needs a little updating, my dear Sherlock.’

The waiter brought their drinks. The two of them lifted their glasses, clinked them and sipped silently, looking at each other unwaveringly.

‘Have you noticed how often Anglo-Saxons look away when making a toast?’

‘I believe it’s a question of intimacy. Just as many women prefer the intimacy of their own thoughts and look away when making love.’ Sherlock was pleased with himself.

‘Good god, you lay yourself open. Isn’t simply a question of technique?’

A pause and Sherlock moved the conversation on: ‘So, in what way can I be of help, Mademoiselle?’

‘That question might be better asked by me. Where, for example, have you got to with Riley?’

‘Looking at the whole picture... not very far,’ smiled Sherlock.

‘That’s what I imagined...’ she swallowed the rest of her first Scotch in one and pulled the full glass towards her, looking absent-mindedly at the jazz band. Then she turned back and stared hard at Sherlock and he felt himself, against all his instincts, relax for a moment. He realised immediately that she had seen it. A smile appeared briefly among the very fine lines that framed her mouth. The woman lowered her gaze and when she looked up again her eyes were dull. The duel he didn’t realise had begun had now ended.

‘I’m listening,’ said Sherlock.

‘It’s nothing personal, Sherlock. I criticise neither you nor Lazar. Your team is terrific but you’re up against the big boys now. Bulgaria is like an unfenced yard right now. What we are witnessing could be the beginnings of a struggle of truly enormous significance. And this is the reason our agency is keeping a very close eye on the situation...’

‘Do you mean ‘AFP’?’

She ignored him. 'How much do you know about the alliance of Suslambek Yushaev's Chechen gangsters and Skender Hoxha, the Albanian don?'

'Please tell me what you know. I feel as if the good fairy has come to lead me out of the dark forest.' The Chief Analyst performed a complex pantomime to ask the waiter for two more glasses of Scotch. 'So, what about the Chechen and Albanian dons?'

'Are you sitting comfortably? Well, Afghanistan, as you know, is the new Colombia. In 2001, the annual output of opium there reached and exceeded that of the golden triangle. Then the Americans blew everything apart. The basic structure of the business and its established export channels were destroyed. A vacuum appeared – limitless supply, limitless demand, but no means of linking the two. It only needed someone to organise it again. There were plenty of applicants.'

'On le sait bien, Mademoiselle. And these mafias were at the head of the queue,' Sherlock interrupted.

‘But perhaps you can tell me why the Albanians? Why not, for example, the Pakistanis?’

‘Because these Albanians are the CIA’s golden boys – the Chechens and the Albanians are well-trained killers, with contacts and protection.’

‘You mean the CIA is directly involved in the drugs business? Now? After everything that has happened in the last thirty years?’ Sherlock looked at her in open surprise.

‘No, I don’t mean that. Though, who knows...? Of course, the Firm didn’t train them in their camps for the drugs business. They were training paramilitary groups, the so-called liberation armies and the rest. It was their job to do the dirty work of destabilising the region around Chechnya on the one hand and Kosovo on the other. But, as always happens with the CIA, they lost control over them.’

‘Michelle, the CIA has always lacked perspective. Whenever they implement a strategy they are blind to the wider consequences.’

‘Are you telling me you already know all this?’

‘I am interested in your perspective, Mademoiselle.’

Michelle looked at him mockingly:

‘In this case, oil is the strategy. Without petroleum, America dies; its entire economy is based on cheap oil and the loss of it is the spectre they have to fight at every turn. They don’t care about drugs. The CIA doesn’t deal with drugs. The DEA is responsible for them. But these newly-fledged gangsters, after doing the CIA’s dirty work, simply looked for a quick way to apply their new skills and earn big money. There is no more profitable business than drugs. And, having American protection and being Muslims, which is a precondition of working with the Afghans, they managed to win a secure position in the opium market in Afghanistan. Of course, their first priority was to organise a reliable channel.’

‘So the Chechens are at one end of the corridor and the Albanians at the other. Is this why you call it the Chechen-Albanian Alliance? And why do you think they choose to go through Bulgaria?’

‘Because the most natural way is through Bulgaria. They can’t go through Turkey because the military there keeps tight control. Very tight. And if they try to go through Romania they have to cross Serbia too, which is absurd. So the only corridor available is through your country.

Michelle, as if suddenly realising that she was thirsty, lifted the untouched soda water and drank it to the bottom.

‘Have you heard the story of the American, the Englishman, the Bulgarian and the Russian who each ordered six whiskies in a bar in Sofia? They arrived a few minutes later,’ he continued when she said nothing, ‘with six separate glasses of soda. The American left in disgust at the service. The Englishman carefully poured one glass of soda into each glass of whisky. The Bulgarian drank his whiskies and then drank the water at the end of the evening to have a clear head for the drive home. The Russian ordered an empty bottle,

poured the soda into it and took it home in case he had a hangover in the morning.'

'Yes, I have,' replied Michelle, pouring the soda into her whisky and drinking it. 'In this matter, as in so few others, I believe the English have it right.' She leant back, pushed her chair a little aside and crossed her legs. She looked in her bag for a packet of Gauloises Lights, checked the number of cigarettes and removed one happily.



'I'm trying to cut down,' she explained to Sherlock. 'If I smoke two packets a day, my voice comes to resemble that of a drill sergeant.'

'Then I urge you to smoke faster.'

'So that I sound like your idea of a Parisian whore? Can't you use your imagination? It will save me smoking another packet this evening.'

'I can imagine exactly...' Sherlock smiled happily.

‘Oh, you’re getting boring again, Sherlock. Are you going to listen to the story to the end? Or have you already marshalled all your resources in your other head.’

‘I’m listening, Mademoiselle.’

‘So just as the Americans are beginning the project stage of the AMBO pipeline, one of our gangsters – a clever one – is struck by the brilliant idea that a pipeline going from the Bulgarian Black Sea to the Adriatic is a gift to them. En bref, they have calculated that it won’t upset anybody if Texaco and Chevron pump oil along this pipeline and the Chechen-Albanian Company puts, in the same pipe, vacuum-sealed capsules packed with drugs. These, quite naturally, together with the oil, cross the Balkans and are caught in the filter in Vlorë, from where they go to Western Europe and the United States, cheaply, quickly and with no risk.’

‘Michelle, I was with you up till then, but this is starting to sound like science fiction.’

‘Whether it’s technically possible is not the point, Sherlock. You know the money these people have. If it’s not possible, they will make it possible. And, for now, the Mafia bosses wait impatiently for the pipeline to work. And this is the piquant idea that reaches Riley’s ears. And he begins to investigate.’

‘So they bombed the hotel to stop this story about drugs and the pipeline getting out? Do you know how many substations with filters there are there along a pipeline? This is ridiculous.’

‘Unlike you, perhaps, I’m not a pipeline engineer, Sherlock. I remind you that the mafia can afford as many engineers as the oil companies. They can afford better ones. They can afford to buy the pipeline plans. They will supply the local contractors and bribe the American ones. It may be ridiculous, but they think it’s possible and they want to keep it secret for now.’

‘And for this they killed nearly thirty people?’

‘Yes, dear boy. I can see that you don’t leave your desk too often. Ask your friends in the FSB. I think

you'll hear some surprising things. Anyway... the CIA knows all this and, because it's the direct result of its own misdeeds, it will do everything possible to cover up the story and prevent your team from getting at the truth...'

'And just at that moment the good fairy appeared riding a white horse,' Sherlock interrupted with a smile. 'There's just one thing – are you really the good fairy or has the story you've just told me got a price?'

'Re-read your fairy tales, Sherlock. There is always a price. Sometimes, though, it goes unstated.'

Sherlock was about to tell her in his turn that the success of AMBO meant the defeat of French oil interests in the Balkans and that the mission of a good fairy from Paris might not be entirely what it seemed. But he stopped himself and said only:

'Michelle, thank you for the geopolitical survey, it was most interesting. And now, could I ask you just two or three mundane things like names, meeting places and so on?'

The woman smiled:

‘As I told you, the operation is under the personal command of Suslambek Yushaev. He uses Burgas as his base. There are always two or three other Chechens with him and the same number of Albanians. Skender Hoxha doesn’t, as a rule, leave his hiding place in the Albanian mountains. He deals with distribution. So Yushaev does all the dirty work. The Albanians finance him and supply him with people and any other resources he needs. They share the profits equally. The Chechen trusts no-one and never spends two nights in the same bed. There are Bulgarians in his group for certain. The latest address we have is in the suburbs of Burgas,’ Michelle found and handed him a piece of paper folded in two. ‘This is the address. No doubt, you won’t find him there after tomorrow.’

She swallowed her whisky and looked at Sherlock:

‘Now, perhaps, you need half an hour to report the news to your colleagues. I hope, you won’t be going to bed afterwards?’

Sherlock produced his most charming smile:

'You read my thoughts, mademoiselle.'

'Come on,' she said, 'When you finish, call me in Room 406. I suppose you know somewhere with decent European cuisine and good Bulgarian wine.'

Sherlock reached for her hand and kissed it:

'Mademoiselle, in this matter, you will be well cared for.'

Most of the windows of the monstrous beige cube at [935 Pennsylvania Avenue](#) were still lit when, at five minutes to nine in the evening, a number of Pentagon cars unloaded two generals and a whole flotilla of lesser nobility, who were instantly elevated to the small conference hall on the fourth floor, which connected with the angular office of the Deputy Director for Operations.

When Chief Agent Patricia O'Connell entered the hall and closed the door behind her, she realised she was the last to arrive. The DDO had appeared a few minutes earlier to salute the flotilla. O'Connell smiled slightly as he approached. The full uniforms, gleaming shoes, razor creases and chestfuls of polished brass gave the scene an unreal air.

'Gentlemen, I think you know Chief Agent Patricia O'Connell.'

Patricia had known the two generals for a long time, since before they became generals, in fact. Major General Sherman McLennan was, by every measure, a coarse man, with a coarse face and a coarse sense of humour; he wore a permanently suspicious expression. *Were you to select the overall commander of the US Army's Criminal Investigation Command on looks alone, McLennan would be your man.* The Judge Advocate General was clearly hewn from the same rock - only his gold-rimmed spectacles softened his appearance a touch.

The DDO took his seat at the long table and the others followed suit.

'Folks, as always in such cases, we are gathered here because a problem has arisen. I suggest Chief Agent O'Connell explain the situation to us immediately,' he raised his blue eyes and settled them on O'Connell, who opened a thin file and, after surveying her audience, began to set out the chronology of recent events:

‘As you know, last Saturday, at 23.58 local time...’ She rattled through the litany of the dead and injured and itemised the reactions of the key Western powers, Russia and China. ‘Of course, reaction was unusually sharp because journalists were involved and attention was focused on the reaction of our own administration and on the statement of the President. Unfortunately, our early statements characterised al-Qaeda as the perpetrator of the assault...’

‘Did you say ‘unfortunately’, Chief Agent?’ Major General Harvey L. Jackson’s spectacles rose in line with his eyebrows. ‘Since when have we apologised for our role in the fight against international terror?’ The General churred the last word, dropping both vowels.

‘General, this is precisely the problem that has brought us here. We have no information on who exactly advised the President’s team that al-Qaeda was involved; equally, we have no information on the sources that they drew on.’ She looked into her file briefly then lifted her head and continued: ‘On the other

hand, all our sources and all the evidence that we have access to clearly indicate that al-Qaeda was not responsible for this assault. This puts our administration into an extremely awkward situation.'

General Jackson laughed:

'Why, I wonder, do the initials CIA spring so readily to mind? Nevertheless, I think it appropriate that we hear your evidence before dismissing that made available to the President.'

Patricia looked at the DDO, who nodded.

Over the next fifteen minutes O'Connell described to those present the whole course of the investigation headed by Lazar Palin, step by step. She outlined the role of the FBI office in Sofia and, when she came to events at Camp Bondsteel, General McLennan interrupted to give additional information supplied to him by Lieutenant Colonel Trent.

'Trent is solid. He wouldn't report something that had even a whiff of conjecture about it. These are the facts,' ended McLennan.

Finally O'Connell referred to corroborating evidence from two other unspecified foreign security agencies. The members of the flotilla looked at each other in silence. Then General Jackson, who had been moving about restlessly in his chair, exclaimed:

'What a mess.'

'I have already reported to the President,' the DDO said. 'We have orders to clean up the mess and limit the damage to a bare minimum. That's why I think the FBI should not show its face in an overseas military base. I have absolute confidence that your teams, gentlemen, will work quickly and quietly. We shall need a big broom in Kosovo.'

The Judge Advocate General nodded energetically.

'I agree that this is the best solution. This evening I shall send judges and examining magistrates to deal with the case on the spot.' Then he turned to McLennan and asked him: 'Does your man in Bondsteel have enough police resources to do the work without involving the infantry?'

‘I have already ordered reinforcements from [Aviano](#). More fly from Fort Hood tonight. Trent can begin work early in the morning, local time.’ General Jackson looked at his watch and nodded too.

‘My magistrates will be there by early afternoon. I’ll get a team together right away. Can you get me five or six offices at Bondsteel and at least six interpreters? I’d prefer to send them from here but I doubt I can find enough in time.’ Then he turned to the DDO: ‘What about this guy in Sofia?’

‘I think I have to go to Sofia myself. Probably on Wednesday.’

They rose and, after taking his cap from the rack, Jackson crossed the room to where the DDO was discussing the details of the operation with McLennan and O’Connell.

‘I can see it all,’ Jackson declared gloomily. ‘I can imagine how they lost control over the natives. But to let them have a weapon that all the world knows belongs only to us... that’s stupid, criminal and incredibly

dangerous. Whoever did this will roast over a low fire,' ended the General.

'Gentlemen, to work.' The two generals saluted and left the hall together.

'Patricia,' the DDO said confidentially, 'please give my thanks to Ben Stanton for his work and warn him to have nothing to do with Crawford. I'll arrange now for the security guard at the Embassy to put him under house arrest till my arrival. I don't want US field agents at one another's throats.'

'Yes, sir. I'll talk to Stanton now.'

He was planning what to get her for tea. Wondering whether it would be warm enough for a salad. Or whether she would prefer spinach. As so often in the early morning, he drifted in and out of sleep, back to his duties as the man of the house, planning his routine as he had every day of his teenage years.

From the time of his father's death, young Ben had never lost, even for a moment, the sense that Arthur Stanton was somehow still present. He felt his father's scrutinising look upon him and he was certain that he still watched him over his half spectacles, sitting in an unknown, but certainly uncushioned, wooden chair. Sometimes he would peep into the Des Moines town library, to make sure for the hundredth time that the familiar head with its thinning hair was not looming behind the large desk at the entrance. But no. Incomprehensibly, a woman was sitting there and it took Ben by surprise each time. Then he would sit on the

bench in front of their Presbyterian church and imagine that father must certainly have been appointed keeper of the Heavenly public library. Then Ben would imagine



his father looking down with that old mixture of surprise and disapproval as his son wandered the streets instead of seeing to more important business. Now, in his sleep, he was again running to buy the tea. He was breathing fast, tasting the air, watching the familiar houses and shops fly by him. Friendly faces appeared, then the square and the church. Just as he was

just going to pass it, the bell tolled - but strangely. It was ringing.

He opened his eyes and reached for the phone. It was six o'clock.

'Ben, I must have woken you, excuse me,' the voice of Patricia O'Connell was tired. 'Secure please.'

'Don't worry, Patty,' Ben woke completely, put out his hand and switched on the scrambler, 'Secure. What's the time there? Midnight? Are you still at the office?'

'It's eleven and I have a mountain of paperwork,' sighed O'Connell. 'Listen...'

The Chief Agent put him in the picture.

'And I must tell you, while I remember, the DDO sent his special thanks to you.'

'Why, thank you Patty.'

'You're welcome, my boy. You deserve them. Are you going back to sleep?'

'No, I have a headache starting. I'm going for a run.'

Ben felt Patty smiling.

The conversation ended and Ben put down the phone. But in spite of his declared intentions, he lay down again. He already had the headache. He had returned a little after midnight and filed his report, but the excitement at Bondsteel had kept him awake till three. He closed his eyes tightly and stretched his arms to hold his dreams of childhood. But instead he could see headlights and heard the crack and rattle of machine guns. The telephone rang again. Ben chased away the horrors of Kosovo, opened his eyes and picked up the receiver. The voice at the other end pronounced his name with rare uncertainty. Salomon Dekalo was calling him at home at six in the morning.

‘Sally, what’s up?’ Ben jumped off the bed, searched for his slippers with his bare feet and put them on.

‘Last night, they arrested the Colonel...’

‘They arrested Lazar? Our Lazar?’ Salomon hummed confirmation. ‘Who arrested him?’

‘The Chief Secretary. Believe me I’ll...’

‘What for, for God’s sake?’

‘You remember we arrested the minister’s son?’
The penny dropped.

‘But... arrested Lazar? For doing his job? Never mind whose son he is. This is a democracy not some West African...’

‘So much for our democracy,’ sighed Salomon. ‘But spare me the criminal justice lecture, Ben.’

Ben thought quickly. ‘Listen Sally, let’s meet. We have to talk and I have news too.’

‘OK, Ben,’ Salomon’s voice sounded despondent.

‘Let’s go jogging together.’

‘Jogging? Jesus.’

‘Yes, a couple of miles and then coffee.’

‘Ben, I’m impressed by your concern for your health. It beats the old man’s smoking. But you’ve got no more chance of exporting your health fads to the Balkans than we have of selling our recipe for soup made with the internal wall of a pig’s stomach to McDonald’s. Anyway, this is no time for gymnastics.’

‘Nonsense, Sally, a run’s exactly what we need right now. Get your trainers on and let’s go.’

There was an uncomfortably long pause:

‘Where? In the Borisova Gradina?’

‘Yup. I’ll be warming up by the lily pond.’

Twenty minutes later, Ben was, true to his word, performing star jumps in the park. The path, paved with small pebbles, was slippery with the thick layer of leaves that had fallen during the night. It was damp and chilly and the wind blew in sharp gusts. The pond too was almost covered with fallen leaves. He had little company. Two plump teenage girls giggled as they jogged past him. And an old man, who was surely over seventy, overtook them on the next bend. Eventually Salomon appeared under the chestnut trees. Ben scrutinised him and thought he looked well, even without the benefit of a night’s sleep.

‘Come on,’ Salomon called as he ran past without slowing.



Ben caught him quickly. As they ran, Salomon told him in detail about the events of the previous day without mentioning anything about Sherlock's meeting with Michelle Brasseur. Finally he told Ben that he had just returned from the clinic where Maria had been worse during the night but was now asleep. As they ran, it was clear to Ben that Salomon was pushing the pace. Ben kept level with him then stopped abruptly and gave

way to his anger, kicking an elderly lime tree by the side of the path.

‘Let’s go and find this fool,’ said the federal agent.

‘Have you got a plan?’

‘I do.’

‘I have,’ countered Salomon.

‘Are you in your car?’

‘Yes, it’s just there,’ the Major pointed at the car park behind the pond.

‘Take me home to change and we’ll go to work.’ Ben stopped, looked at the Major and asked: ‘What about you? Will you come in your sports gear?’

‘I guessed you’d do something like this, Ben, and brought my clothes with me. They’re in the car.’

‘Well, that’s just fine. You can change in my apartment, come on!’

The Major accepted Ben’s invitation to take a shower and at half past seven they were hurrying to finish the big jug of coffee that the federal agent had prepared. Five minutes later they were both driving to

the Ministry in separate cars. They left them in the underground car park and Salomon went to the office while Ben went in search of the Chief Secretary and found his assistant.

‘Special Agent Stanton,’ the young man stood up surprised.

‘I have to see the Chief Secretary immediately.’

‘Just a moment, sir.’ The young man sank through the upholstered doors into the office of his boss. He came out almost immediately leaving the door slightly open behind him. ‘Please, come in, the Chief Secretary will see you now.’

Ben entered the vast gloomy office. The Chief Secretary was reading a newspaper but looked up and applied a smile.

‘Good morning, Ben. I see you are a lark like me, at sunrise you fly the nest. Unfortunately there is no sun this morning.’

Ben looked at the Chief Secretary absent mindedly, waiting for the inevitable weather discourse to pass.

When he concluded that it had, he declined the invitation to sit down, approached the desk of the Chief Secretary, stared at him with his most innocent look and began:

‘Gospodin Chief Secretary, earlier this morning I reported personally to the Deputy Director for Operations at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington that Colonel Lazar Palin’s line of enquiry had been correct and that Riley was indeed the main target of the attack on the Flamingo Hotel. I gave full details of the investigation, insofar as they pertained to the question in hand, and after that the Deputy Director characterised the work of Colonel Palin’s department as exceptional and asked me to inform him that the government of the USA deeply appreciates his assistance in the fight against terrorism in all its forms. I would like to ask you in my turn, Gospodin Chief Secretary, to arrange a meeting between me and the Colonel in the military prosecutor’s office in order to convey to him, er... in the flesh, the message of the

government of the United States of America.’ The Chief Secretary closed his eyes and sank back into his chair.

‘Ben, don’t do this to me, please... I have supported you at every step of this investigation. Show me any problem at our end that I haven’t solved for you.’

‘To be blunt, Gospodin Chief Secretary, I need Lazar,’ Ben replied, then, leaning closer to the Chief Secretary, continued: ‘In fact, it is not I that need him. Rather, as I see it, the investigation needs him and this is now an international investigation in which the FBI is an active, not to say vigorously active, participant. The eyes of men whose names you have, almost certainly, never heard are focused on the work of Colonel Palin and his team. You must be, from an outsider’s perspective Gospodin Chief Secretary, crazy to arrest him at a moment like this. And let me add that you personally need Lazar Palin right now. I can only imagine that you have deferred to some threat, real or implied, from one of your colleagues. Let me assure you, Gospodin Chief Secretary that, whatever the nature of the threat, it will

be as nothing compared to the humiliation of reading your political obituary in the world's press. If you continue to detain this incontrovertibly honest, effective, professional and respected man, the first thing you do is to undermine your own position and credibility.'

The Chief Secretary leant back and running both his hands through the remains of his thinning hair he said quietly:

'OK, Ben, you win...'

'No, Gospodin Chief Secretary, if I may say so, you win.'

Picture credits

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Des Moines - www.ship-of-fools.com

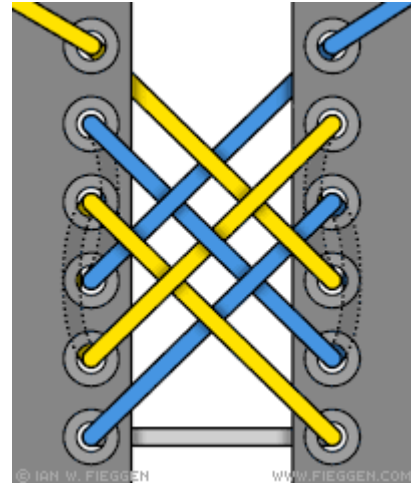
Borisova Gradina - [Gergana](#)

The guard, like a mediaeval gaoler, jangled a bunch of keys, found the right one and, turning it twice, unlocked the cell door.

‘Colonel, I have orders to release you. You are to go to your department immediately.’

‘Ah. The [primrose way](#)?’ Lazar pulled off the thin blanket, which he had thrown over his shoulders and stood up. The planks of the bed creaked with pleasure at being released from their load. The Colonel stretched his neck and cracked each vertebra before folding the blanket. He looked around idly but, since there was nothing he could forget in the narrow cell, he went to the door. At the main desk a sergeant with drooping spectacles passed him a basket in which his possessions were gathered – keys, mobile phone, wallet, pistol, holster with straps, tie and shoelaces. Then he turned an ancient book towards Lazar, which the latter dully signed (*sic*).

Lazar took the basket and put it on a table. The cloth covering the table was greasy and a gaggle of half-empty cups of coffee stood on it. First he threaded and tied his shoelaces – using the zig-zag, equilateral technique - and put on his tie. Then he took off his jacket, shrugged on the holster and dropped his pistol into it. He put on his jacket again and distributed his other possessions among the pockets. Without uttering a word, he left the office. Lazar had left his raincoat in Salomon's BMW and he shivered, pulled up his collar and looked around - breathing in the damp air deeply. He looked at the sky, low and grey, and he felt like a character emerging from prison in any of a dozen French movies. At that moment a car stopped in front of him and the door opened. Like the car door opening outside the prison gates in any of a dozen French movies. Only it wasn't a Citroën and he wasn't Alain



Delon. Without hesitation Lazar got in and Salomon was already rounding the next corner as his passenger finally closed the door. Lazar was the first to speak.

‘What happened?’

‘Ben.’

‘What about Ben?’

‘He got you released.’

‘Did somebody meet Brasseur?’

‘Chairlock.’

‘And?’

‘She fucked him.’

‘That’s correct.’

As always, when hitting the ramp at the entrance to the underground car park, Salomon performed his



streets of San Francisco trick and the two of them hit their heads on the ceiling of the BMW.

‘Fool.’

When they entered the main office everyone stood up and a cocktail of cheers, applause and whistles greeted them. Lazar crossed the room with Salomon behind him imitating his familiar walk and absent expression. This raised a new commotion and general laughter.

Entering his office Lazar threw his jacket over the back of a chair, removed his tie, took off his shirt, opened the sliding door of one of the cupboards, took out his shaving kit, went to the sink with a mirror and began shaving. Salomon stretched himself on the sofa and fell asleep. After shaving, Lazar washed his face and neck, shampooed his hair and then rubbed himself dry for rather too long. When he finished he had turned generally pink. He opened another cupboard where there were ironed shirts, took one out and put it on with a different tie. Then he slipped his jacket back on and

headed for his coffee. Awoken by the familiar grunting, Salomon could have sworn that Lazar patted the coffee machine before beginning the ritual.

Salomon got up and took his turn at the sink, washed and demanded a clean towel. Lazar obliged. With the towel hanging round his neck, the Major stuck his head out of the office door and gestured at the Head of Operations.

‘Where is our cocksman, Mr Boggy?’

‘What cocksman?’

‘Chairlock, who else?’

‘Aah,’ smiled Bogomil, ‘he called a minute ago, he’ll be here in ten minutes.’

‘Has Ben called?’

‘No, Sally.’

When, in ten minutes, all of them were gathered in Lazar’s office the Colonel was already making more coffee. With a steaming cup in hand he was the last to sit down at the long table. He took out a new packet of Camel, lit one and inhaled with pleasure:

'Let's get started!'

Looking first at Ben then at the Colonel, Salomon asked:

'Shall we discuss last night's developments or leave it for later on?'

Lazar looked at him, his eyes smiling, tapped on the table and said:

'We'll put our cards on the table, Sally, Ben is one of us.'

Ben felt himself stand up, walk round the table to Lazar and shake his hand warmly. Salomon coughed and said that during the night they had received important information that should lead them to the perpetrators of the Flamingo bombing. Then he asked Sherlock to give details. While listening to Sherlock, Ben maintained a steady frown, but in the end he smiled and asked:

'Your source is... it's not Bulgarian, is it?'

Salomon nodded.

Deducing that he'd just been honoured with a Bulgarian nod, Ben continued confidently:

'Your source is... Russian or French,' Ben stated confidently.

Lazar smiled and said:

'Ben, for an American policeman, you have a good grasp of the European theatre of espionage. Congratulations, you've done your homework.'

For the third time that morning Ben felt himself blushing. He couldn't hide it and smiled broadly.

'Quid pro quo,' he said still smiling. 'Yesterday I was in Uroshevats. The head of the military police at Camp Bondsteel gave me some... what I would characterise as very useful information as well as saving my life in an ambush. If his backup had been a minute later, perhaps even less than that, I think, in all probability, that we would both be dead by now.'

He told them briefly the main points he had uncovered in Kosovo.

‘Believe me, there’s going to be one hell of a shake-up,’ the federal agent concluded, without mentioning the imminent arrival of military police, examining magistrates and judges. Nor did he tell them that Crawford was under house arrest. In the silence, the cracking of Lazar’s neck vertebrae was heard distinctly. Salomon looked at him:

‘You are very melodious this morning.’

‘I look forward with pleasure to the day when you make me so angry that I have you arrested... One night on that plank bed and in the morning every bone in your body will be cracking,’ Lazar replied.

‘So, let’s not waste time. Let’s take the Berets, go to Burgas and catch these bastards.’

‘Let’s do it,’ Ben exclaimed enthusiastically and raised his hand. The Major looked at him for a moment, then laughed and executed the offered high five.

‘OK, let’s do it the American way.’

Image credits:

Shoelace diagram - www.cynical-c.com

Le Cercle Rouge – www.kweb.be

Colonel John Trent and his opposite number from the US base in Aviano, who had arrived early that morning on board a C-130 with three platoons of military police, climbed into the Humvee. Phil Willis could hardly fail to notice that the vehicle was riddled with bullet holes. Trent had ordered only that the tyres be changed immediately after the ambush, and it was with some pleasure that he now drove it with his bandaged left arm clearly visible.

On landing, Willis had immediately taken four trucks and arrested every living creature in the CIA training camp. At the same time, Trent's men, supported by two of Willis's newly-arrived platoons, had split into three groups and surrounded the nearby villages, where the headquarters of the main Kosovar gangsters were situated, and rounded up all but eight of the men on a 6-page "Wanted" list. The Kosovars had made no attempt to resist.

In the mean time, and on Trent's orders, a series of detention blocks were being hastily equipped. Now Trent and Willis, in convoy with two small buses, were going to meet the magistrates. Their movements were watched with intense curiosity by the other soldiers. Even the Camp Commander had received orders from the Pentagon to give maximum assistance – but no further information on what was going on.

The two military policemen expected a prominent figure to appear first from the helicopter, but when a tall, slim general of about sixty with a shaven head and small, deep-set eyes jumped out, holding his cap in one hand and a small suitcase in the other, Willis gave a low whistle:

'Well, I was expecting trouble, but not a bloodbath. Dismukes! Do you know him?' he turned to Trent.

'Of course.'

[The hanging judge.](#)

'Hello men,' the chief magistrate shouted over the noise of the helicopter. His expression betraying no apparent pleasure at seeing them.

'General,' Trent saluted him.

'Butcher,' Willis saluted and smiled. 'Is this,' he pointed at the suitcase 'your portable gallows?'

'You were always getting ahead of yourself, Phil. This is my torture equipment. We'll make sure it gets plenty of use. What a mess. We can smell the shit in Washington... Do you have enough transport? I have a whole execution corps with me.'

Trent nodded and pointed to the two buses parked nearby.

'Let's go then... I have no time. I'm flying back on Thursday, at the latest. I'm due to play golf with the Attorney General on Friday... The stake is a box of Castro's own cigars. I don't know how the bastard got hold of them.'

General Dismukes was about to get into the Humvee when he stopped, groaned and surveyed the holes in the bodywork.

‘Trent,’ he knocked on the vehicle with a knuckle, ‘this is evidence, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, General.’

‘And you’re driving around in it?’

‘Psychology, general. It’s important that I be seen in it.’

The two of them looked at each other, then Dismukes jumped in and barked:

‘We’ll see. Drive.’

Willis climbed into the back and Trent pulled away.

When they entered the military police building in Bondsteel, General Dismukes immediately commandeered Trent’s office and turned it into his own residence.

‘I like it here,’ said the judge. ‘I’m hungry. Have them bring me a big steak and a fresh salad. Trent, you’re a connoisseur. I want green tea. A lot of it.’ Then

he took a box of cigars out of his suitcase, cut one and bit it with pleasure.

‘While I wait for my lunch, you can put me in the picture.’

Over the next half hour, Trent detailed the events of the previous day and the account that Ben Stanton had given him of the news from Sofia. Then he gave him the list of all those who had been arrested. Dismukes called in an assistant and they quickly allocated the names between the examining magistrates.

Dismukes ended his lunch with a cigar and, to Trent’s surprise, praised the cuisine in Camp Bondsteel.

‘Trent, let’s start at the top.’

The Lieutenant Colonel nodded and gave his orders on the phone. In ten minutes two military policemen led a man of about fifty into the room. They took off his handcuffs, saluted and went out. Nick Archer ran the CIA training camps in Kosovo and was senior resident. He had a welcoming face, thick grey hair neatly combed back, and wore a camouflage uniform without the

distinctive insignia. He seemed unworried by the situation. Dismukes scrutinised him:

‘Nick Archer,’ he croaked. ‘You think this is going to be fun, don’t you?’

Archer looked at him in his turn and replied calmly:

‘General, I don’t know if it is going to be fun, but everything that’s happened so far this morning has been amateur dramatics and deeply unproductive. What conceivable reason can there be for the senior CIA resident to be arrested and marched through a US military base, handcuffed like a common criminal?’

‘The reason, Nick Archer, is that you are charged with conspiring to commit acts of terror against American citizens and half a dozen other violations of US federal law.’

‘I am an officer of the CIA and I insist on an immediate meeting with a representative from Langley...’ Archer replied calmly. ‘Only after that will I talk with anybody else. And, of course, even then, only in the presence of my lawyer.’

‘How many years have you been in the CIA, Nick Archer?’

‘Nearly twenty-five, general...’

‘I ask the question advisedly,’ Dismukes paused to relight his cigar. ‘An old fox like you shouldn’t bother an old hunting dog like me with this nonsense. Your only hope is to convince me that you are either criminally careless or criminally stupid. If you don’t, then I have no alternative but to consider your actions treasonable. In neither case will I be authorising visits from anyone at Langley. Not even the cleaner. It’s your choice! Will you sit here and tell me what you know or shall I have you handcuffed again and sent back to your cell?’

The General sucked with renewed fervour on his cigar.

‘Nick,’ Colonel Trent broke the silence, ‘I’ll put it even more simply. General Dismukes is asking if you sent these men last night to kill me, and to kill Special Agent Stanton, or if you just lost control of them. And if

you don't tell him the truth, he'll rip you a new asshole, I swear.'

'Trent, are you crazy? You have my deep sympathy for what happened last night and I am profoundly relieved that you both survived but I can't believe you would even entertain the idea that I might have sent somebody to kill you.'

'In that case, what's holding you back?' General Willis broke in. 'If you maintain your innocence, talk! Forget Langley and lawyers. Judge Advocate Dismukes rightly suggests that you have only one option... to sit here and explain everything. Everybody makes mistakes. If you have, tell us. Anything less, including your silence, will simply incriminate you.'

The silence lasted a full minute. Nick Archer looked through the window blankly. Then he turned back and said:

'That's exactly what happened. We lost control. Crawford phoned me from Sofia to warn me that Stanton was coming here to investigate us. I told the

leaders of the groups that I monitor to disappear and not show themselves again until they heard from me. I didn't think for a moment that they would try to organise something like this on their own. But I should have.'

'I'm stiff,' Martha stood up and stretched cautiously, so as not to rock the trailer from which they were watching the house.

They had arrived in [Akatsiite](#) at five in the morning and for almost eight hours they had been sitting in the trailer of a small DAF freezer lorry decorated with faded advertisements for an enticing array of Bavarian wüst. The moment she first saw the truck, Martha was reminded that one of Bergman's most delightful talents was his ability to make himself invisible – whether in the desert, the city centre or some wretched slum. It was common for Bulgarian businesses to import second-hand trucks. And since repainting was expensive, most didn't bother. So, from the outside, their vehicle was utterly unremarkable. Inside, it was a different story. Under the bonnet was a powerful new engine, in the trailer a bunk bed had been installed along with a full comms desk, and if anybody had cared to dismantle the

freezer unit they would have found an astonishing array of aerals, cameras, electronic scanners, listening devices and computer equipment.

Even now, Martha's laptop was talking to the embassy, while she and Bergman watched the small whitewashed house, which had been the scene of no less than three throat-slittings the previous day but now showed no sign of life. They were cramped by two big Kawasaki bikes, which had been squeezed in beside them, and a member of the Embassy security guard who was their driver and was presently lying on the bunk. The rest of their group dozed in a deep red Nissan Patrol with darkened windows parked in a neighbouring street.

They had decided to carry out a punitive action against the assassins who had twice threatened Martha's life as well as the security of the Embassy. Martha had been reluctant and they had debated the pros and cons for several hours with AMAN HQ before Bergman had his way. Still, Tel Aviv had insisted that everything had

must look like a vendetta attack - Israeli relations with Sofia must not be jeopardised in any way. The Chechens would know very well what had happened to them.

Just after one o'clock a white Audi, driven by Yanko the Stutterer, approached Akatsiite. With him, in the back, were Abdul and Amarbek, the two men who had booby-trapped the house the previous day. They were arguing noisily about how best to re-enter the house where the body of their murdered colleague lay with, Suslambek had established, his mobile phone still in his pocket. There were telephone numbers in the phone's memory that absolutely must not fall into the hands of the Bulgarian Secret Services, and as they all knew, SIM cards have a cockroach-like ability to survive fire and explosion, especially if protected by a human corpse.

'Abdul, these bastards could be waiting for us anywhere. Do you think they'll be in a tank marked Diplomatic Protection Squad? I don't want to take any more risks than we have to. We either go in from the

back through the yards or you go in alone without cover. OK?’

Abdul shrugged his shoulders in agreement.

Amarbek leant forward and tapped the Stutterer on the shoulder:

‘Go back down this road. There’s a turning to the tyre place. You know it.’

The Stutterer nodded.

‘OK. Take it. Don’t drive right into the yard. Stop outside and wait there for us.’

The Stutterer nodded again. He went to the Sozopol crossroads and did a U-turn, which gave him the chance to make sure once again that nobody was following them. Shortly afterwards, he indicated right and the Audi swung down the asphalt track to the tyre store. Amarbek knew that they had only to cross the back yard of an eighty year old man who practically never went out. The Stutterer stopped at the entrance to Pneumatika and turned the car round. Finally he inched behind a shed where the vehicle was hidden out of sight of the

three men shifting a small mountain of tyres in the yard. Abdul and Amarbek jumped out of the car and, ducking awkwardly, ran about twenty metres to the broken fence at the end of the old man's garden. They pushed through it. Meanwhile the Stutterer, leaving the Audi's engine running, got out whistling, lifted the bonnet and busied himself with checking its bodily fluids while keeping half an eye on the fence through which the Chechens had disappeared. Amarbek waited in the old man's yard, from where he could see the back of their house and, more important, part of the street.

Meanwhile, Abdul looked around carefully, then slipped into the yard of their house, ran crouched to the back wall and stood up straight. Amarbek had wanted him to enter through one of the side windows but none of them could be opened without sending the place up. And breaking a window would attract attention. The only way in was through the door. If he opened it no more than ten centimetres he could reach in and disconnect the cable. But the door was on the front of

the house and could be seen from the street. Abdul wiped away the small drops of sweat that had formed on his top lip. He knew that no-one could be inside. Inside the house, he would be safer than out here, provided they weren't being watched. Gripping with his left hand the pistol in his coat pocket, he licked his lip and started walking slowly round the corner of the house to the front door.

Unable to see him now, Amarbek imagined him unlocking the door, opening it a little, while looking back at the street over his shoulder, reaching in and finding the hastily-improvised set of contacts hanging loosely on a cable. He should certainly be sweating by now. If Abdul made the wrong move, Allah only knew if Amarbek would survive. He moved slightly, looking for more cover in case of an explosion. In the street he noticed an old freezer truck with signs in Latin script that he couldn't make out. He reckoned that Abdul must be in the house by now, heaved a deep sigh and mopped his brow.

Martha and Bergman were staring tensely at the screens of their laptops.

‘The front door must be booby-trapped. Did you see how he reached in first before he opened the door? Must be a wire.’

‘But there’s no sign of explosives.’

‘The scanner’s weak. If they spread the explosives round it might not detect them,’ Bergman replied.

‘I don’t think anyone else is coming,’ Martha said. ‘They must be hiding somewhere else. Let’s take this guy and see what he can tell us.’

Bergman shook his head:

‘Somebody must be covering him from the back of the house. We can’t surround the house in time. And they must have come in a car.’

‘Maybe. But they could have sent him on his own. And if they’ve wired the house it means they’ve abandoned it. This may be our only chance to get him. If we don’t take him now we might as well give up the

operation. I think they've forgotten something and won't be back.'

Bergman switched on the microphone hanging in front of him and said:

'Blue flag!'

The engine of the Nissan Patrol in the neighbouring street roared into life and it began to drive towards the house. On their screens, Martha and Bergman watched Abdul opening the front door to leave. The roar of the engine startled him and he looked to see what was happening in the street. Commandos were pouring out of the Nissan and scattering at the front of the house, using a low brick wall as cover. Adrenalin racing, Abdul pulled the door shut and the two contacts licked each other for a split second. The small house seemed to jump upwards, lifted by an angry yellow flame. Then, with a dull thud, plaster, bricks, timber and glass exploded out of the flames.

‘Red flag! Red flag!’ Bergman shouted into his microphone, deafened by the roar as their trailer rocked with the blast.

Martha fell backwards and her laptop landed on top of her. Paying her no attention, Bergman turned to the driver who had squeezed into the cab through the small connecting door, and shouted:

‘Let’s get out of here.’

The commandos, beating plaster and dust out of their clothes, ran back to the Nissan Patrol which, a few moments later, raced after the truck. In thirty seconds they were on the main road and in four minutes they were leaving Burgas on the mountain road through Grudovo. Two minutes after that, the first police car, siren wailing, reached Akatsiite.

Amarbek, who had been knocked backwards by the blast, wondered for a moment whether he was dead. Tried to stand. Couldn’t. Wiping his face, he saw that his hand was covered in blood but registered with

satisfaction the fact that he was able to see it. He crawled back to the old man's fence, slid himself through it and saw the Audi waiting. The back door was open.

'Allah bless you Stutterer, I'll reward you for this.'

The Stutterer began to drive immediately, back along the side road, leaving behind the shouts of the tyre workers who had cautiously emerged to check whether the world had ended. Reaching the main road, he overtook three cars then braked to edge between two lorries.

Amarbek contemplated the wrestler. He hadn't asked about Abdul, almost certainly didn't care. He knew that The Stutterer was no admirer of the Chechens and took no pleasure in Suslambek's killings, that he was a pure mercenary. But, whatever his motives, Amarbek felt deeply grateful to him.

'Where to?' asked The Stutterer over his shoulder.

'Straight to Suslambek.'

The Stutterer nodded.

Salomon's team, closely followed by the berets in their Cherokee, had passed Karnobat and was already nearing Aytos when his mobile phone peeped. The Major looked at the display and flicked it open. It was the NSS officer in Burgas.

'Speak,' said Salomon.

'Major, it's chaos.'

'What's up?'

'The house blew up. But, before that, an army arrived.'

'What army?'

'I'd better explain when you get here. Where are you?'

'We're in Aytos. Be with you in twenty minutes.'

Salomon ended the conversation and called Lazar.

'Mmm.'

'We're in Aytos. Something has gone wrong...'

'What?'

'I have no idea. But the house has been blown up. Outsiders were at the scene. Unidentified. I'll know more in fifteen minutes. Should I send the berets back?'

'Sally, you are ringing me because you don't have enough information to answer this question yourself. Do you suppose I know any more? Feed them. See if you need them. Then decide.' Lazar hung up.

Bogomil looked questioningly at Salomon.

'Don't fucking look at me like that.'

When they reached Akatsiite, all roads were blocked. The site of the house was clearly indicated at some distance by the thick clouds of smoke that rose above it. Two fire brigade trucks had drenched what was left of the house with foam and a dozen firemen with pickaxes were trying to get into the ruins. Salomon parked the BMW about fifty metres from the house and got out with the Head of Operations. A stout blond man with caterpillar eyebrows moved towards them.

'OK, Stefan, thanks for ringing. Tell me what you know.'

‘Well, I came here alone without the local police, as you ordered, so I had no real chance of observing the area fully...’

‘Just tell me what you know, not why none of it’s your fault,’ snapped Salomon.

‘Sorry, Major. I, er, was watching from one of the houses opposite. I had to talk to the old lady who lives there all morning while I was watching the house from her kitchen, so I didn’t see everything. Vehicles. There was a red Nissan Patrol which appeared at the last minute and must have been parked nearby, I think. But I hadn’t seen it earlier. There was also an old DAF freezer lorry parked near the house. As far as I could tell, it was empty. At 13.10 a man appeared at the front of the target house. He walked round from the back yard. Dark, maybe an Arab. He opened the front door very carefully, might have been de-activating an alarm or a detonator. He was inside for about two minutes. As he came out, the Nissan appeared and stopped in front of the house and about eight commandos jumped out.’

‘Commandos? Ours?’

‘I don’t know Major. But they were good. Military training. They spread out behind the wall in front of the house. No shooting. The guy in the house looked like he panicked, closed the door and bang. That was it. The commandos got straight back in the Nissan and disappeared. So did the freezer lorry.’

‘The one with nobody in it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you seal the area?’

‘With what? On my own? The traffic police haven’t driven for ten days. They’re over their fuel limit already.’

‘Give me a description of the vehicles.’

‘I’ve already given it to the Colonel.’

At that moment a fireman appeared from the side of the house and spoke to a uniformed officer in the street. Salomon and his subordinate walked towards them. As they arrived, the Colonel turned to Salomon:

‘They’ve found a head.’

‘What head?’

‘A human head.’

‘Well I didn’t suppose he’d come out to report finding the decapitated head of a goose,’ retorted Salomon. ‘What else do we know?’

‘Nothing sir. But the face is identifiable.’

‘Then let’s see it.’

The Israelis had stopped in a clearing in the forest above Grudovo. The DAF had a hydraulic tail lift and Bergman and Martha had already extracted their bikes. The commandos had changed into civilian clothing. The sausage pictures had been stripped off the trailer and the whole electronics unit had been taken off the roof and put in the back of the Nissan. Five minutes later the truck set off. When it reached the main road it indicated right and drove back towards Burgas. Meanwhile, six commandos were scrubbing the Nissan furiously. In a short time it had turned from deep red to metallic blue. Bergman examined the work critically as they fastened diplomatic plates to it. He and Martha followed it on

their bikes to the main road, indicated left to Sofia and immediately overtook it.

Thirty kilometres north-east of them, Amarbek was washing his face over a battered sink and recounting events to Suslambek Yushaev. The Chechen's face was grim. Finally, Amarbek dried his face with paper towels, opened a green box and began to disinfect the wounds on his face. He applied three plasters then turned to Suslambek smiling:

‘Well, our clumsy Abdul is probably very happy now. His idea was that he would be greeted when he died by forty wives.’

‘Forty wives... Forty Bulgarian whores. And I'm left with no bomb man. None of these white men,’ he indicated the three Albanians in the yard, ‘can do it. Listen, Amarbek, they've finished the tanker. It would be better to wait an hour or two for it to dry, but we haven't got time. We have to move. We need to deal

with the guys who painted it – bring the white men,’ he cupped his throat with his palm.

Amarbek nodded and went to leave when he saw The Stutterer sitting in the Audi. He turned to Suslambek and gestured questioningly at the wrestler.

‘Get him out of the yard,’ was Suslambek’s instant reply.

Amarbek walked over to the car:

‘Drive to the main road and wait for us there.’

The Stutterer nodded, started the engine and moved off. Amarbek returned to the shed, looking into each room to make sure there was nobody headed for the workshop. The workers were tearing away the newspapers stuck to the tyres and windscreen of the tanker, whose new yellow and blue livery and signage showed it to be part of the Transoil fleet. The garage owner was already talking to Suslambek and nodding at the truck:

‘It’s ready, just needs an hour or two for the varnish to dry. Let’s settle up.’

The Chechen smiled, took him by the elbow and led him to the exit. A familiar flick-knife clicked in Suslambek's hand, he held his man tightly under the armpit and stuck the blade abruptly into his chest. The man hiccoughed and went limp but Suslambek, holding him firmly, didn't let him fall. Amarbek and the Albanians wasted no time. In a few seconds the workmen were rolling by the truck choking in their own blood. Suslambek released his man and he fell away, his weight pulling his body off the sharp blade. The Chechen bent and wiped the blade in the man's clothes then closed the knife and put it back in his pocket. Amarbek waved at one of the Albanians who nodded, jumped into the cab, started the engine and slowly drove the tanker out of the workshop.

'Amarbek,' Suslambek cried, 'Throw them into the pit, clean this place up with the hose and spread some gravel about – there's a pile behind the workshop. Be ready in five minutes!'

When they had finished they pulled the heavy door of the workshop closed and padlocked it. Amarbek had one more look around the rooms in the shed and picked up the keys from the rickety desk where a small pile of invoices was lying. He thought a little, then picked up the invoices for both jobs, closed the door behind him and locked it. The tanker was leaving the yard and Amarbek pulled the gate to, ran to the cab and jumped inside.

At the edge of the village, Amarbek and one of the Albanians climbed out of the tanker and got into the Opel parked at the end of the street. The tanker stopped once again at the main road where the Stutterer was waiting in the Audi. The three vehicles drove southwards to Sozopol.

Lazar double parked by the Women's Market and disappeared into the crowd among the stalls. While he considered the array of roses, carnations and gerberas, Lazar remembered that Salomon always took wild flowers, or at least ones that looked as if they might have come from a real garden. They looked somehow alive and seemed to suit Maria better. Lazar decided it was time to break his red rose habit.

He had already seen most of the stalls and was beginning to feel that he would never find what he was looking for. A familiar feeling. Then, passing the market's vegetable sector he glimpsed two small bouquets hiding among the cabbages on a stall belonging to a hunched old woman in black. He recognised not one of the flowers, but they looked magnificent and the scent when he picked up the nearer bouquet filled the air. He opened his wallet, gave a note to the old woman and, without waiting for the change,

walked back to the jeep. The smoky car filled with the fragrance of forest flowers.

By the time he reached the clinic it was almost dark. The senior nurse met him in the corridor and her shrugged shoulders told him that Maria was stable. Nonetheless he felt a familiar cold shiver run down his spine and, reaching the door of the intensive care ward, he put his forehead on the cold glass and heard his heart thumping frenetically.

She is so young... She hasn't lived yet. Give her life. No. Let her just have her life. Give nothing and take nothing away.

He stepped inside, holding his breath. It smelt sterile and was quiet. Even the equipment was oddly silent. His legs had become leaden. It occurred to him to bend forward and his right leg moved to balance him. Then it was easier and he walked up to the bed and put the small bouquet on her pillow. She was asleep. The cords of the oxygen mask had left red marks on her pale skin.

At that moment his mobile phone began to vibrate in his jacket pocket. Frightened that even that might wake her, he started moving backwards. He bumped into a cupboard and his heart sank hearing the noise. But he managed to sneak out of the room unnoticed. He looked through the glass again. She hadn't moved. Fast asleep. Lazar walked down the corridor a little and took out his phone. The number displayed told him nothing. He opened the lid and whispered:

'Hallo.'

'Zdravstvui medved,' Lazar recognised the voice at once.

Colonel Igor Losev headed what was left of the former residence of the GRU in Sofia. In fact, it was not so small, Lazar thought, if one were to judge by the number of cultural and trade attachés in the Embassy, but the currently cool relations between Russia and Bulgaria were echoed in the new wall between the special services of the two countries. Lazar knew very little about the new Russian security hierarchy that had

emerged since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. The most important thing was that they made very little trouble for him, so relations remained cordial though they saw each other almost exclusively at official functions.

‘Igor, I haven’t seen you for a hundred years.’

‘You are right, my friend. Change has scattered us. Blown us about like the Siberian wind.’

‘Igor, are you testing me? I’m not an American yet. There is no wind in Siberia. If there were wind in Siberia even the thick socks of the [Chukchi](#) would freeze.’

The Russian laughed:

‘You are right again,’ he answered. ‘It’s strange how we speak in others’ riddles.’ Losev coughed and his voice became more serious: ‘[Medved](#), I’ll be frank – I have a problem.’

‘Indeed. What is your problem?’

‘Nothing I can discuss on the phone - but it is urgent. I’d be grateful if you could spare the time to see me as soon as possible.’

Lazar looked at his watch and said:

‘Do you know Kalfov’s clinic?’

‘I know it. There is a park...’

‘That’s correct. Go there now ...’

‘I’m on my way...’

Lazar closed his phone and went slowly back to the door of the intensive care ward. Maria was still sleeping. She hadn’t moved and the flowers still lay on the pillow by her head. He turned and walked back along the corridor.

Downstairs, he found a small door that led to the tarmac playground and then dropped down into the park. Hidden by the trees he walked round the clinic and stopped by the fence where he could see the road leading down to the clinic. It was well lit. He noticed that all the lights were on. Taking out his cigarettes and lighting one he observed that, in the West, one would remark on a single bulb out of order. Here however... He flicked the ash off his cigarette, went to a birch tree with a thick trunk and leaned against it. The air was

damp and his movement shook drops of water over him like rain. He cursed. Felt foolish, exhausted and insignificant.

When he was twenty-five he would hide among the bushes in parks for secret meetings. It was exciting, orienting himself, considering the possible exits, traps and dead-ends, observation points, watching the passers-by and viewing each as a possible threat. Now, at forty-five, he found himself still waiting under wet trees, still obsessed by the idea of conspiracy. Only the poles had reversed: black had turned white and white black. In those days, his Soviet comrades had been welcomed in his office; information had been gladly shared; operations run jointly. While conspiracy or betrayal was assumed when it came to meetings of any sort with Westerners – whether American, English or French. With them, it was always chance meetings in unexpected places with strangers; though, of course, they understood each other well, acted like professionals and reached the necessary agreement

quickly. Now it was the Americans who walked into his office as if they owned it; the English who supplied him with his equipment; his Soviet comrades whom he met discreetly in the bushes. Only the Soviet comrades were not Soviet but Russian and they weren't comrades but gentlemen. Plus ça change...

A car was driving slowly along the main road. First it passed the turning to the clinic then stopped, waited for the two cars behind it to overtake, then reversed until it came level with the lane. Now it turned off and headed down to the clinic. Lazar strained to see the driver and cursed himself for not asking Igor about the car he was going to come in. He was sure it was Igor, but it was a Citroën and Lazar found he didn't know whether the requirement for Embassy staff to drive only Russian vehicles had been relaxed. Losev switched off the engine, got out, then turned slowly towards the park, looking almost directly at Lazar. Lazar smiled broadly for the first time that evening.

‘An old dog is an old god,’ he said, emerging from the trees. ‘He finds the right track as if he is going to the place where he met his first lover...’

‘Lazar, my friend, help me,’ the Russian put his hand under Lazar’s elbow.

He was a bit older than Lazar but it didn’t show. Lazar saw that his blond hair was turning grey, recognised his blue eyes, broad face and that nose. As if the word Russian were written all over him. Perhaps it was the reason why he had spent his working life in Eastern Europe though he was an exemplary secret service man. It would have been impossible for him to work under cover. His Russian soul would have uncovered him at once.

‘Lazar, I know you’re handling the Flamingo bombing. We are following the case closely – not just because one of our journalists was killed there. I haven’t bothered you before now, knowing that whatever could be done would be done since you are leading the investigation. But some complications have arisen.’

‘What complications?’

‘The Chechens, who are the answer to the ‘who’ question, have gone too far...’

‘Wait a moment!’ Lazar’s voice rose angrily. ‘You didn’t want to bother me with what? With the useless information that it was the Chechens who bombed the hotel? May I live to return the favour.’

‘Medved...’

‘Shut up, Igor. And what is this ‘too far’? Further than killing twenty-nine people in the centre of Sofia? Too far for whom? How convenient that you can sit idly watching in Dragan Tsankov while the world’s press are massacred, but you need urgent night meetings once your beloved interests are touched by the Chechens.’

‘Don’t get angry, Medved,’ Losev smiled in the darkness. ‘Just two days after the attack you had considered all the available theories and rejected them all except for the Chechen one. What help does Lazar Palin need from me? And don’t forget, it took me time to

establish that it was you who was conducting the investigation...'

'Igor! Igor! Why didn't you ask me? Now when it's you that has a problem you seem to have no trouble finding me. And behold the lowly spies aspire to become diplomats...'

But, in spite of himself, Lazar smiled back at the Russian, recognising his own talk as showmanship. You are getting old, Igor, he thought. You forget that a smile is useless in the dark; you must speak; every nuance, every suggestion must be delivered with the most precise and appropriate words. You try to disarm me with your smile – a smile that I can't see. Only then did Lazar register that the smile he had seen had not been visible. He had felt the smile. And the Russian knew that he had felt it.

'Tell me your problem.'

'You have to promise that you won't shout Lazar. You've become a very important man, Lazar, and your voice has become important too...'

‘What in God’s name have you done that you begin with this nonsense? How bad can it be Igor?’

‘My friend, it’s like this. The Chechens have stolen a very valuable property ...’

‘What kind of property, Igor? Don’t play games. The President’s dacha? Have you lost it? Have they towed it away?’

‘You misunderstand me, Medved. I mean a weapon...’

‘Oh Jesus, no! Not one of your nerve gases? Some virus? Am I right? I thought you destroyed them with the help of the Americans...’

‘No, Lazar, it’s not a virus nor a bacteria. It’s plutonium...’

‘What?’

‘If I say it thirty times it won’t turn into [kvass](#). You heard me. Nearly sixteen kilos. With luck it will be enough for two bombs. And don’t look at me like that or I’ll kick you. Don’t try to teach me ethics, do you hear me? I know why you are here. I have no children but I’m

the last man on earth who would allow anyone to lay their hands on plutonium. You know that.'

'Stop it, Igor. Let's go and sit somewhere...'

Lazar knew well the personal tragedy of Igor Losev. As a young Lieutenant commanding a security platoon at a Soviet nuclear site he had helped his men collect up a truckload of nuclear waste capsules that had spilled onto the road outside a kindergarten. He had sent his men to hospital while he himself drove the truck to a secure place away from the civilian population. Then he had hitched a lift to the hospital. The soldiers were OK but a military doctor in Moscow had told him that he must never think of having children. Losev had had a vasectomy. And then joined the GRU. As a physiological bachelor he was uniquely qualified.

The two men went to a bench and sat on it.

'It's crazy,' Losev began. 'We have been personally ordered by Putin to call in the Alphas at the first sign of trouble. You know what that means. And absolute silence. Do you know that in twenty years we haven't

allowed even one gram of unauthorised plutonium to leave the country. Yet every other Hollywood movie has the same plot – terrorists steal plutonium from the helpless Russians. Can you imagine what will happen if news of this gets out? At least we have it under control – we sacrificed our most valuable undercover agent in the Chechen HQ. We know the plutonium is on its way to Burgas. They plan to take it through Bulgaria and Macedonia and sell it on, most probably to the Arabs, either in Kosovo, or in Albania, around Vlorë. It's coming in the tanker *Jimmy 3* but there is no such tanker in the Black Sea so we think that they have changed its name and documents at sea. There are at least four possible vessels en route to Burgas and it would be madness to search them at sea. They might throw the stuff overboard. The only way is to take them in Bulgaria. I guaranteed that you would help us do this discreetly...'

'Are you mad? Do you suppose I can seize a consignment of plutonium without authorisation?'

Lazar stared at him. 'When is the ship expected to arrive – and where exactly?'

'It's coming to the oil terminal, almost definitely. Tomorrow...'

'Now I'm going to kill you. Really I'm going to kill you! It's seven p.m. You're telling me now. How much time have you wasted? Two days? Why didn't you tell me...? What else?'

'Nothing else. You know that even this is too much.'

'Get out of here. And don't even think about lecturing me about discretion and secrecy. You made this godawful fucking mess. Now it's our problem and we'll clear it up our way.'

'I know that if anyone can do it, Lazar, you can. But I must stress...'

'Fuck yourself, Igor. Go and fuck yourself.'

Salomon went straight home. The sight of Lazar's face seemed like an indefinitely deferrable pleasure. Nearly a thousand kilometres at the wheel. Several hours in the wrecked house sorting through heads, fingers, tits and balls. He felt grey. For once he hoped his family would be taking their time at the shops so he could have a shower before they got home. But alas, his two torpedoes launched themselves at him when he was still in the corridor.

'Daddy! Daddy! Horse! Horse!' Emo screamed, clutching at his left leg.

'Daddy's back! Daddy's back!' Victor dragged his father to the kitchen where Elena was playing the evening symphony for pots and pans with the Hoover, unaccountably, running in the background.

She took one look at Salomon and said firmly:

'Boys! Let your father catch his breath. Go in the other room. Now.'

His sons started to argue, but one ominously raised eyebrow from their mother sent them scurrying out of the kitchen.

Salomon kissed Elena and felt a moment's resentment that, in spite of his best intentions, it was she who had assumed supreme power in their home. Getting such obedience from the little rascals was beyond him.

Disconsolate, he went to the bedroom, undressed, put on his dressing gown and walked into the bathroom. He was just running the shower when Elena appeared at the door and passed him the phone. He looked at her questioningly.

'Lazar.'

He snatched the phone:

'Colonel, I'm...'

'I need you in the office.'

'I'll have a shower and I'll be right there.'

'No shower, Sally. Come now,' Lazar hung up.

Salomon wailed with anger:

‘Damn you! You have no fucking idea...’ he would have continued but, opening the door, he caught Elena’s look and changed his tone. ‘If you knew what I’ve been doing day. And now the fat shit won’t even let me wash.’

Elena smiled and hugged him. He softened at once.

‘I know, honey. But it must be important. He didn’t even tell me how beautiful I am. I can’t remember the last time that happened.’ Her eyes twinkled.

‘You’re right. I’m going.’ Suddenly he wanted her terribly. They hadn’t made love for... a week.

‘Hurry home. I want you too.’

Entering the office, he stopped for a moment, astonished to see everyone at their desks. The place was humming. The Head of Operations, Sherlock, the explosives specialist and Rossy were sitting with Lazar. Even Shifter looked worried. Salomon got a coffee from the machine and walked into Lazar’s office.

‘What’s up, has somebody died?’

‘Be quiet.’

‘Fuck be quiet. How about good evening Sally? How was your day Sally? Thank you for spending the afternoon matching gypsies’ body parts, Sally? Would you like to wash the blood and shit off before we start, Sally? Thank you for working for three days with only six hours sleep, Sally?’

‘What gypsies? What are you talking about,’ Lazar glared at him. ‘Right now, I don’t need this. Get out of my office.’

‘You’ve just fucking dragged me out of the fucking shower, before I could even get in it and now you don’t want me here,’ Salomon banged the table with his palm.

‘Sally, I’m guessing you’ve had a bad day. Well, guess what? I don’t care. We’ve got better things to do...’

‘You are such a shit, Colonel. You may not have a home...’

Sherlock braced himself and interrupted:

‘We’ve got a big problem, Sally.’

Salomon turned abruptly to face the analyst:

‘How big?’

‘Sixteen kilos...’

‘What? Is this some kind of joke?’

‘Sally, tomorrow morning, sixteen kilos of plutonium – enough for two bombs that could shake the planet – arrive in this country courtesy of the Chechen mafia. We don’t know exactly where it is, what it’s in or who’s guarding it. By the end of tomorrow, we have to find it and confiscate it, without telling anyone. Not a soul. Now pull yourself together, stop whining and run the fucking operation. Brief him. I’m going to see to that little madam... This time she’s going to talk.’

Lazar got up, walked out and slammed the door behind him.

Salomon looked blank.

‘Martha Friedman,’ Bogomil explained. ‘He’s decided she knows about the plutonium. I think we could have a diplomatic incident.’

Salomon shook his head and turned to Sherlock:

‘OK, start at the beginning...’

Lazar parked the Mitsubishi in front of The Lame Dog. The bar was in the same street as the Israeli Embassy but two blocks up. It was a modest place but served excellent food. Rich smells came from the kitchen, the clean tablecloths were set with olive oil, vinegar and four other types of spice. Green Balkan savory sat in hand-turned wooden bowls on each table.

Martha was sitting alone at a table by the window, eating a salad topped with a creamy sauce. She nodded at him and Lazar sat at the table beside her in order to be able to watch the door. He said nothing and she continued eating her salad energetically. Lazar left her to finish her dinner. Finally she swallowed the last leaf, pushed her plate away and sighed with pleasure. She felt in her bag, took out a packet of Papastratos and offered a cigarette to the Colonel. Lazar shook his head and took out his Camels.

'I smoke only camel shit. I can't abide the Greek stuff.'

Martha smiled: 'Do you have problems with the Greeks?'

'No, not these days. Fifteen years ago it was different...'

'Go on, Colonel. I'm listening,' Martha looked at him with large dark eyes.

'No, this time I'm going to listen to you, Miss Friedman, and you are going to talk. You are going to talk until I decide that you've said enough. Otherwise you and your colleagues will be on a plane to Tel Aviv on Monday,' Lazar replied slowly.

'Is that a threat, Colonel?'

'Of course it's a threat, Miss Friedman. Does it sound like an invitation to a barbecue? And if you're thinking that I haven't got the authority to do it, I suggest you get your pretty head out of your fat arse, Miss Friedman. The world's not what it was a week ago. Have I made myself clear?'

‘Colonel, I don’t want a fight. Not with you. I’m happy to tell you everything you want to know provided only that it’s not a state secret as defined by the chief censor at the Ministry of Defence in Jerusalem...’

‘Listen to me, my girl,’ Lazar’s face was tense now. ‘I’ve been doing this job since you were in nappies. Diapers to you. I don’t need lectures on state secrets. You are in the Republic of Bulgaria and while you’re here *I* decide what constitutes a state secret...’

Martha stretched, tossed her hair and smiled:

‘OK, Colonel. I told you I don’t want a fight. Ask me.’

‘I want you to tell me everything you know about the plutonium, now!’

‘About plutonium? Wouldn’t it be easier to look in an encyclopaedia? I’m afraid I don’t remember exact figures, temperatures, pressures...’

‘Martha Friedman, if we were anywhere else I would slap you, you insolent little chit. I’m talking about

the plutonium which the Chechens have stolen. The same Chechens that Riley was investigating. The same Chechens that bombed the Flamingo Hotel and twice tried to kill you and would have killed you... I don't want gratitude, Miss Friedman, I simply expect you to behave appropriately for once.'

He observed the activity on Martha's face carefully. Her eyebrows had shot up, crumpling her entire forehead. Now she lowered them, narrowing her eyes. Finally she closed her eyes completely so that two deep lines formed above her small nose. She looked embarrassed and confused. Martha put her elbows on the table and held her face between her palms. Then she leant back and crossed her fingers behind her head like a boy:

'So the Chechens have stolen the plutonium?' She paused and closed her eyes again for several seconds. Lazar said nothing. When she opened them again, she looked tired and sad. 'That's why I couldn't make sense of all this... They were preparing to transport

plutonium... Colonel, I swear on my mother's grave that I didn't know about this plutonium and I can assure you that Riley... had no idea about it either. He was getting deep, but he was only interested in drugs.'

Lazar contemplated her in silence.

'I know, Colonel, I know that you don't believe me. But this is too serious to play cat and mouse over. This looks terrible. Like nothing I have come across in my career before. Will you permit me to call Major Bergman and ask him here so we can discuss this together.'

Lazar thought for a moment and nodded. He had no choice but to believe her.

Martha took out her phone.

'Bergy, can you get here straight away? ...No. No problem.' She switched off her phone and put it back in her bag.

'Do they plan to sell it to the Arabs?'

'I believe so.'

'We've heard something about that end of it. A deal. Nobody sleeps at AMAN HQ at the moment because of

this. We didn't even know the suppliers were Chechens. They're calling it "the big bang". That's what we picked up with our electronic surveillance. That's all we knew.'

Martha ruffled her hair with her fingers.

Lazar's attention was caught by a movement at the door and he saw Bergman enter the bar. Without looking around he headed to their table, nodded to Martha and held out his hand to Lazar. Evidently trying, like the others, not to sit with his back to the door, he turned a chair to sit beside Lazar, almost with his back to Martha. Wasting no time on civilities, Lazar told them what he knew about the plutonium. Martha looked almost excited while Bergman maintained a steady frown. Lazar finished and Bergman coughed and said:

'Colonel, I suggest we lay all our cards on the table. The stakes are too high to play our own games. Do you agree?'

Lazar sighed and nodded. Then he scrutinised both of them and, raising his right forefinger, said:

'I agree. But don't forget one thing. Not for a second. You are on my territory. The final decision on everything is mine. No tricks. None of your virtuoso performances. Do you understand, Major?'

'That's absolutely fair, Colonel. My suggestion is that we don't arrest them in Bulgaria.'

'We have to!' snorted Lazar.

'On the contrary, Colonel,' Bergman said calmly. 'We should take them in Albania. Our Special Forces will take care of it. We need to catch the buyer too. At all costs. It is, of course, in our interest to do it this way. But yours too. We can do it cleanly in Albania. Surgically. Nobody doubts that, surely? The world is watching Bulgaria right now, Colonel. You are not free to act. This is not about personal glory, Colonel. Please think about it, Colonel.'

Ben Stanton had been sitting as if glued to his chair in Lazar's office for half an hour. The others were chatting in the main hall and Salomon was asleep – knowing he would have to drive to Burgas again. Ben's eyes were fixed on the single word PLUTONIUM which he had written in his notebook in block capitals and subsequently embellished. But his thoughts were drifting. In just three days his life had been turned inside out like a woollen sock. The six months he had spent setting up the office, attending meetings and cocktail parties, making acquaintances and, of course, doing the required paper work now seemed years away. This business, the bombing, the CIA's disinformation, the ambush, and now the plutonium. It just seemed to grow. Wanting to consume everything. Each time it seemed to be over, a new twist emerged.

He was startled by a movement behind him and turned to see the Colonel's exhausted eyes gazing at the bold word occupying a whole page of his notebook.

'Do you know what a man said to me two hours ago? "Even if you say it thirty times, it won't turn into kvass." Do you know what kvass is?'

'A Russian drink? Low alcohol as far as I can remember?'

'It's yoghurt. And if you write it in thirty notebooks it won't turn into a paper tiger.'

Lazar walked to his desk and fell into the chair.
'Tomorrow



or the day after, Ben, the bastards intend to take enough plutonium for two bombs across Bulgaria to Albania. And all we know is the word Burgas. We say it's like seeking a pin in a roll of hay...'

'We have something similar, Colonel.'

Lazar stood up and made for his coffee machine. 'Call those clowns in here will you?'

Ben jumped up and went out into the main office. The explosives specialist looked at him questioningly and Ben nodded to Lazar's office. Sherlock and Mr Boggy were stood by the coffee machine. Sherlock waved at him to say that they were coming.

When they were all assembled, Lazar walked over to the sofa and, to their universal amazement, woke Salomon very carefully.

'Sally, my boy, let's do some work.'

Salomon looked around and stretched:

'OK, let me just wash my face.'

While he did so, Lazar sent Rossy to fetch Salomon a cup of coffee.

‘Boys,’ Lazar began the briefing in further violation of the established order ‘This is how it looks...’

He told them about his conversation with the Israelis and Bergman’s suggestion. When he had finished, Sherlock was the first to speak:

‘It does make sense, Boss. What would it achieve to try and make a move while the plutonium is in transit in Bulgaria? The Israelis can’t help us here. We can’t catch the buyer. And the operation would be more exposed.’

Lazar looked at Ben. The federal agent coughed and spoke quietly:

‘Colonel, in my opinion my... opinion is of little importance because this decision is going to be taken in Washington, DC,’ Ben looked around him. ‘I’m afraid it may sound rude, but we have already agreed to speak openly and now the stakes are so high that what we say here is of little consequence. Whether we are going to be allowed to let the plutonium reach Albania depends on Washington. So let me report first and then we’ll decide

about the Israelis. Of course, we should certainly still be ready to meet the shipment when it comes...'

Lazar nodded.

'This, I suppose, is what you would call non-interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country?' Salomon, who was now occupying his usual seat, looked at Ben with a grim smile.

'Sally, for God's sake, let's not start on that again. You may not like it; you may call us imperialists and many other things besides. But this isn't the time for a political debate. I am simply telling you what is going to happen...'

'But we didn't have to tell you about the plutonium,' Salomon nagged.

'Sally, do you mean to tell me that you would undertake an operation like this without the knowledge and agreement of your own government? The Chief Secretary of your Ministry of the Interior has to be told and he...'

‘Exactly,’ Lazar broke in. ‘Sally, he’s right. OK, Ben, submit your report and get us a decision quickly. Though, I won’t be surprised if they’ve already made it ...’

Ben looked at him quizzically, nodded, stood up and left the office.

‘Congratulations. We surrender,’ Salomon clapped his hands.

‘Major Dekalo, I’ve already warned you. Stop this nonsense or leave. I won’t say it again,’ Lazar’s voice sounded strained and hoarse.

‘Have we got a plan for Burgas?’ Lazar turned to the Head of Operations.

‘Yes, Colonel. We’ll take two observation teams and a platoon of berets. We concentrate our efforts on the Lukoil terminal. We know the potatoes are on a tanker...



‘Potatoes...’ roared Salomon and Lazar in unison.

‘Sorry, Boss, you talked about the need for absolute secrecy earlier. The operation is already code-named Vox Dei and the goods will only ever be referred to as potatoes. My thinking, Boss, is that there is very little chance of our confusing these potatoes with real potatoes at the terminal or in transit.’

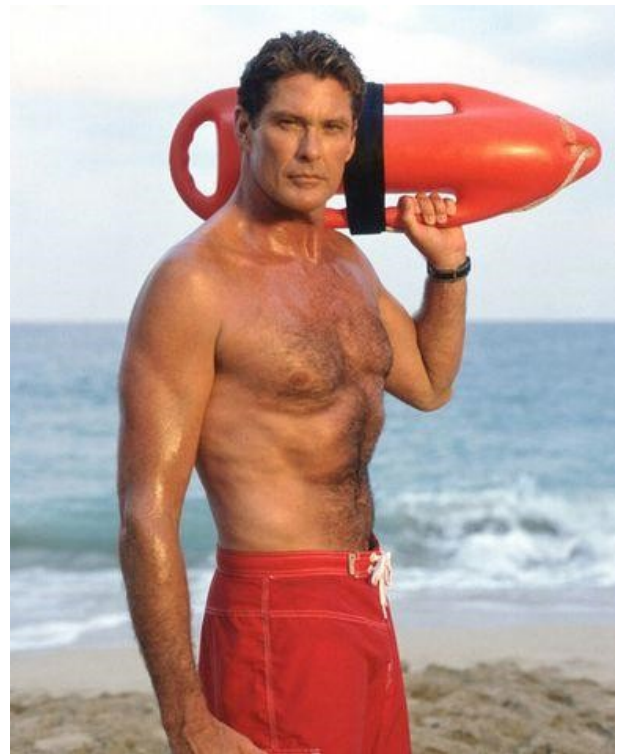
‘That’s correct, Mr Boggy. Your forward thinking is, as usual, impeccable. And anyone eavesdropping will surely suspect nothing, knowing, as they do, that the Bulgarian security services also run a black market greengrocery business.’

‘But we have no idea if they will try to land them at the quay or offload them onto a smaller vessel offshore,’ Bogomil pressed on. ‘If they’re using a tanker and they land them quayside, they will certainly use the oil terminal; a tanker can’t go anywhere else. Even if they use an auxiliary vessel, the consignment will be bulky. I understand that it’s likely to have been in a very large metal cylinder and they are highly *unlikely* to have

unpacked it. Ben is getting us more on this. In any case, they can't land it on a beach. If they try, we've already arranged for the coast guard to double its patrols and keep all its men on stand-by for the next forty-eight hours. But the logical choice is still the Lukoil terminal. It's the most remote. Assuming they have their own people inside the terminal, they'll land it easily and use a petrol tanker to transport it onwards. If they're using a smaller vessel, they've got problems. All the other landing points in Burgas are more exposed, busier - even at night - and the risk of the unexpected happening are much greater. In an ideal world we would watch them all, and we will have backups in place. But we need to concentrate our efforts on the oil terminal.'

'We're putting our trust in the coast guard?'

'Boss, the coast guard knows the coastline. It's their



job. They are experienced. They've got new-to-us vessels from the Italians. *Lungomare*. Who else should we use?'

'So long as they've been following Baywatch recently, we'll be OK,' snorted Lazar.

'Colonel?'

'I watched an episode. It featured a coastguard vessel racing to save a woman with prominent breasts. She appeared to be floundering in almost a metre of water.' Lazar turned to Sherlock, who was rocking almost imperceptibly in his chair:

'Boss, this plan is based on my assessment. I don't believe they will take too many risks here. Apart from the Lukoil terminal, all the other deep-water docks are approached via the town centre. They won't want to be caught up in the centre of Burgas. Round the Lukoil terminal there are forests, a holiday village believe it or not, and countless small roads. The choice is obvious.'

'I was told the Lukoil terminal,' Lazar interjected.

'Ah, any other crucial information we should be given Boss?'

‘Let’s just hope the choice is not too obvious,’ Lazar ignored the question. ‘But I agree with your conclusions. Sally, will you lead the operation in Burgas?’

‘What kind of question...’

‘You’ll use a driver. That’s an order.’

‘I...’

‘Then go.’

Salomon, Bogomil and the explosives specialist left the office. Sherlock stood up and looked expectantly at the Colonel.

‘I want you to look after everything at this end.’

‘By the way,’ Sherlock turned back as he left the office, ‘tomorrow is the funeral of some of the Flamingo casualties. Riley will be buried in Sofia.’

‘Why is he not being flown home?’

Sherlock shrugged. ‘Martha Friedman will be there... no relatives are expected to attend.’

When Ben Stanton returned half an hour later he saw the Colonel still thinking. The federal agent sat quietly next to him and coughed.

‘Ah, Ben, you’re back.’

‘As always you were right, Colonel, they knew... the Israelis.’

Lazar smiled. ‘The Israelis, Ben, never like to lose.’

‘...and the decision is to follow their plan,’ Ben finished.

‘Well, now I have to go and report to our mutual friend,’ Lazar stood up and put on his jacket slowly.

‘Do you want me to come with you? It might be useful?’

Lazar gave him a lop-sided smile:

‘Right now, Ben, the secret password in Sofia is not ‘Open Sesame’ but ‘Washington says to me.’ And to be honest, bearing in mind the scum that’s risen to the surface of our swamp in the last few days, they may not believe it from me. Let’s go, I can’t think of a better man to speak for me in the name of Washington.’

Patricia O'Connell listened attentively to the head of the radioactive materials laboratory as he explained to her the general principles and conditions for the storage and transport of plutonium. When he finished Patricia asked:

‘Anything special as far as the Russians are concerned?’

‘I don't believe so... It's handled the same everywhere.’

Patty nodded and the man left her office. She looked at her watch, gathered the scattered papers on her desk, put them into a small file and then went to the angular office on the fourth floor. The assistant to the Deputy Director for Operations was at his computer. She greeted him and asked:

‘Who's he got with him?’

‘Go in, he's with Brian. They're waiting for you.’

Checking her hair mechanically, Patty went through. The Director of the National Security Agency was sitting behind a large walnut desk and the owner of the desk was sitting on it. The two were talking quietly. Her boss looked up and said:

‘Come in, Patty,’ then, smiling, ‘I suppose you won’t want to join me on the desk - take a chair.’

Patricia liked his manner: in any situation he took care to make people comfortable and welcome. She pushed one of the most comfortable chairs round to the front of the desk and sat down, her file on the desk in front of her. The NSA Director had been watching her carefully:

‘So Patty, how are you?’

‘I’m OK,’ she answered with a smile, thinking that the old fox had never looked better. They had known each other for many years since his time as chairman of the Senate Committee on Intelligence. She had worked for him a number of times then and knew she had his complete confidence. Perhaps that was why the DDO

tended to use her in almost all the Bureau's most important operations. It certainly guaranteed that the Bureau had the ear of the White House. And, as a consequence, the NSA chief felt at home in the FBI building.

Patty looked at her boss questioningly. He nodded to her with a smile:

'Speak, Patty, I can see you want to.'

'This deal with the Israelis. Their insistence that they have to take the buyer. Everyone seems to accept it at face value. But the buyer won't be Mr Big. The buyer will be a man with a suitcase and a lot of firepower. Mr Big will be on the end of a telephone. They want the goods. It's as simple as that. And nobody seems to see it.' She looked at them in turn and they laughed simultaneously.

'We were just talking about this,' her boss replied. 'Of course, you're right, Patty.'

‘And we’re just going to let them take the plutonium? These are nuclear weapons we’re talking about.’

‘Listen, Patty,’ the NSA chief looked serious at last, ‘they’ve got enough already. Two more or two less makes no difference... In the mean time, the US saves millions of dollars in military aid in return and the Israelis get to do the dirty work which, right now, suits the administration just fine and saves us another million dollars.’

‘I see,’ said Patty thoughtfully. ‘I see.’

Her boss smiled again and the NSA Director slapped his hand on the table and exclaimed:

‘That’s right, Patty, you’re beginning to see the big picture,’ then he turned to the Deputy Director and said, ‘Your successor is developing a steel grip... When I think what a naive young woman she was ten years ago.’

‘Brian, if I wasn’t at work, I’d say you talk too much like a novelist these days – you could fill a book with this stuff.’

‘Memoirs, perhaps...’ the DDO grinned.

‘No-oo. Everybody’s writing their memoirs these days. Perhaps a collection of modern-day morality tales, laced with exquisitely-chosen aphorisms and a wise but unobtrusive commentary.’

‘Sign me up for a copy,’ the DDO laughed.

‘But it’ll have to wait until I’m through with my mandate, of course. And now, tell me the unforeseeable difficulties. The impossible-to-predict eventualities. This time, the White House is going to want to know every detail. And remember, if anything goes wrong, the CIA will give no quarter. They’re under serious pressure.’

Patty checked her notes then looked up:

‘Brian, there’s nothing simple here. Our latest information is that, apart from ourselves and the CIA, which may not be the same thing, Tel Aviv, the Bulgarians, two groups of Chechens, the Russians as a

result, some Albanians and the French all have vested interests. It seems unlikely that the Brits know nothing, but they haven't made contact. All we need is for the Chinese to get involved.'

The DDO was looking at her thoughtfully. She continued:

'I know you won't like it but everything is now in the hands of the Bulgarians. I have never met this Lazar Palin, but our agent in Sofia rates him extraordinarily highly. Of course, we can't be sure of his resources, but London put in some good equipment there recently.'

'OK. But what about insurance?'

'A second team?' Patricia asked.

The NSA Chief nodded.

'Brian, they expect the shipment in around eight hours. We have no men on the ground except for Stanton in Sofia. The CIA have been locked up. If we got men there in time, they wouldn't know the terrain, they'd have no resources. The Bulgarians have asked for technical support and we're giving it. It would be chaos

if we sent our own people and it would probably alert the carriers.'

'And what about the risk of an accident? Is there any chance the Bulgarians could try and make a move while the plutonium is on their soil?'

'None,' replied Patty. 'They don't want the problem. They're as happy as we are to use the men in black.'

The DDO stood up and, hands in pockets, began pacing the room. Then he stopped, turned and smiled suddenly:

'Patty, I've been thinking about the radiation. If there's a risk that they'll miss the shipment when it lands, couldn't we pinpoint it with our newest scanners? We could get them there in time.'

'It's in hand,' Patty replied. 'The Brits gave them two portable ones last year and the Israelis are sending two more tonight. That's four vessels, four points of entry or four roads covered. There are only two roads they can use to cross Bulgaria.'

The NSA Chief took the coat he had thrown over the back of a chair, put it on and looked at them:

‘OK, thank you. I’ll get out of your hair.’

The DDO walked him to the door.

‘When are you flying?’ his visitor asked.

‘In six hours. Tomorrow at noon, local time, I’ll be there. I’ll decide then if additional support is needed.’

‘Great. You know, office analysis is one thing, but a man on the spot is always better. Nose to the ground. You have the full authority of the President to act as you see fit, provided only that the decisions you take are all correct.’

The DDO laughed loudly and turned back to his desk.

‘Patty, get in touch with Ben Stanton again, tell him all this latest stuff and tell him from this moment to keep me informed personally. If a situation that needs my sanction arises, have him ring me on the plane. And emphasise again that my visit is incognito and not one word of it must get out.’

Patty stood up, took her file and nodded:

‘I’ll talk to Ben right now.’

The DDO leant back and laughed tiredly:

‘Well, Patricia, I wish you luck with... what did you say.. ah yes, ‘Operation Vox Dei.’ I like it. This holy Colonel of theirs had better be good. In fact, Patty, isn’t he an atheist?’

Patricia O’Connell smiled broadly:

‘I see you’ve been reading his CV as well, sir.’

Ben was lying on his bed in the dark. But his curtains were not fully drawn and some light spilled in from the boulevard. He was following the shadows as they moved across the ceiling and trying to think of nothing. Instead, his thoughts jumped wildly from Lazar to his sick daughter, from the bullets in Uroshevats to Salomon in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle on its way to the Black Sea. He tried to imagine the plutonium and the ship that was ferrying it. They thought it was on a tanker. *Where have they hidden the container? On the*

hull? Using magnets? Hardly. Too risky. Then he thought of Trent. There had been some success there. They had identified two Kosovars who were probably connected with the plutonium shipment. But they hadn't been able to extract any hard information.

The telephone rang. It was the call from Washington he'd been waiting for. He switched on the scrambler.

'Hi, Ben, are you asleep?' He was pleased to hear Patty's voice.

'Secure. No, Patty,' Ben smiled. 'No chance. This plutonium is pursuing me. It's becoming a Greek monster with two heads and three eyes on each one.' He heard his boss's ringing laugh.

'Don't worry, Ben, I'm just the same... well without the monsters, of course. But you're very close to Greece there, aren't you?'

'Sure. From here, Thessalonica is nearer than Burgas.'

‘However you feel, Ben, try to sleep tonight. You won’t get much chance over the next two days. The DDO flies tonight. Everything is as discussed. He wants me to stress again that the visit is incognito. He will see only your Lazar and the big chief at AMAN who is on his way from Tel Aviv now. He still plans to bring Crawford back with him. And he wants you to keep him informed personally of any developments. Don’t hesitate to ring him during his flight. But don’t forget to ring me too...’ Patty laughed again. ‘Any questions?’

‘No, Patty. I think everything is clear...’

‘Ah, one thing, the Israelis are bringing two new scanners tonight to Sofia. Make sure there’s transport to Burgas available the moment they land.’

‘Excellent, Patty. I’ll see to it.’

‘Try to sleep, Ben, good night.’

‘Good night, Patty.’

Ben looked at the clock. It was nearly midnight. He decided it was impossible that Lazar would already be

in bed and called to tell him the latest news from Washington.

‘Hi, Ben,’ Lazar answered. ‘Why aren’t you asleep?’

‘I can’t, Colonel. What about you? Are you at home?’

‘I’m on a bench,’ Lazar said and paused, then added, ‘outside the clinic.’

Without hesitation, Ben heard himself say, ‘I’m coming over.’