

# AN OLD SPY STORY

## Terry Morgan

---

### Copyright 2011 Terry Morgan

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Kobo and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2011 by TJM Books [www.tjmbooks.com](http://www.tjmbooks.com)

The right of Terry Morgan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

### REVIEWS & COMMENTS:

*".....a masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about...."*

*"....I loved this plot.....international trade, bribery, corruption and the murky workings of British Intelligence. The depiction of the may fixers and middle men ring so true, as do the dubious business practices. Gritty descriptions of far flung cities and their low budget hotels....easy reading."*

*"..A wonderful and moving love story from an elderly man's perspective is beautifully woven into it and the ending is masterful..."*

*"...I enjoyed it, exciting, endlessly beguiling and fun...."*

*"..thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. A remarkable book from a new writer who has clearly been there and done it - easy reading."*

## CONTENTS:

### **PART ONE: The Detention**

### **PART TWO: The Statement**

The Beginning

Cockroaches

The Algerian Parrot

Monkey Puzzle

Hanky Panky

Reynolds

Jack Woodward

The Voice Inside

Assignments

Operation Chrysalis

Farid

A Mugging

Aftermath

Guilt

A Sub Contract

Medical Report

Frank and Olga

The Red Lantern

Gathering Evidence

William

Good Advice

Back Scratching

Set Up

A Mistake

Beaty

Sarah

Robert

Jim

### **PART THREE: The Interview**

Andy Wilson

Little Ollie

Betty

Malaga

Donaldson

Fred Carrington

## **PART ONE: The Detention**

**Oliver Thomas had no wish to appear to be crying like a baby**, but the strain of trying to make out the detail of a blurred silhouette standing over him was making tears run down his unshaven cheeks.

For an otherwise healthy man of eighty-six whose spectacles had also started to slide sideways down his nose, maintaining some self-dignity was still paramount. But attempts to deal with both the tears and the glasses with both hands then caused the walking stick that he was gripping between his knees, to slide with a clatter to the floor.

Both of them, the silhouette and he, listened but neither did anything to chase it as it disappeared from view beneath the table that separated them. Instead, Oliver Thomas took a deep, audible breath that whistled past the hairs of his nose. It was just another familiar problem that compounded what little dignity he still felt. The silhouette dragged up a chair and sat down. A pot of untouched tea and two mugs sat on the otherwise bare table between them.

“Come on Mr Thomas! Why would someone of your age fly to Spain, smuggle a hand gun past all the airport checks and surveillance gear and threaten another old man in his nineties?”

His interrogator was clearly getting impatient but Oliver Thomas was in no hurry.

“Tea, Mr Thomas? Milk?”

He breathed out again, noisily, and looked down to check if he could see his stick. Having failed, he coughed to clear the phlegm he could feel gathering at the back of his throat.

“Thank you,” he said politely, watching tea and milk being poured into the two mugs. Then, noting that the tea looked pale and stone cold, added:

“Sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Andy Wilson, Inspector Andy Wilson,” was the reply, spoken as though it was the tenth time he had given his name and rank. “Ah, yes, of course,” he said. The Inspector saw a faint smile appear amongst the deep creases in the unshaven cheeks and his suspicions that he was actually being taken for a bit of a ride by the old man were reinforced. But he ignored it. The detainee looked tired and unsteady on his feet and a little like his own grandfather. “So,” Inspector Andy Wilson sighed now, “any chance of an explanation?”

Oliver Thomas leaned forwards, took the mug nearest him and sucked on the contents. It was, as he had expected, tepid and tasteless but he swallowed the first mouthful and then drained the cup.

It was Andy Wilson’s turn to smile faintly at the speed with which the old man drank it, replaced the mug on the table and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“As we used to say in the RAF, a shit, shower and shave would be my preferred priority,” he said, aware of combining politeness with perhaps some unnecessary frankness. “One of my colleagues used to add the word shag to that list but I don’t feel like one at present.”

“Really,” Andy Wilson said. “We, in the police use similar catch phrases.”

Oliver Thomas edged himself back into his chair and tried, once more, to find his stick with his foot. Then he put his hand down to check that the old black leather bag that had accompanied him for the last seven days was still sat by his side.

"It's a long story," he said.

"I've got time."

"It goes back sixty years so it'll take sixty years to tell."

"Then give me a summary."

"Your friend whom I spoke to earlier said he wanted me to start from scratch."

"Clive's got more patience. Just give me a summary."

Oliver Thomas spent a minute or so rubbing his sore eyes behind his glasses.

"I still don't know where to start," he said.

"The only thing I know so far is that your name is Oliver James Thomas and that you probably live somewhere in Gloucester. And we got that from your passport. Perhaps you can start with explaining why you had such a problem with a ninety-year old gentleman who was apparently living in quiet retirement in a nice villa in Malaga."

There was silence from Oliver Thomas.

He just stared at the walls.

"Is it any wonder that the Spanish police have asked us to detain you, Mr Thomas? When a British national goes to Spain, uses a smuggled hand gun on another British national and then runs away or, as in your case, walks away using a walking stick, it poses the question of why," Andy Wilson continued.

"And while we're at it, what were you doing with six thousand Euros in a brown envelope? Was it unspent holiday money?"

Oliver Thomas tried looking at his interrogator across the top of his glasses as the lenses were far too greasy for a clear view through them and his hand went down to check that the black bag was still there.

Andy Wilson noticed. "Don't worry," he said. "The envelope is still in there. We've only held on to your passport."

"So, did your Spanish friends confirm the name of this so-called gentleman, Inspector?" Oliver Thomas asked.

"His name is Alexander Donaldson, which I imagine you know anyway. "

Andy Wilson sighed.

Oliver Thomas then copied him, noisily and deliberately, as if competing in a test of how much frustration a man could tolerate. He then scanned the depressing magnolia walls of the interview room with tired, red-rimmed eyes before trying to focus once more on the silhouette of Inspector Andy Wilson.

"My wife, Sarah, died, you see," he said.

"Excuse me?" Andy Wilson asked, unsure how this related to the case in hand.

"And so, did Beaty," Oliver Thomas added.

Andy Wilson stared back, now wondering if he was dealing with a case of geriatric infidelity and promiscuity having got out of hand.

Meanwhile, Oliver Thomas made one last attempt to find his stick, this time with his other foot and then said, "So is the bastard dead, Inspector?"

Andy Wilson said nothing but picked up his own cup and drained the contents.

Oliver Thomas noticed the reluctance to confirm anything.

"Oh well," he said, "the bastard was far from well when I last saw him. Perhaps he's already gone to his maker – the devil. Whatever I did, he seemed about to suffer a heart attack anyway. So perhaps I've done everyone a favour."

Andy Wilson watched him.

Clearly the old man seemed none too concerned. He was now sitting back as though trying to relax after a job well done.

"Damned hard chair," said Oliver Thomas fidgeting.

"So is mine," Andy Wilson replied impatiently. "As for Mr Donaldson, I understand he is in intensive care. We are still waiting for news."

There was a short silence as Oliver Thomas fidgeted a bit more and looked around the room again. Then he turned to face his questioner.

"I'd be happy to explain, Inspector, but I trust you were taught the art of patience during your police training. Because, if you really want to know, then it all started more than sixty years ago, and if I am to explain what happened, and why, then I need to start from the beginning and this could take a while."

"Go ahead," Andy Wilson said, "try to make yourself comfortable."

"Home comforts are not something that ever really bothered me, Inspector, but a softer chair might be easier on my bloody arse and, if you could retrieve my stick from over there, I'd be very grateful."

Andy Wilson smiled now and, as he bent down to pick up the stick, Oliver Thomas seized his chance.

"Could we not, perhaps, go and sit in your main office where I am sure I saw a sofa and coffee table as we passed by a while ago. I suspect that's where your staff go and relax, so perhaps the tea can be guaranteed to be of a better quality there as well. If we don't finish before midnight, I am sure I can find a room somewhere. I'd be happy to continue tomorrow as I don't have any other pressing engagements.

And a toilet where I could perhaps have a quick shit to avoid disgracing myself would be useful.

"Apart from that, I've got plenty of time and, frankly, the thought of returning home to the cold and empty house in Gloucester and running the gauntlet of my nosey neighbour Fred Carrington is something that depresses me."

Andy Wilson got up and handed him his stick.

"Here," he said, "come with me," and he came around to the other side of the table and put his hand on the old man's elbow to steady him as he struggled up. "Thank you," said Oliver Thomas, "I'm unlikely to run far away as you can see."

Andy Wilson bent down again, this time to pick up the black bag.

“I’ll take that,” said Oliver Thomas as though it contained his life savings.

He was led to another office with a desk, bookshelves, a few filing cabinets, a coffee table and an exotic potted plant.

“That’s much nicer,” he said to Andy Wilson, “and I can actually see your face now.”

Then he raised his glasses to rest on his forehead and peered at the potted plant.

“A Malaysian miniature coconut – how interesting. It’ll fruit in about four years but it won’t be anything like warm or bright enough just sitting there. I feel sorry for it. Trees like that should be left where they were born. I hope it isn’t one you borrowed after confiscation at customs, because I thought that was illegal.”

“Ah,” said Andy Wilson, unconvincingly. He beckoned him towards the sofa. “So you know something about customs regulations do you?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “I ran an export and import company for most of my life so I know most of the dodges.”

“You certainly know how to carry a gun onto a plane undetected, Mr Thomas. How many other little tricks are you up to?” Andy Wilson settled into the chair opposite and placed a notepad on the table. But, as he did so, a phone rang on a desk nearby and he leaned over to answer it. “That might be Spain, excuse me.”

Oliver Thomas listened.

“Yes, I see – thanks. Anything else from Malaga?” Andy Wilson replaced the phone and returned to face Oliver Thomas.

“Well, you won’t be going far anyway, Mr Thomas. There is another little problem. The long-term car park office reports that your car, an old Jaguar I understand, that you parked there some days ago, has no tax and no insurance.”

Oliver Thomas scratched his head.

“Oh! Yes, I’d forgotten about that with all the excitement. It’s in the post. But what about the medical reports from Malaga, Inspector? Is the bastard dead?”

Andy Wilson picked up a pen and started to write something on the pad.

“He is in intensive care. Though I understand the Spanish police are also now taking an interest in some other matters.” “Ah!” said Oliver Thomas again. “Good. Better late than never, I suppose.”

Andy Wilson was now the one to scratch his head. He then stuck the pen between his teeth.

“So, tell me about your business, Mr Thomas. Are you still running it? Are you not retired? Is this some sort of business feud or just an argument over girlfriends?”

“I would say it’s far more complicated than that, Inspector. Do you want to start from the beginning or not?”

Andy Wilson sighed once more.

If this was a long feud then perhaps, the old man was right in that it would not be a quick explanation. He glanced at the walking stick now propped up opposite him and down at the black bag. Then he thought about the detainee’s transport problem and the information from Spain, which was still vague.

Time was not something the old man appeared to be concerned with. But the long-awaited explanation suddenly seemed to start and he thought he had better listen. "I started the business after the war," he heard Oliver Thomas begin.

"Sarah and I had just got married and we moved to live in Croydon which was near enough to London, far enough into the country and yet near to the airport. Sarah called the house 'Brick View' and I knew she didn't really like it but it was an era of austerity, ration books, waste not, want not and beggars can't be choosers.

"You wouldn't understand, Inspector, as you're far too young. But it was a good time for those with ambition and energy and I was one of those with ideas to start my own business. Exporting was my plan."

"Why exporting?" Andy Wilson asked, trying to focus on something specific.

"I had always wanted to travel to more exotic places, you see," said Oliver Thomas. "Ever since I was a boy and first read about Captain Cook and stared at the illustrations. Afterwards I took out books on Africa, Persia and India from the library. After the war, I decided I wanted to visit more countries than the few that His Majesty had already sent me to in the RAF. And so, Thomas Import Export Limited was born several years before our two children."

He paused and seemed to glaze over. Andy Wilson thought that, perhaps, he was imagining a couple of babies bouncing on his knee – babies that would in fact be nigh on retirement age themselves.

But this had been described to him earlier as a possible murder investigation and he really needed to get to the facts.

He decided to jump in again.

"Let's cut out the family history shall we, Mr Thomas? Are you still in business or not?"

Oliver Thomas's mind was still sixty years behind and the question caught him unaware.

"I suppose so," he said, "I admit I hadn't thought of it like that. I've stopped doing tax returns but I suppose you could say my business plan has not yet been fulfilled."

Andy Wilson sighed and looked at his watch yet again, regretting his last question.

The old man was already in full flow again.

"Oh yes, in the beginning I had big plans for Thomas Import Export. If you had asked me sixty years ago, how it might have grown I would probably have described a multi-national trading company with plush offices in New York, Paris, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires.

"But looking at me now, Inspector, in my Marks and Spencer's jumper, jacket and stained trousers how do I look? Do I look like a successful businessman who worked his socks off and risked his neck for fifty years? Do I resemble some of your flash, modern jet setters with their credit cards, laptops and exaggerated stories about top level meetings with bankers in Sheraton Hotels in places like Singapore and Los Angeles? Or do I look like one of the few who ventured abroad even before the days of telexes and international telephones and were to be found waiting around at squalid airports carrying tattered cases of samples and staying at doss houses in places like downtown Lagos?"



“How, Inspector, do I compare with your vision of Mister, fucking, Alexander Donaldson, as you are apparently required to address him, who is living, as you so politely put it, in quiet retirement in a nice villa in Spain?”

“That bastard ruined my life, and that of many others. “Let me ask you. What was the final death toll in Northern Ireland?”

“I disliked him from the first time I met him but the feeling got worse the older I got and the more I realized what he was really up to. But since Sarah died and I found myself with the time and just about enough energy left I felt it was time to act.

“But am I partly to blame? Yes, probably.

“Do I have my weaknesses? Yes, as we all do.

“Am I honest and reliable? Yes, generally.

“Am I patriotic? Yes, definitely.

“But just after the war was a time when old Army and RAF chums still kept in touch.

“A group of us used to meet up in the Feathers in Mayfair.”

Oliver Thomas stopped and Andy Wilson thought he might be recalling pleasant evenings of seventy years ago.

“Ah yes, the Feathers,” he continued, “Do you know it, Inspector? Is it still there? Is it now covered in hanging baskets of geraniums and petunias and other tinsel? Does it now offer gastro food and serve organic quiche salads for lunch? If so it has changed a bit since I frequented the dive in the fifties.

“But relationships between old chums often became soured as we recognized our differences outside our uniforms. And this particularly sour relationship has taken me far longer to deal with than it should.

“Oh yes, the old man in his nineties, as you so decently refer to him, is a bastard of the first order.

“Have you ever met an old-fashioned money launderer, Inspector?”

“Do you know any ninety-year-old gun running arms dealers or drug dealers?”

“How many of your friends are associates of Sicilian or Russian Mafia and hide out in places like Malta, Inspector?”

“Are you familiar with the big money that can be made by being the instigator of military coups and other subversive plots in places like Algeria, Sierra Leone or Chad and do you know any nice people who ran the Provisional IRA?”

“In your recent career, Inspector, have you ever found it necessary to arrest a really nasty but clever piece of shit that operates internationally and is still going strong and unidentified like some New York Godfather? Perhaps you have so perhaps you know the sort. Perhaps, with luck, your Spanish friends are going to find one who’s been hiding in their midst for too long. Yet it’s me who is under detention and I find that strange. But then, that’s the story of my life. So, shall I go on, Inspector?”

Andy Wilson had sat listening patiently throughout this diatribe which seemed to get more and more passionate as it progressed. He had found himself staring at the old man toying with the desire to cut the old man short by telling him to get to the point. But he was also intrigued.

Was he an ex gangster, arms dealer or drugs dealer? Was he a money launderer? But he hardly looked the part and, what was more, he lived in Gloucester. Andy Wilson's only image of Gloucester was of a grimy place with docks and a rugby club. Malaga, on the other hand, was a far more likely headquarters for an expatriate criminal.

And although it may just have been the influence of David Attenborough documentaries, but travel to places other than Tenerife, that his wife preferred, had always intrigued him. And as for meeting gangsters, this was usually the job of other police departments. And the only Mafia types he knew were the sort portrayed by Marlon Brando. This old man looked, as he himself had just admitted, like an ordinary pensioner. Just like his grandfather, he reminded himself again.

But Andy Wilson had a job to do and he looked at his watch. "It's getting late," said Andy Wilson, tapping the watch. "We need to decide what to do here. But we're still waiting on information from the Spanish police."

"So, I'm not being charged?"

"You're being detained pending further enquiries." "So, where am I to be detained?"

"Somewhere close by. A hotel. Your car has been impounded and your passport is with me here," he said, and produced the passport from beneath the pad in front of him.

Then he looked down at Oliver Thomas's black bag again. "You're not carrying very much, Mr Thomas. When we checked, it was just a bundle of old clothes, some keys and your brown envelope of euros. Is that it?"

Oliver Thomas also looked down at his old black leather bag. He had owned it for more than forty years and he felt it was still in good shape.

"Italian leather," he said, "made to order by a craftsman in Naples. But you missed something Inspector. As did most customs and immigration officials for all the years I used it. It used to hold my other passports in a concealed compartment. I held several, at various times. But on this occasion, it contains something else."

He bent down and opened it up.

Andy Wilson watched as the old man ran a veiny hand around the lining. There was a sound like a Velcro fastening being opened and the hand emerged with a thick pile of A4 size paper held together with a single, large bulldog clip.

"I started it some months ago," he said, "I partly updated it in red biro when I was in Frankfurt. But this is as good a police statement as you'll find anywhere. I wrote it just in case I didn't get back. But there is a carbon copy with my solicitor along with some other papers. I hope you enjoy it."

Andy Wilson took it from him and started to flip through the pages.

It looked as if it had been prepared on an ancient typewriter.

"By the way, Inspector," Oliver Thomas interrupted, "Alex Donaldson is no ordinary mister. For one thing, his rank is Major and, for another, he had tenuous links with British Intelligence."

Andy Wilson looked at him.

"Really? And you, Mr Thomas?"

“Me?” he replied, pointing a finger at himself. “Oh, I just ran a small export business.”

An hour later, Oliver Thomas found himself in a small hotel room overlooking the airport runway but with the black leather bag now containing little more than a week’s worth of dirty washing and a toothbrush. The curtains were not drawn and bright orange lights from the airport flickered and reflected off the ceiling and so he went to the window to look out. He spat on the lenses of his glasses and wiped them with the end of his woollen jumper and then put them on to watch as a plane taxied towards the terminal. Airports had been a way of life for him for many years and still held a fascination but he had never heard of the airline whose owner’s name was splashed on the tail alongside what looked like a sun and a palm tree.

“Like a bloody coach trip to Blackpool,” he muttered to himself and pulled the curtain shut.

Then he switched on the dim bedside light, went to the bathroom, filled a glass with water, drank it, filled it once again and brought it back to sit on the bed.

It was a dismal room but luxurious compared to some he had stayed in, so he lay back and closed his eyes. For a while he lay in the dark on the single bed, fully clothed, thinking about Andy Wilson.

He had warned him that his hand-written statement went back sixty years and could take a while to read but, for now, there was not much else he could do.

“Oh yes, Inspector,” he mumbled to himself, “I forgot one thing. Please add blackmail to the list of accusations to throw at that bastard.”

His tired, unfocused eyes tried looking around the orange lit room but he could feel himself drifting to sleep. It turned out to be the best sleep he had had for weeks.

Back at the police offices, Andy Wilson removed the bulldog clip and settled himself for a long read.

## **PART TWO: The Beginning**

**Starting from birth, eighty-six years ago**, will be a pointless exercise and so I will begin with a time when, too often, I frequented the Feathers public house in Mayfair.

But, let me make it quite clear, I do not associate the Feathers with cosy, after works drinks with colleagues but with an ex British Army Major called Alex Donaldson.

Donaldson was a man I was very content to believe was long dead.

But I can still see Donaldson in his crumpled white shirt sat alongside his crony sidekick Jack Woodward on those red leather stools at the bar.

I can still smell the stale Bass beer and see the Red Triangles on the soggy beer mats even now, nearly sixty years later. I can also still smell Donaldson's stinking Craven A cigarettes and see him deliberately puffing the smoke down the dark and cavernous cleavage of Betty the barmaid. Sophistication was never Donaldson's style.

The room was always filled with an acrid blue haze, sticky with heat from the coal fire in the black grate with its brass scuttle, poker, dirty brush and small shovel. I can still feel the sticky warmth on my face as I sat there trying to be part of this ugly scene whilst all the time thinking I would be far better off at home with Sarah sat by our own fireside.

I can see Betty, as she then was, standing behind her bar, tolerating Donaldson's grotesque rudeness whilst cleaning her squeaking beer glasses with a cloth and winking at customers whenever their eyes rose from her cleavage.

I have had far too many dreams about this pub because I had been there too often in the past. But instead of diminishing over time, the dreams have increased. Perhaps it is because, unlike many of the others who visited the Feathers, I never went there to be sociable but with what I now see as a misplaced sense of patriotism and duty to King and Country left over from the war.

Those meetings were often arranged by a phone call to my Croydon office from Jack Woodward. Betty, who was my office manager, typist and telephonist would take the call before handing the phone to me to decide. And it bothers me now how easy it had been for me to be persuaded to meet. But I was younger then and the young are much greater opportunity seekers.

As we sat at the bar, Jack Woodward would gorge on dishes of shellfish and when I came in through the door, both of them would already be there, hunched over their drinks as though they had been there for hours already discussing what to say to me or how best to persuade me to do the next job.

But it was my fault.

In the early days, I was far too easy going and had no idea what I was letting myself in for. Jack, being the politer one, would always see me first and stand up as though slightly embarrassed by what they had been discussing. Donaldson would continue facing the bar and Betty until I had sat down on the next stool. Then he would turn and nod at me. No smile, just a nod. Donaldson always wore the same grey gabardine mackintosh over his suit and tie and only after he nodded might he then decide to join Jack in shaking my hand. But I was always reluctant to touch

Donaldson because I knew my hands would smell of stale cigarettes for hours as a result of that fleeting but disgusting contact.

Jack would order the drinks and cockles and was always the one to pay Betty.

“Two and six, please, luv. Ta, luv,” in her broad east London accent. Then Betty would slide over a tiny white dish that always held three small, sharp wooden sticks and the cockles that glistened with vinegar.

Before and since my dear wife, Sarah, died I have dreamed about the Feathers too often. Mostly they are colourful nightmares with accompanying stereophonic sound effects and smells included and I often wake up in a sweat because the nightmares spiralled out of control onto other things. The nightmares are almost always linked to Donaldson.

When I awake in the middle of the night or the very early morning with my lap soaked in whisky from the glass that had fallen from my hand I often wonder if I am actually suffering from some sort of new and unnamed form of senile dementia.

I fear I may have a new type of Alzheimer’s disease distinguished by a vivid imagination and an uncanny ability to dredge up memories that are best forgotten. But I often amuse myself by thinking it should, perhaps, be called Thomas’s Disease after its first recorded victim. I have even dreamed of seeing a definition of it in medical textbooks or copies of the British Medical Journal.

“Thomas’s Disease: A condition of the mind characterized by symptoms that include an uncontrollable desire to analyse the past through dreams so that the sufferer finds it easy to pinpoint his past mistakes and weaknesses. And finally decides to wake up and do something about them.”

It is, I acknowledge, a long-winded definition but I feel it is accurate. But I often wondered if, perhaps, I was no longer remembering facts but embellishing things to make them more interesting. Perhaps, I just have an overactive brain that is long past its sell by date.

But I also have a theory that Alzheimer’s disease is not really a disease but a useful and highly evolved mechanism for protecting the old and decrepit from realizing their predicament.

I have often thought how much nicer that would be because Thomas’s Disease is far worse. It is a punishing and painful disease that is all too apparent to its victims.

What is certain is that the nightmares I experienced up until the moment I decided to do something about the cause had been a mixture of historic fact and vivid imagination.

But couple that with a mind-blowing ability to suddenly realize what had been going on beneath my nose and behind my back for fifty years and perhaps you will begin to understand why I need to deal with it.

Writing this is part of that process.

I still can’t accurately pinpoint exactly when it all started or when I suddenly saw the light. It was like the slow arrival of dawn when you can’t sleep. You lie there waiting until you can stand it no longer and finally get up, go to the window and draw the curtains. But, in my case, I didn’t see the rising sun. I saw that a dark and rainy day

had already begun, that the time was far later than I had thought and I wished I had got up much earlier.

For me, late dawning has happened too often and there is only so much cloud and rain a man can stand.

The final awakening began when Sarah became ill although even then it was not so much a sudden switching on of the light but gradual, like a dimmer switch being turned.

I had been feeling very lonely which didn't help. I was certainly bored.

Sarah was sick and a nurse had been calling daily. She had become bedridden, as they once called it, and spent her days upstairs.

I, on the other hand, spent my days and often my nights, downstairs sitting in the chair by Sarah's favourite log effect gas fire but with trips up and down the stairs with cups of tea for Sarah followed by other daytime trips to the supermarket for the newspaper and a few more bottles of Bell's whisky for myself.

I know I had been sitting around far too much but what else is an old man expected to do? But, to keep my brain occupied, I had also, mistakenly, started rummaging through an old box of papers and other things that had been gathering dust for twenty-five years in a cupboard upstairs.

Oh dear, what a mistake that was.

But then there were the nightmares, the main features of Thomas's Disease. I would wake up in the early hours or the late hours or even the daytime hours feeling uncomfortable, hot and sweaty and with an all too familiar taste of stale whisky in the back of my throat and an intense heat in my stomach like a gastric version of heartburn.

But what really used to wake me up was the uncontrollable and frantic tossing and sweating in the chair by Sarah's gas fire as I dreamed. I would hear voices. And Jack Woodward's voice – he of the Feathers public house in Mayfair – was one.

And Jack might not even have been talking in English. It had been a habit sixty years ago, for ex forces chaps to speak "in tongues" as we humorously called it. Arabic was one such language. Speaking in an accent supposedly to resemble that of President Nasser of Egypt was Jack's little habit. Mixed up with conversations that included "bints" and "kazis", it had all become rather predictable but in one of my whisky fuelled dreams I clearly saw him.

"Sabbah el kheir, kaif hallak?" Jack was saying, his voice seemingly coming directly from the empty whisky glass I was holding to my ear like a phone.

"Good day" and "how are you" are easy enough Arabic words, but, having spent a while in Cairo, Jack was almost fluent and so his Nasser accent was quite realistic. My Arabic isn't bad though, having been picked up from many visits to North Africa and the Middle East and I can easily distinguish between Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian or Egyptian accents. I had a smattering of other languages too or, at least, enough to direct various nationalities of taxi drivers to wherever I was heading.

I had even picked up some occasionally useful Russian words during a few lessons run by a Polish immigrant working out of a room in an office block off Whitehall. That was also sixty years ago but I still harbour memories of a dark room with dusty

bookshelves, hard chairs, a stained wooden table and a single, dim light bulb that hung from the ceiling. It had felt like the Eastern Bloc in miniature.

But Jack, who also had the remnants of an English public-school accent to go with his Arabic, had not risen very far after the war. He became Donaldson's errand boy. He was the one who would phone me with a job to do and, stupidly as I now see it, I would agree.

Donaldson and Jack had been old but distant acquaintances of mine at the time and we met, by sheer coincidence, at another pub in Victoria and it had all started as a few odd jobs that relied on a few years of RAF experience.

But, before I knew it, I was up to my neck in things. Not that I didn't find some of it exciting at the time. After all, I was young, enthusiastic, and motivated by the need to find opportunities and ideas for my new business. So, any chance to go abroad to mix with unusual characters of different nationalities looked like pure fun with the added potential of earning a shilling or two.

Actually, I was a natural and very good at it.

Did I have time, Jack asked me, to fly off with a camera that they'd provide to photograph a few buildings near an airport somewhere in northern Finland? That was in the very early days, one of my first assignments just after the war. It was the Cold War and it was very, very cold two hundred miles north of Helsinki in January.

"It'll only take a few days – in and out in no time," Jack had said, although the words he used were probably what he had been told to say by Donaldson. And, of course, driven by the excitement, I went.

Another phrase Jack often used was, "Come over, this afternoon, Ollie. We want you to meet someone." And my reply was usually framed by an excuse such as, "But I've got a Letter of Credit that I need to lodge before the bank shuts". This was often true as I was probably surrounded by paper on my desk and due to fly off somewhere warmer like Lebanon next day.

But so began long years of evening meetings in the Feathers with two men, one of whom, Jack, was just tolerable, the other, Donaldson, a serious but sinister man who in the early days I never fully understood.

And, from my small office in Croydon, Beaty, my newly found office assistant, would have been fussing around in her usual way but listening all the while. Beaty rapidly became indispensable to me but there was more to Beaty than I first realized.

But that's how it was in the beginning.

It was a creeping process made easy by my new business – a small venture that taxed the mind but offered endless opportunities for foreign travel whilst enabling me to mix legitimacy with the sort of antics that Donaldson and his crony Jack tempted me to pursue.

I didn't mind. No job was ever the same and, inevitably, I would meet someone who became a new customer or might lead to one.

But the assignments, as Donaldson always described them, gradually got more frequent. Business wasn't easy and I wasn't making much money after paying my overheads and Beaty's salary and I soon

realized the assignments were impinging on my business.

Meanwhile, at home, Sarah was busy looking after the new baby and our young son, Robert. There was not much saving going on. What little was coming in, was going straight out.

But Beaty would take the calls from Jack and, yet again, I would find myself catching the five thirty train and then a taxi to go to the Feathers. And all at my expense and when it would have been far better and sensible to go home to be with Sarah and the children and eat cottage pie and apple crumble.

And so, of course, Sarah got used to the loneliness.

She accepted it as part of my business but, looking back, I regret it so much now that it brings a lump to my throat just to write this. I should have understood things better so many years ago.

Suffering from Thomas's Disease, you see, has caused me to reflect on past errors of judgment. But in the weeks and months up until the day Sarah died I often woke up to find myself sobbing like a child.

And why, since Sarah died, do I still sit with lumps in my throat and tears in my eyes?

Because, in the weeks before Sarah passed away, whilst she was lying, gravely sick upstairs in bed, I was downstairs, drunk as a skunk and perhaps speaking to a voice from maybe sixty years ago, coming out of an empty whisky glass clamped to my right ear.

In fact, I have been known to be so far gone that the whisky glass would transform itself into my old black office telephone receiver with its twisted cable that I would waste hours trying to unravel, until Beaty came to my aid.

"Tut, tut," Beaty would say, "leave it to me."

And I would say to her something like, "Here, you sort the blasted wire, Beat. I've got to run. See what you can do to finish these quotes off."

And I would push a pile of papers and price lists towards her as Beaty said, "Are you sure, Mr Thomas?"

And then I'd be gone like some stupid boy summoned by the headmaster.

But, I was also driven by a sense of duty and patriotism. The assignments were for the good of the country, or so I believed. And if they could also be used to enhance my business, why not?

But my motivations were gradually driven by an added element of fear. And this was nothing to do with early onset Thomas's Disease.

This was a genuine fear for myself and my family and fear of other repercussions for failing to co-operate. Looking back, I can see that Beaty was also worried but, at the time, I was too blind to see it and so Beaty also forms a key part of this tale.

I sometimes still dream about Beaty, but please don't misunderstand me.

Dreams about Beaty are never erotic. She was my age but always at least fifteen years behind the fashions of the day and I usually see her dressed in a pink twin set with her Imperial typewriter noticeably hesitating in its clatter as she listened to me on the phone. She would then glance furtively toward me over her horn-rimmed



glasses, before looking quickly back to her work. Then the machine would ping back into action again as she hit the return.

But, Thomas's Disease has enabled me to remember the look on Beaty's face whenever Jack Woodward phoned my office to invite me to another meeting.

Beaty's expression was particularly exaggerated on the rarer occasions that Donaldson rang.

I would put the big black phone with its tangled cable back on the receiver and glance at Beaty who quickly looked away. "How's it all coming along, Beat?" I would ask with diplomacy and just a little humor, in order to quell Beaty's far too easy embarrassment at being caught watching and listening. In fact, I see now that she treated all phone calls from Jack and Donaldson as if she was nervous. She seemed to dislike the intrusions as if she was an unwilling witness to an extramarital affair and would cough, unnecessarily, nervously and say something like, "Nearly finished, Mr Thomas. But should we copy the text in the credit exactly? You see they have typed dollar wrong. They have put doller – with an 'e'."

"Oh dear. Yes. Better had, Beat. I'll speak to the bank when I present the documents. We don't want to have to request an amendment at this stage. We should have noticed it before."

"Sorry, Mr Thomas."

I had appointed poor old Beaty because she seemed to be a lonely spinster but she was very good at her job. She came with a very good set of references although I have to admit that one of them was from Donaldson. Lonely Beaty was, in fact, indispensable but I now know she also lived in some sort of fear.

So, the few jobs I found myself doing for King and Country or, afterwards, for Queen and Country gradually became more and more frequent to the detriment of my business.

And the plans for them were nearly always laid while drinking pints of draft Bass bitter and slurping bowls of cockles at the Feathers.

And it was in the Feathers that I started to dislike Donaldson although the feeling was undoubtedly mutual.

For some years, Donaldson had a thick moustache on his upper lip. One day it disappeared without warning although we never discussed such personal things. But it was then that I grew to notice and hate the white spittle that often appeared on his lips if he got angry.

And Donaldson could get very angry.

But I also disliked his eyes. They were furtive and he used to look out of their corners so that he didn't have to move his thick neck. He would not read a newspaper but use it as a screen for his face while he watched others. But in the Feathers his eyes usually looked down into his beer or down the front of Betty's blouse and he would congratulate me on my latest assignment. His speech would often start to slur towards closing time although the words were always fairly predictable and invariably interspersed with public school, army-trained "old chap" and "dear boy". And there was also a remnant of a Scottish accent which I never questioned at the time.

“Brilliant job, Ollie, old chap. Brilliant. Best man we’ve got for that type of job. Tripoli and Benghazi, huh? Not much in the way of beer there these days I understand. Tough assignment, dear boy, brilliantly executed.”

And Donaldson would then swig the last of his beer and move on to a further examination of Betty’s cleavage or a description of the next job he had planned for me.

Sometimes we would move away from the bar stools and find a quieter corner, but the jobs were always explained as being for the good of the country with the full backing of the few in Government circles that needed to know. And they were always sold to me as small tasks that I could easily fit around my legitimate business whether it was Libya or any other part of the Middle East, West Africa or wherever else I went.

But Major Alex Donaldson was mostly office based. Where he lived, I had no idea as we never ever discussed personal matters. It was the same with Jack, whose private life was a mystery that I had no reason to ask about.

Donaldson had certainly never been to Libya.

As far as I knew, he had never travelled very far at all although Cairo had been his home for a few months once, which is where he had probably encountered Jack Woodward.

He went to Jordan and Beirut a few times during and after the war but the numbers of times he went were nothing compared to me. He also seemed to visit Italy regularly on holiday. Again, I never questioned where exactly he stayed as it was not my business.

“D’s just flown to Italy, Ollie for a few days’ break,” Jack would say. “But he’s left a message for you.”

“He seems to like Italy, Jack,” I remember saying to Jack one day. “Has he got an Italian girlfriend?”

But Donaldson clearly still retained a few overseas military connections and I was eventually to discover one reason why he visited Jordan.

But let us not beat about the bush. Major Alex Donaldson and, by default, Jack, were connected to British Intelligence somehow, hence the constant tapping of forefingers on noses.

“Need to know basis, old chap, don’t worry. All in hand.”

But Donaldson seemed to spend most of his time not around Whitehall where one might have expected him to be, but at a bare and dingy office with no files or other paraphernalia. This cold, cigarette-smelling place was located on the second floor of a block in Regent Street.

Not that I ever questioned it, especially in the early days, as I had no idea how these Government things worked.

Also, I suppose it was my working-class upbringing and the constant nose tapping from people I felt I should treat as superiors because of their far greater inside knowledge and authority.

But Major Alex Donaldson was only very loosely connected to British Intelligence as you will see and my more recent affliction with Thomas's Disease has slowly helped to confirm my suspicions and understand things clearly for the very first time.

And Donaldson had another less well-known office hidden in a dark, granite block in Morningside in Edinburgh which I visited once or twice. I have never forgotten the very last time I was there. That was when I had been shown some photographs of myself. Sarah would not have liked those pictures.

It was all a long time ago, but if you read what follows, I think you will agree I had every reason to do what I did.

After all, It is never too late.

## **Cockroaches**

**By the late sixties**, Thomas Import Export Ltd already held a number of agencies for small British companies that often required me to get to know the holders of purse strings in the Libyan hierarchy. But then, in the name of freedom, socialism and unity, Colonel Muammar Gadaffi ousted the King and relabelled the country the Libyan Arab Republic. That whole area of North Africa featured rather highly in my life around that time, although it was, by no means, the only part of the world.

By the early seventies, politics had changed radically but I was still able to travel there although some of my old friends had already disappeared. Neither was I still earning much money for the business due to the distractions.

But on one occasion I decided to try to convince the Libyan People's Public Health Authority to buy bulk insecticides for their heavy cockroach infestations.

In reality though, driven by my sense of adventure, I was also fulfilling my part-time, unpaid job for Queen and Country by trying to make friends with Gadaffi's cronies and making the acquaintances of some of his less prominent enemies to add them to a growing list of possible informers.

I was not being forced to do it and even Donaldson knew very little about what I did and how I did it. But Donaldson soon realized that the little fish he had hooked some years earlier was quite adept at this sort of work and proving to be rather well connected.

I enjoyed the intrigue and the risk but it all got out of hand and I became very vulnerable. But as a result, I was making friends of people I actually mistrusted and shaking hands with those whose palms were already well greased.

Mohammed Saleh was one such.

We would meet regularly in quiet spots behind walls near the port in Tripoli or next to the National Pharmaceutical Company and Ministry of Health. Saleh was often impossible to see at first glance as his grubby beige suit blended with the dust and sand. He had also camouflaged himself rather well within Gadaffi's circles and had become a very useful contact. Saleh was very reliable and always turned up on time.

My mistake was in mentioning him to Donaldson.

Saleh behaved as though the only way to squeeze a small commission out of a visiting Englishman was to look identical by donning similar dust-stained attire. He wore a respectable small moustache like a dark brown, dishevelled, Arabic version of David Niven and was always keen to escape from the watching eyes and the whispering voices of Tripoli, for a bottle or two of Black Label, even if it meant crossing the water to Valletta.

He visited London occasionally and he and I often ate at Tiddy Doll's in Mayfair, around the corner from the Feathers.

I rarely took Sarah with me to meet my many foreign contacts but on one occasion she did join me because Saleh seemed to doubt my description of myself as a happily married man. But Saleh, feeling free of his Libyan shackles misbehaved himself and seduced the red haired, Irish waitress from Cork.

Sarah was impressed, not by the food, but at how easy it had been for the Libyan – fresh off the Libyan Arab Airlines flight – to carry out his seduction.

“Good gracious, dear. Is that how all those Arab friends of yours behave? Who'd have thought it?”

But Sarah, bless her, never knew about the meeting the next morning between Saleh and myself in Regent Street at which Saleh received some expenses in cash from Jack and then the fare for a taxi ride to Credit Suisse.

All Saleh had done for this was to provide a list of possible dissidents and their addresses which I had then passed to Donaldson in all innocence, expecting them to be handed on to the Secret Intelligence Services or some other Government body.

At the time, you see, I didn't really care who received the intelligence because I was convinced it was going somewhere official and so being put to good use.

But Saleh's bedding of the Irish waitress was perhaps the most innocuous part of Libyan-Irish relationships that I was later involved with.

I used to stay at the Libya Palace Hotel in Tripoli and often thought that if there was ever a need for an example of a den of spies, mistrust and suspicion all of it under the watchful eye of secret police then this was it. The Libya Palace, though, was convenient in that it was just around the corner from Abdul Wahid's office. Abdul had been my more official agent and his concrete block office was in a dingy, rubble-laden side street where the fat, brown American cockroaches scurried, too slowly, out of the way and were crunched underfoot on the pavement at night. This was the excellent legitimate market that I had spotted in my usual entrepreneurial fashion.

Abdul Wahid's office featured highly in some of my whisky-fuelled nightmares when Sarah had been sick and the dreams often started with a smell like dust in my nostrils. You see, Thomas's Disease often provides an olfactory dimension to nightmares and this one was like a dream within a dream, a sleep within a sleep. I was well aware of the perversity and would watch myself clamber off the bed clad only in my underpants. And, where was I? After a moment's searching within the mists of my dream, behold, I would find I was in the Libya Palace Hotel in a room along a dark corridor with a threadbare carpet where I could hear the ceiling fan squeaking, slowly, round and round. But everywhere was that smell of dust. It would be caked inside my nostrils and the skin of my face would feel dirty and stretched taught. The room was dark except for a small crack of light between the closed window shutters and in my dream, I would shuffle across the dusty floor in bare feet

feeling the grit between my toes. Then I would lean over to open the shutters with their flaking, light blue paint.

I am fairly convinced that this really did happen to me once, many years ago, but, for some reason of nocturnal fantasy, the dream found me using my walking stick. And when I opened the shutters the vivid scene that met my eyes was not one that was common to Gloucester where I now live. For all I was able to see was a swirling grey dust, with paper and litter flying left to right. Piles of fine, grey sand had squeezed through to form small dunes accumulating on the peeling, wooden ledge between the shutters and the closed window and I used my finger to write something in the dust.

In this recurring dream, I wrote "SARAH".

I feel sure I had also written "SARAH" fifty years ago, but it was so long ago that I can no longer be totally certain. But the dream was enough. Writing "SARAH" in Saharan dust seems fitting enough.

But, outside, the neighbouring buildings were just dark grey outlines and the morning sun was just visible as a faint, red, disk like a Japanese flag, low above the flat roofs, disappearing and reappearing as the flying dust passed before it in thick clouds. The sand storm was like a hot, violent, London smog of stinging particles of sand.

But I usually awoke from these dreams to find myself sitting by Sarah's log effect gas fire in the sitting room in Gloucester with an empty whisky glass falling from my hand and with such a dryness in my throat and nose that I would find myself blowing my nose into the whisky glass to clear it.

And, whilst it might have been the heat from the gas fire on my face, I still felt it as though I was standing facing the hot wind coming straight up from Kufra.

But, because I was half awake and probably also half drunk, the dry heat would suddenly change to a humid, coal smoke heat and I would find myself back in the bar at the Feathers again with Alex Donaldson and Jack Woodward with Donaldson making all sorts of suggestions about how else they might be able to use Mohammed Saleh and other contacts I had made over the years.

And through the dreams and nightmares I can now also remember what I said to Donaldson after Saleh had returned to Libya after that night at Tiddy Doll's.

"But my business is suffering because of all this nonsense."

"Rubbish!" said Donaldson. "You're the one talking nonsense old chap. In your prime. My goodness. Best man we've got for those sorts of jobs. Mixing it with your business.

What more could you want, dear fellow? Good expenses.

Fifteen quid a day subsistence paid in cash and no asking for vouchers. On top of what you make on the business. Flights sometimes paid for or arranged."

"I've had enough," I said.

"Nonsense, old chap. You need a break. Take a few days off. Go away with that young family of yours. The seaside – Brighton, Bournemouth, Blackpool. There's an idea. Get a bit of clear English air in your lungs, dear fellow, instead of all that hot bloody sand."

But then my own voice had risen in anger at Donaldson's insensitivity.

“But the children are at school. And, anyway, it’s the middle of winter.”

“Ah, yes. Never mind old chap – go another time.”

“But I’m nearly forty,” I had said, “I need to concentrate on the business.”

“Forty is not old, dear fellow. Heavens above. I’m just as old. Feel like twenty. Just looking at Betty over there gives me evil ideas.”

You see, I was already starting to regret my involvement and feeling that I had been sucked into something outside of my control.

Already, the early excitement had run thin and I knew I needed my business to start to earn some real money for my growing family, not waste time on errands for other people that only offered nominal expenses in return. I wanted to pull back because I felt I had already given up too many of my rights by allowing myself to be sucked in on a wave of lingering adolescence.

But I didn’t pull out, partly because I really did believe I was doing something for the good of the country.

Later I didn’t pull out for fear of the effects on me and my family.

But I was also from a generation where it was not right for the adult male to be seen to be in any doubt at any times. At all times, there must be certainty and boldness.

“Go on, you can do it, you stupid fool. Stop whining. What are you – man or mouse?”

It was the very essence of manliness. Never mind if you were shot out of the sky last night. I felt it was my duty to get back into the cockpit and to stop whinging.

## **The Algerian Parrot**

### **But let me explain the type of thing I was doing.**

Yousef was my agent in Algeria.

Whenever I visited, Yousef would sit in a squeaking, swivelling chair high up behind his large desk looking down on visitors. There might be half a dozen of us sitting or standing around trying to catch his attention as he held overlapping discussions with everyone and flapped at buzzing flies from the abattoir next door. As the only foreigner, I would be granted pride of place in a sagging chair looking up at him whilst I struggled to sell him tractor parts or cans of insecticide in poor Arabic and French. I was an old hand at Arabic ways and well used to this form of selling but add in the regular interruptions from Yousef’s parrot and you will see why I am cynical about the skill sets of current sales and marketing consultants.

You see, Yousef kept an old, green and red parrot called Pierre in a bottomless cage on the coffee table that all of Yousef’s visitors shared to place their cups. The table, itself, was inlaid with fine, polished marquetry and Pierre would sit there and listen all day long to Youssef’s business deals and the traffic noise that wafted in through the open window along with the meat flies from the butcher’s shop on the street below.

Youssef employed an elderly and crippled assistant, Mohammad, who would be summoned to bring pots of thick, sweet Arabic coffee or mint tea at frequent

intervals. But the parrot's call was louder and clearer than Youssef's and he spoke far better Arabic.

"Mohammad, Mohammad. Gahwa, Gahwa," he would call.

The parrot would call every few minutes and Mohammed would appear, breathless from waiting downstairs, unsure if he was being summoned by Youssef or by Pierre. But, anxious as ever to please, Mohammad would bring the same dirty, damp cloth with him and, whether the summons was from bird or man, use the opportunity to lift the cage and wipe the table top clean of fresh parrot droppings. Pierre always made sure there was something fresh to clear and patiently watched the messy proceedings from his perch with his head on one side, white eyelids blinking in astonishment at the stupidity of man, before breaking into his repertoire of car and motor bike sounds from the street below.

"Beep, beep. Vroom, vroom. Bzzzzzzzzzz."

But I am writing this, not so much for entertainment, but in order to put Algeria into context and to point out that I told Sarah about the parrot more than once to cheer her up. It didn't work the last time because she fell asleep in the middle of my story but it was near the end. Sarah was sleeping a lot towards the end. But, in the past, when I told her she would always say, "Well I never," and then smile.

But describing what I did in Algeria and other places like Syria and Jordan gives you an idea of what I had become involved in.

My problem was that I mostly did as I was told, especially by those who were older or more experienced or for whom I felt I should show respect. Donaldson held a higher rank than me, you see. Rank doesn't make a better, or more decent, person but that is how it started. I still behaved like the good little boy I had been when grandma asked me to fetch something from the grocer. I was far too willing to do jobs for others with less likeable traits and my respect was often misplaced. I really should have learned a lot more from the things my mother said.

"Mrs Ricketts tells me you took three bottles of milk at school today, Oliver. That's very naughty, you know."

"Sorry, Mummy, but Ronald told me to."

"But you should know better than to listen to that nasty boy Ronald, Oliver."

"But he said his sister was sick and needed building up."

"You really believe that silly story, Oliver?"

"Well . . .!"

You see, I found it hard to rid myself of this over willing habit when I grew up and joined the RAF. I would nod politely to Donaldson telling me that I was the best person for a job. In fact, I asked far too few questions.

Back in 1956 when I was still fairly new to Donaldson's games my business with Youssef in Algiers was just starting. But it was also a time of troubles in and around the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Algeria and Morocco. In Algeria there was guerilla warfare with Arab nationalists and, on one trip, little did I know that the French Premier Guy Mollet was also in town.

But Donaldson clearly did.

This time the Feathers pub was where I took delivery of a small package to take to Algiers. Donaldson had also scribbled an address on a scrap of paper in his usual untidy scrawl.

“Easy job, old chap. Just drop it off at the address here. After midnight, would be best. Someone will take it off your hands. Everything done and dusted. No questions asked.”

“What is it?” I asked, looking at a light, cylindrical object wrapped in brown paper.

“Just rolls of film, apparently, old chap. Nothing important so I’m told. Need to know basis. Safe as houses but just don’t lose it, old chap or we’ll all be in the shit.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t know, old chap. It’s on a need to know basis. Top brass. Mum’s the word and all that. Don’t worry. It’s for our fresh young Queen and the good of her loyal citizens, bless her cotton socks and sparkling crown.”

I let those derogatory words pass, bit my tongue and said, “The address. It’s a house?”

“A villa, apparently,” said Donaldson as though this meant it was superior.

“Who does it belong to?”

“Fuck sake, man. Why do you need to know that? Just hand the bloody thing over at the bloody door and fuck off back to your hotel or wherever you are staying.” A blob of white spit appeared on Donaldson’s lower lip and another blob landed on the table top next to my beer. Donaldson was getting mad.

“Just wondered,” I said, “is the drop to be made to a Frenchman or an Algerian? Just so I don’t give it to the wrong man.”

“For your information, it’ll be an Arab, a bloody Algerian,” Donaldson said and swigged his beer. Jack looked embarrassed.

“Thanks,” I said, reluctantly. But then I decided to ask for a bit more.

“Big villa?”

“Bloody hell, man. Why the questions? Fucking big villa I expect. It belongs to the French Government – the bloody Governor General, himself.”

“Oh, I see. So, will the Governor be there?”

“How the fuck should I know. He never answers the bloody door anyway, whether it’s morning, noon or night so after midnight you’ll get welcomed by his fucking night servant I expect. Just hand it over, old chap. Then you just fucking disappear.”

That was it.

Three days later I was in Algiers and after my meeting with Youssef and landing a small order for fan belts and spark plugs I returned to my hotel. Then, come midnight, and this is where I realize I may be

opening a can of worms that the current Foreign Office and the French equivalent may like to know about, I crept out again to find a taxi.

It was a very dark night, warm but cloudy and the streets were empty and silent but an old Peugeot taxi was parked outside and I got in, gave the driver the address on



Donaldson's scrap of paper and we drove off. All the while, I could sense the taxi driver's wariness of me.

All I was carrying was the small parcel of what I thought was film. The object wasn't heavy and, in order to get through customs, I had concealed it in a piece of copper tube that I had labelled as a commercial sample for Youssef. It was my usual practice.

So, on my way to the Governor's place and in the darkness of the back seat of a taxi with the package now out of its copper tube, I could feel that the glue holding the brown paper covering had worked loose and in the fleeting light from passing street lamps, I caught a glimpse of a small, round, black object like a miniature fire extinguisher with a length of red wire attached to it. This clearly was not photographic film and I began to feel uneasy. But because I really did not want to know what it was and being still sat in the darkness I tried to cover up the gap with the rustling noise obviously upsetting the taxi driver even more. But then the package completely ripped and as the black object rolled onto the seat and then onto the floor by my feet, the taxi stopped at what looked like our destination – a manned gatepost leading to a row of private villas. The suspicious taxi driver, hearing the thing fall, turned around. With the troubles in Algiers at the time I think he thought I was carrying a small bomb. He was not far wrong.

He switched on the dim interior light of the ancient Peugeot taxi.

“Qu'est-ce que c'est, Monsieur? Qu'est-ce qui a fait ce bruit?”

My French is not so good but I knew he was asking me what I was carrying and why it had made a noise. Although I couldn't see his eyes, I could sense he was very nervous.

“C'est un extincteur,” I said, hoping I had used the right French-Algerian word for a fire extinguisher though in fact I had no idea what it was. I was groping under his seat where the thing had rolled and I knew he was thinking about jumping out of his cab.

I also said something about it being “tres petit” but by then the night-time gate keeper appeared at the window of the taxi. They exchanged a few words in Arabic, the driver flicking his thumb backwards in my direction and the gatekeeper peered in at me in the darkness. But we were allowed through and a minute later the taxi stopped at the gate to a big villa. I was expecting the driver to wait for me but he was clearly too nervous and asked for his fare. Not sure how I would get back but not wanting to cause any more fuss I paid him anyway and he reversed and disappeared back to the gatehouse in a cloud of exhaust smoke leaving me holding the object barely concealed in its brown packaging.

I pulled a brass handle on the gate and heard a bell ring somewhere in the darkness. A dog barked and a light came on and I could then see a courtyard and someone carrying a torch came out from behind a black Citroen car. He came up to the gate and shone the light into my face through the metal bars. “Je m'appelle Thomas,” I said trying some French rather than Arabic. I could just make out the dark face of a younger man, shorter than myself, wearing a long white shirt which reflected the light from his torch.

“Monsieur Thomas? Mr Oliver?” “Oui,” I said.

“You have something?” The young man clearly spoke English and I was grateful because I needed to use a word that I couldn’t recall the French or Arabic word for. ‘Leaking’ is not a word that often needs to be translated.

“Yes,” I said, “but there is a problem. I think it’s leaking.”

Indeed, it was, for as I held it, my hands felt as though they were holding a large, dripping pebble with a strand of thin seaweed hanging from it – a cylindrical, pebble, smooth and shiny, but still wrapped in the remnants of its packaging.

The boy, for he was hardly more than a teenager, opened the squeaky gate but, instead of coming in, I knelt down and placed the object in the dust on the ground. The boy shone his torch onto it and also knelt down. We both looked at it. I carefully removed the last of the packaging and without speaking we both stared at it. I smelt my hands. They smelled of a mixture of petrol or acetone. I wiped them on my trousers and then bent down to look at the object. It was, indeed like a black, miniature fire extinguisher without its handle but with a red wire instead of a nozzle and a wet-looking screw top.

“It’s OK,” the young man said, confidently, and he picked it up and shone his torch on it. I joined him, towering above him by more than a foot.

“I see before. No problem. We fix. Explosive mixture different this time that all. No worry. Not explode. No battery.

We fix. Fucking French.”

Thinking he meant to abuse the manufacturer I said, “No, it’s English”.

The boy grinned up at me, a good-looking lad of about seventeen with black, shiny eyes and a moustache sprouting above his upper lip.

“Fucking French mean dead French.”

“What is it?” I asked this clearly far more experienced youth.

“Fucking parcel bomb for fucking French Governor. You not know? We must kill.”

“Ah,” I said, “I thought this was the Governor’s villa.” “Oui, c’est ca. A demain. Insh’allah. Fucking French Governor. We sort, no problem. Merci, Monsieur.”

“Ah,” I said, still sniffing my hands. “So I can go now?”

“Oui, d’accord. Merci.”

“But I have no taxi.”

“OK, I take you in Governor’s car. He not here. With girlfriend.”

“Is that the Governor’s car?” I asked, pointing at the black Citroen.

“Oui, c’est ca. I get key.”

“What about the bomb?”

“No problem, I leave by tree. Aziz fix later. Wait.”

An hour later, I was back in my hotel having been on a wild drive with many wrong turnings in a car stolen from the French Governor General and driven by a multilingual Algerian teenager who didn’t stop talking about a local hero called Ben Bella and the Melbourne Olympic games.

The Governor survived because I read about him in a paper a few weeks later.

They eventually won their independence but, oh yes, Algeria was in a frightful mess at the time with Moslem fanatics and killings and the French doing some very unseemly things which never really came to light. But if anyone who reads this wants to know more, please ask.

And who, from the safe haven of a dingy Regent Street office was in a position to pick up threads of official intelligence and seize an opportunity to try to make some money out of this by using an innocent English courier who wrongly thought he was actually doing something approved by the British Government? Why, Donaldson of course and it was not the first or only time.

But it was only just dawning on me that Donaldson had some methods and motives that, to me, didn't seem to match what the British Government might normally endorse. I should have pulled out there and then and put up with the flak from Donaldson.

But I didn't, and then it became impossible.

But why, you might ask, was I so naïve at the time? I have been asking myself that for years and even more so during the last year. But the only answer is that, at the time, I never really believed that someone in a highly placed, salaried and pensionable civil servant position could live with so few principles without any sense of duty and pride in their country. I assumed that that was the way it worked. But it became clearer and clearer that Donaldson was looking on every conceivable opportunity that came in his direction as a way to make money for himself.

But I made and lost several friends along the way as a result of what I did and it hurts me now if they thought it was me who failed them.

One had been a naïve, well meaning, but misused Moroccan student to whom I subsequently discovered I had been giving deliberately false information to pass on to another contact in Casablanca. Looking back I now know it was me who was the naïve one. I passed the student's own information back to someone from the French Embassy, all with some form of connivance with Donaldson. It really was all very complicated and I had not fully understood what I was doing.

The problem was that, to some extent, I enjoyed the secrecy and the risk and preferred not to know too much. I still enjoy my memories about my ride in the Governor's Citroen.

But everything increasingly impinged on my legitimate business.

And I was, by that time, developing a very clear sense of what was really wrong with the world and that I may not really be helping anyone other than Donaldson. It certainly wasn't helping my business.

But, mixed up as it was with my business, the so-called assignments seemed to blend in well and some jobs were little more than delivering notes, reports, rolls of film or cash inside brown envelopes or rolls of newspaper. To me, it was antiquated, old style intelligence gathering and delivering.

I left Algeria on one occasion just before an earthquake hit killing hundreds of people. Sarah heard about the tragedy but it was a week before I managed to get a telephone call through to Beaty from Amman to say where I was. Those, you see, were the days of poor or non-existent international phone connections and of cables,

before the telex and long before the facsimile machine and e-mail. Sarah had been so cross with me when I returned home. I remember her crying.

But whatever I was doing and wherever I was, she was never far from my mind.

I would haggle in dusty, back street souks to buy a few small silver trinkets and charms for Sarah's bracelet that still lies in a drawer with other jewellery. Over the years, it became heavy with tiny pieces I bought whenever I was away and had the time to wander, like a tourist, through narrow streets.

There were tiny coffee-pots from Syria, crosses and stars from Israel, an antelope from Kenya, cow bells from Switzerland and Austria, a bunch of tiny keys, a tiny Voortrecker wagon from South Africa and a scarab beetle inlaid with malachite from Cairo. But on that memorable occasion in Amman after the earthquake I found a tiny, nativity scene, in silver, complete with Mary, Joseph, a crib with an overlarge baby and three sheep.

"Well I never! Silver Christmas carols." That was how Sarah had described them.

## **Monkey Puzzle**

**I start this page after two days of sitting and drinking** but I have not slept. It is a struggle to clear my mind sufficiently to write and I still have a long way to go.

Sleep, I believe, is a pastime of the young and of those whose energy is consumed by physical and mental endeavour. Insomnia, on the other hand, is an affliction of the old and those whose energy remains untapped. These latter souls – and I am one – will sit, think and drink, and with lights still blazing deep into the night, spend useless hours wandering in circles around the house. I have become such a depressed wanderer.

It is hard for me to admit this but, in my effort to explain things, I will swallow what remains of my pride.

You see, over the last few months and years, I have spent hours peering through the curtains of the upstairs windows like a nosy old woman. I am well aware of the pathetic creature I have become. The only thing left of my manly persona is the whisky bottle I am usually to be found clutching in my hand.

This peering from the bedroom window first began when Sarah became ill and was confined to bed. I have spent hours watching Sarah asleep in the bed. There is little that is more depressing than watching someone with their eyes shut, unaware of your presence and who seems to have entered a sort of time warp where nothing is happening. It is an interesting scientific fact that contemplating a universe where there is absolutely nothing goes nowhere. But Sarah barely moved once she fell asleep.

Towards the end, she barely moved during the day either but, at night, she was particularly still. Towards the end her breathing also became irregular and noisy. But

I would perch on the edge of the bed near the pillow looking down at her although if I had had a drink or two I tried not to get too close in case she smelt it. Sarah's nose, you see, was one part of her body that still worked. But if I was sober, I would often stroke her forehead or her hair and talk to her even though she was asleep.

Then I might go to the window.

I would part the curtains, wipe the condensation from the glass and peer out into the darkness. Last autumn, just before Sarah died, I was watching as a mixture of wet snow and rain fell onto the road below. Large, wet, snowflakes floated through the bare cherry tree on the overgrown lawn. First, they seemed to fall downwards then, as the swirling wind caught them, they were swept upwards again, disappearing back into the darkness. The long grass of the lawn looked orange in the street light but everything was still too wet for snow to settle. A car drove slowly past, its headlights picking out rain mixed with snowflakes and reflecting off the wet road. And, in the distance over the rooftops opposite, stood the cathedral, already floodlit for the season, its spire outlined in a dimmer, foggy light. A Christmas tree lit with tiny red, blue and yellow fairy lights stood in the window of the house opposite.

The Carringtons at number 26, now named Grey Walls, always wanted to be the first to show how Christian and festive they were and it was only November.

I once told Sarah, "The Carringtons would put up a Christmas tree at Easter, if competition really hotted up."

I had not spoken to Fred Carrington for weeks. Mrs Carrington had been in hospital and I only knew that because Fred told me. We sometimes met in the local shop where I would spot him scanning the racks of the wine and spirits shelves with a guilty expression on his face. The poor man would be furtively glancing around as though he feared Mrs C might be lurking, somewhere in the vicinity. But standing there, watching what little life there was unfold from behind the curtain, I wondered who, if Mrs C was still in hospital, had put up that tree. I was immediately disgusted at my interest in such petty issues but such, you see, is the intellectual height of insomniacs who ponder on such trifling matters and so fail to tire their brains.

Fred, I decided, didn't seem the sort to have done it himself as the competitive streak undoubtedly came from Mrs C. Perhaps his wife, whatever her other name was, was better now. Perhaps Fred had been forced to fix the tree in place in a bucket, wrapped it in coloured crepe paper and Mrs C had done the more interesting part of decorating it.

The house to the right of the Carringtons, number 28, now called The Laurels, was always in darkness. As I write this I can see it through the curtains but I have no idea who lives there. It was once rented out to a family who shouted a lot and appeared to own at least six cars which they parked on the pavement between the garbage bins.

The house to the left was number 24 but I can't tell you its name if, indeed, it has been given one. But it, too, is in complete darkness. Such is the mysterious lifelessness that depicts certain streets like this.

I often look at the monkey-puzzle tree that stands stark against the gap between numbers 24 and 26. It is clearly visible in the street light against the orange hue from the low clouds that seem to constantly hover over the city and I often ponder about monkey-puzzle trees and about those who thought they were useful adornments for urban, English gardens.

They are, as trees, so brutal, stark and unbending and I have never seen it move, even during a gale. This is a particularly dirty tree that looks depressed but does not know how to die. It is a tree that appears lonely, homesick and out of place in England – a tree that should probably have stayed at home in South America. But it had not been given a choice. It, or its parents, had been brought to England, shipped here like an unwilling immigrant by someone with distorted ideas of interest and beauty with ideas to exhibit it in grand, English country gardens. It had done its best. In fact, it had made the most of its new home. This was, in fact, a particularly courageous specimen that might, if it could speak, admit that true happiness had eluded it since it came to Gloucester. If it could speak it might also tell you that it possessed undying patience and tolerance in abundance but that now it only half-believed the stories it had been told of high, snow-topped mountains in its birthplace of Chile and Argentina. It may have heard from other, older monkey-puzzle trees about soaring condors and of how its cousins provided nesting sites amongst their spiky armoury for far more exotic birds than the local sparrows that it was familiar with. It knows nothing of the stark terrain to which it is so much better suited and I am sure it dislikes providing shelter for the ugly, rusting shed and it tries its best to ignore the concrete post and the street light that shines at night.

In fact, I think it hates its safe, suburban life. I think it would have preferred the risk and adventure of coping with wild gales and other forces of nature. Its life is too mundane, you see.

Standing there, peeping from behind the curtain, I always feel sorry for that tree. Perhaps it also saw the eyes, peering like a ghost from behind the curtains of the upstairs window opposite and sympathized. That tree and I were like friends who had never spoken.

The view from the bedroom window is not one I would have chosen, but it is, I suppose, better than the view in Croydon, where the far horizon could be measured in yards. But a detached gable-fronted house in Gloucester had been the only sort affordable when I finally sat down to count the savings. It had been close to essential amenities, as Sarah used to call the shops and post office. But it had also been close to Robert, my son, and his family, which was the real reason for Sarah – that is before Robert decided with just a hint of guilt, to pack up and move to America within weeks of our arrival. The post office, too, has of course, now moved away.

But for Sarah, she was returning to somewhere closer to her Gloucestershire roots, and the house had given her a sense of comfort, which I saw no reason to undermine.

Personally, I would have found it far more exciting to live in a mountain hut in Chile next to a Monkey Puzzle tree or in Cape Town, Cyprus, South East Asia or any of the sixty odd other countries I have visited over the years. You see, I still prefer to feel hot sun on my face, not cold, wet, sleet. And I still need space and fresh air to breathe. But I owed it to Sarah to do what she wanted, not what I wanted. It was her turn, so to speak, to decide what we should do. She said she felt safer there and I now know why.

So, instead of buying a much larger villa with several acres of land in Cape Town we used all my remaining resources to buy a gable-fronted house in a side street of Gloucester.

Even Cheltenham would have been better and I tried hard to persuade Sarah of that. Cheltenham still has a certain ring of sophistication and affluence. It possesses an air of grandeur left by generations of retired military who have traveled the world, seen a lot, done their bit for King or Queen and Country and finally come home to roost in manageable apartments in Georgian streets. Cheltenham gathers secret intelligence by clever electronic surveillance of distant lands.

Cheltenham also calls itself the gateway to the Cotswolds. Certainly, it feels closer to the higher hills and the watery, more southerly valleys of Stroud and Painswick, of Cider with Rosie villages and stony cottages. Cheltenham is spring and summer – a town of glorious flowers in sunny parks. Gloucester, on the other hand, is like autumn and winter – a city of wet sleet, of oily water slopping about in old, disused docks, of dull brick terraced houses and industry.

But back in November, as I was peering from behind the curtain, I remember Sarah moaning in her sleep. I turned to check her as she moved just a little and settled once more. Her hair lay across her forehead, her face just a little orange in the reflected light from the street lamp. I watched her mouth move and heard her mumble something. It was the familiar sound of Sarah sleeping that I had listened to for nearly sixty years and I listened to her for a while longer.

That night, it was the only sound in the world. Sometimes, I decided, I had not heard her because, wrongly, I believed that what she was saying was not important. I had listened but had not heard. Sometimes I did not hear because I did not understand. Sometimes I did not hear because my mind was distracted and too far away. And once, but only once, I did not want to hear because we had argued. I looked away, back towards the window. I looked away because Sarah had known about Kings Cross. And Kings Cross was where Donaldson had started to turn the screw.

## **Hanky Panky**

**“The address is on there.”**

That was Jack pointing to the usual, scribbled message on the back of an old, brown envelope.

“Pick it up before you get the train. It’s just a package I understand. D wants it taken up.”

D was Jack’s occasional name for Donaldson.

“So, what has she got?” I had asked Jack.

Jack had shrugged. “Search me. Works for the Israelis but going back to Tel Aviv tomorrow I gather.”

“M?”

It was another ridiculous initial because we loved codes. M was Mossad. Jack had known what I meant but he shrugged again, said nothing and looked away. Later I took the underground to Kings Cross Station. It was late one evening in July and still light and I was getting out of a taxi and looking around at street numbers, finding 46, and ringing the bell next to the name that said Weizmann. A woman in her mid-twenties had come to the door and let me in. I followed close behind her as we

walked, round and round, up three flights of dark stairs and entered an airless flat that smelled as though it may, until recently, have remained unoccupied for months.

I remember that room so clearly. It had one high window open to the deep blue sky from the heat of the summer evening. But the bed looked slept in and the gas stove held a kettle that was steaming. A small suitcase lay on the floor, clothes tumbling from it. And a brown briefcase lay on the bedside table beside the only electric light that was switched on.

She had introduced herself as Leila and asked me if I would like coffee. Then she had filled the kettle from a single, cold water tap over the white, porcelain sink. I had sat on the only space available, the bed, and waited while she talked and washed two cups.

“We have to wait for Simon to arrive. We don’t have everything yet.”

She spoke in a husky Arab-Israeli accent tinged with American and pronounced Simon first in the Arabic way – Semaan and also in the more familiar Simon.

“Simon should be here very soon.”

I asked her a few questions but knew it was unwise to pry too much because I was merely doing favours – my innocent courier role as usual.

“I go home tomorrow,” she said, “El Al. You fly El Al before?”

We talked similar generalities and she came to sit beside me.

It was high summer, as I said – a hot July evening. The warm, eastern Mediterranean sun was shining from her dark brown eyes and I knew she was wearing nothing underneath her open necked shirt. Her smooth, brown, bare legs were parted at the hem of her short skirt. I remember her sighing and constantly looking at her watch as she continued with small talk.

“If he is not coming by ten o’clock, then maybe he is not coming until morning.”

I have to say her manner of speech and accent was very appealing so I used the time to practice my few words of Hebrew with a few remembered words and sentences. She seemed to like it and laughed and joked in Arabic. “My Arabic is now better than my Hebrew.”

And then we both told a few jokes about Arabs and Israelis, then a few more, but less political. Her Arabic was, indeed, good and I had started to wonder about her precise nationality but was too cautious to ask outright because I was only there as a trusted aid for Donaldson. She laughed again and seemed to like touching my leg with her own, just like Gladys Hargreaves used to do when I was eleven at school.

But time passed and Simon had still not arrived by ten.

After another mug of Leila’s delicious coffee, though, I remember nothing except feeling unusually relaxed and tired and lying backwards on the bed with my head on the pillow. I must have passed out and it was many hours later that the sound of people talking woke me. It was six in the morning and a man, presumably Simon, had arrived with an envelope and had let himself in with a key.

But I found, on waking from a sleep that was far, far deeper than normal, that I was missing my trousers and shirt. I was partly covered by a bed sheet but mostly I was covered by Leila’s bare arms, legs and long, jet-black hair. I also had a severe and throbbing headache.



But Simon had seemed surprisingly unconcerned and went about the task of making coffee for himself while Leila dressed beneath the sheet and I recovered my clothes that I could not recall having removed, from the floor.

Then, later that evening, after a long and tedious train journey to Edinburgh with my headache only receding slowly, I arrived at Donaldson's mysterious office in Morningside.

I gave him the sealed, brown envelope and he asked me how I had got on with Leila. Then he winked at me.

I remember Donaldson's winks. They were always made with a sideways nod of his head and a smug grin. Donaldson never smiled much but, when he did, he exposed a row of big, yellow teeth.

"Jolly energetic bit of totty, don't you think, old chap?"

I hated the suggestive nature of Donaldson's words and I told him I did not know what he was talking about. But the worst bit was to come.

Donaldson went on.

"Sarah rang the hotel in George Street because you failed to ring her last night. Tut tut, old chap."

I had looked at Donaldson, puzzled.

"Sarah?" I asked. "But Sarah has no idea I'm in Edinburgh, least of all where I might be staying."

Donaldson looked unconcerned.

"Ah, yes, sorry, old man. Jack would have told Beaty to phone your wife to ring the hotel in Edinburgh, as it was urgent."

I looked at him, my heart now starting to beat in my chest.

"But I'm telling you my wife didn't know I was going to Edinburgh. Neither did Beaty. And what, on earth, could have been so urgent?"

Donaldson then turned his back on me.

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure, but everyone seems to know something now, old chap."

Donaldson then turned around again, walked over, slapped me on the shoulder and looked at me as though he was about to reveal more. He did.

Donaldson retrieved the papers from the envelope that I had brought with me but had not opened because it was not mine to open – naïve devotion to Queen and Country you see.

Donaldson sat, inspecting the contents while I stood and meanwhile worried, in advance, what I would say to Sarah when I got home.

And so, it was, two days later, that Sarah and I started to argue about who, what, why, when and where. As usual I made a complete mess of explanations, as the only person in the world that I could never deceive with words was Sarah. I may not have always told her everything but what I did say was always the truth.

But my real anger lay with Donaldson who knew full well that I never talked to Sarah about my other life.

But Donaldson had got what he wanted. He held up something that he pulled from the envelope, placed it on the table, leaned back in his squeaking chair and read from the scrap of notepaper that was inside.

“Ah. Yes. You see. Just as I thought, Leila liked you – a lot.

She says here that you didn’t tell her your name but she asks me to tell you she would love to see you again next time she’s in London. She likes the photos you took of each other. She says to tell you she’ll keep them as a memento – until the next time.”

It was the only time I had argued with Sarah but it was not the first or the last time with Donaldson. It was the first and only time I met Leila. But Donaldson often found time to talk about her and the photographs and I knew full well that Donaldson was the only one keeping them as a memento.

“Seen Leila lately, Ollie? Good job Sarah doesn’t know about you, you rascal. But she’ll soon see the photos if you ever step out of line. Mind you, I wouldn’t mind a bit of Leila myself sometime. What?”

The visions in the darkened bedroom window disappeared and were replaced again with the pale reflection of my own face and at the equally pale form of Sarah still sleeping in the bed behind me.

So, I wandered downstairs again, filled my glass once more and sat staring into the log effect gas fire wondering if those photos still existed somewhere. Perhaps they were filed in a box in some dusty cellar somewhere and had been turned up by a couple of cleaners or low grade civil servants tasked with reducing the volume of paperwork still in storage.

“Seen this one, Bert? Quaint bit of hanky-panky and other goings-on in the corridors of power. Must have been a few years ago though, Bert. See? The girl’s mini skirt is half way up her arse – and look, no bloody knickers. Dirty old man whoever he is. Lucky sod! Ha ha!”

But Donaldson had started to turn the screw.

## **Reynolds**

### **Some months after Kings Cross, Donaldson gave the screw another turn.**

I had been to Algeria again on business but then flew to Amman in Jordan because Donaldson had apparently set me up with an appointment with the Ministry of Defense.

When I returned to my hotel from my usual evening visit to the souk on the lookout for a small gift for Sarah, a bearded Arab in smart white dress was waiting for me.

It was the reception clerk who pointed him out and I can remember the occasion as clearly as if it was a week ago. The man was sitting in a chair, running a string of brown coloured beads between his fingers just as I was fingering my new found present for Sarah in my pocket.

“Salaam Alekum,” he said and stood up, his hand outstretched.

There was the briefest of pauses. “Mr Thomas?”

Now, this had been surprising because my passport for immigration and visa purposes when I arrived in Amman had been a special one, prepared and given to me by Donaldson in London. It was all done in readiness for the meeting he had arranged with the Jordanian Armed Forces the next day.

The new passport was in another name, one David William Reynolds, a company director, born in Sheffield on February 4th 1918 and I had not shaved whilst in Algeria and Egypt so as to better match the photograph.

I remember the reception clerk scratching his head. Perhaps he went to consult his guest list because I had also checked in as David Reynolds and been welcomed as Mr Reynolds every time I collected my key.

I knew my Oliver Thomas passport lay secure behind the lining of my black case. In fact, I held three passports in the name of Thomas although I normally only carried one. The others would have been at home or lodged with Embassies awaiting visas for future trips. On this occasion, the lining had been the hiding place for the Reynolds passport until just before my plane landed in Amman. Then, just before touching down, I had hidden the Thomas one, recovered the Reynolds one and passed through immigration as David Reynolds.

Faced, then, with a visitor in the hotel lobby addressing me as Oliver Thomas, I was, at first, unsure how to respond. I decided on caution.

"Aleikum essalaam. And you are?" I asked.

"Derhally, sir. Fouad Derhally. Major Donaldson informed us you were staying here," he said.

His English was good.

"Major Donaldson?"

"Yes, sir. I think you know him, sir."

I decided on maintaining my caution. "I do?" I said.

"Yes sir. Mr David Reynolds also confirmed you were staying here."

This was odd, because I was, ostensibly, David Reynolds.

"Mr Reynolds?" I asked, again checking.

"Yes, sir. He is coming from England," the man said in his Arabic way.

This was true, but it was still very odd.

"And where is Mr Reynolds at present?" I asked the man.

"He is coming from the British Embassy, I believe, sir."

"Is he? And how do you know Mr Reynolds?"

"He is arriving yesterday, sir. He was fly to Amman from Algeria."

Even now, years later, I remember exactly how the man spoke. But it was me who, as Oliver Thomas, had flown from Algeria, just the day before. The confusion combined with the heat of an afternoon in the middle of July in Amman brought on a sticky sweat. But what happened afterwards has been a recurring nightmare that produces regular sweats even in December in England.

I walked with the Arab to the corner of the hotel lobby and we sat, briefly, by a potted palm and ordered coffee. We talked pleasantries until it arrived in a pot and was served by a bearded man in white robes and a red sash into tiny cups on a brass tray. Little was said and the coffee ritual only served to extend the time I spent with the man. But eventually he said: "So, sir. There is an appointment for you, as arranged. You will meet General Najib Jamal tomorrow. At eight in the morning, sir."

The man spoke to me over sips of the coffee but never looked directly at me. I know his eyes were black and that one manicured finger bore a fine gold ring with a blue stone. But there was no eye contact. Then, with an over vigorous shaking of hands, he left.

It was ten hours later that the man called again and escorted me to a black, official looking car parked outside. Sometime later, we arrived at the gate of what I took to be a military headquarters with guards and guns outside. We were ushered through and then I was asked to get out. The black car drove off leaving me standing in the heat of the hot morning sun, but I was immediately met by another man in army uniform and taken across a compound, past flat roofed buildings and through a door into a surprisingly plush office.

I can recall everything about that room.

The General, or whoever he was, because he had discarded the jacket part of his uniform and so the badges and ribbons were not apparent, was seated at an elaborate desk with a gilt framed picture of a young King Hussein behind. He was flanked by three younger, military men, who wore khaki uniforms and off set berets. And there was a fourth man in a crumpled, dark, grey suit and tie, looking not unlike myself but with a better developed beard, who looked distinctly English and also distinctly nervous.

The view of that office is imprinted on my mind.

Perhaps it has been embellished by time, but despite the briefest of minutes I spent there it is still very clear. There were other ornate frames bearing inscriptions – passages from the Koran drawn in gold and red and conveying messages probably of peace and praise and loyalty to Allah. But the room itself did not convey a message of peace, goodwill and loyalty.

"Mr Thomas. Please come with me."

I can hear the order even now. There were no pleasantries, hand-shakes or invitations to sit, because the General was already standing. I was taken through to another room. The others followed, including the Englishman who appeared reluctant but said nothing. Then came the invitation to sit. An outstretched hand pointed. The seat was hard, with no arms and I sat with my hot, sticky hands clasped in my lap. The General, if that is what he was, talked whilst the others stood around him in their smart uniforms and shiny boots.

The Englishman, for that is what he proved to be, was standing beside one of the soldiers furthest from the main group. It was then that I saw the handcuffs and heard the words that I still remember to this day.

"This is Mr Reynolds, Mr Thomas. Mr David Reynolds. Mr Reynolds has made a few mistakes. He talked too much to the Israelis, Mr Thomas. Far too much. About what is not important. What is important is that from today we would like you to become Mr Reynolds. It will be very useful for everyone. You can also be Mr Thomas. But for

certain tasks related to the ongoing situation in the Middle East, of which you are well aware, it has been decided that it will make things, what shall we say, easier – no convenient – no, efficient yes, that is it, efficient. It will be more efficient and convenient if you are able, occasionally, to take over from Mr Reynolds, for the goodness of international relations – officially.

“What is more, Mr Thomas, our mutual friend Major Donaldson approves of this bold plan. That is also what we say – official. Ha.”

The General finished by laughing a little as though embarrassed. I, myself, stood up, objected and asked for a better explanation. But the General just raised his hand. No more explanation was forthcoming. But the menace came all too quickly.

“Your wife – Mrs Sarah, isn’t it, Mr Thomas – and your children, they are called Elizabeth and Robert, isn’t it Mr Thomas? They must not know. Do you understand? No one must know. No one knows about this most important decision even now, except our mutual friend Major Donaldson. Major Donaldson knows. Major Donaldson knows everything, you see. Major Donaldson is a good friend to us. He has arranged everything. Even our young King does not know, Mr Thomas. “Some things are best dealt with in – how shall we say – in strictest confidence. It is best for everyone. Even your Queen and your own Prime Minister – no one knows. No one then has to deny knowledge about your legitimate business activities and you can run your other very useful assignments as Mr Reynolds whenever it is appropriate. It is safer for you. That’s it – safer and better. It will be easier for you also. And it will be very useful for relations, you understand. You see how it is?”

I had not understood at all, but I had, suddenly, become David Reynolds and was about to become further enmeshed in a sticky web of intrigue that lasted years and where struggle meant even more entanglement. I had been caught like a fly in a spider’s web although it felt more like barbed wire.

But things had then happened very suddenly.

The General nodded to the soldier who was fastened by handcuffs on his left hand to the silent Englishman. The man undid the bottom button of his khaki jacket with his free, right hand and a shiny black pistol was taken from a leather holster inside.

The real and mysterious Mr Reynolds who had, so far, said nothing, froze. He stared with wide eyes at me, his fellow Englishman and apparent replacement and the blood visibly drained from his face. But still he said nothing. The gun was raised to the side of the head of the real Reynolds. The poor man closed his eyes and seemed to clench his teeth. Then there was a bright flash and a loud bang as the man’s head twisted violently over his neck. A red hole appeared above the ear and the body slumped to the ground with one arm still upright, attached to the uniformed assassin. Blood gushed from the hole onto the floor.

I admit I was in too much of a state of shock to say or do much after that, and what happened in the minutes after-wards is unclear.

I remember Reynolds’ body being dragged away by the handcuff that held him to his killer and being pulled through a doorway to a darker room with what looked like a plain concrete floor. I saw the soldier who had shot him release the handcuff from his own wrist and the body of Reynolds slump to the floor. I remember the line of fresh blood that ran from just a few feet from me across the floor to the other room. I also remember the General taking me by the arm and me pushing him away. But what I

said or shouted I cannot recall. I then remember both my arms being held by the other soldiers as I tried to fight myself free, but it was pointless because my legs and body felt weak from what I had just seen.

But, as I was marched back out into the sunshine, I remember the General talking non-stop in short, incomplete sentences as though it was just a routine morning's work.

"Such a pity," he repeated probably ten times and there were other words that I think he spoke. "But that is the way of life."

"We must all obey our orders."

"At last, we now have a very fine replacement. This is good.

It is best for everyone. We must carry on this good work."

"This will be better now, you will see. Insh'allah. Things are clearer now."

"Major Donaldson, he will be pleased with this. I shall report immediately."

With that, and with me still in a state of shock but not wanting to instigate a fight when I knew I was totally outnumbered, I was bundled into the same black car I had arrived in and, in a daze, I was dropped off at my hotel.

I felt completely numb.

I went to my room, still in a state of shock and there I removed my glasses, washed my face and stood before the mirror looking at my new appearance. The fact was that, even to myself, I didn't look like Ollie Thomas anymore. I suppose it was the light beard and my hair which was plastered down with a parting on the wrong side. Then I went to lie on the bed, took out my Oliver Thomas passport and laid it next to the Reynolds one.

I picked up the phone to call the British Embassy, thinking they might help but then stopped myself because I was already afraid of what I had got involved in.

Then, in my mind, I went over and over the words spoken to me earlier.

"This is Mr Reynolds, Mr Thomas. Mr David Reynolds. Mr Reynolds has made a few mistakes. He talked too much . . . It will be very useful for everyone if you are able, occasionally, to take over from Mr Reynolds, for the goodness of international relations . . . What is more, Mr Thomas, our mutual friend Major Donaldson approves of this bold plan."

And then the threats: "Your wife – Mrs Sarah, isn't it, Mr Thomas – and your children, they are called Elizabeth and Robert, isn't it Mr Thomas? They must not know. Do you understand? No one must know."

I remember thinking about Sarah back at home and looking over at my white shirts hanging in the wardrobe and remembering that Sarah had carefully washed and ironed them before I left home and I remember tears coming to my eyes.

What the hell had I become involved with?

I thought about phoning home but then thought better of it because of the threats.

"No one knows about this most important decision except our friend Major Donaldson . . . Major Donaldson is a good friend to us . . . He has arranged everything . . . Even our young King does not know, Mr Thomas . . . Some things are

best dealt with in strictest confidence . . . Even your, Queen and your Prime Minister . . . No one knows . . . No one then has to deny knowledge . . . You can run your other assignments as Mr Reynolds whenever it is appropriate . . . It is safer and better . . . It will be easier for you also . . . It will be very useful for relations. You see how it is?”

Oh yes, I was really starting to see how it was and what I was involved in.

I stayed in that hotel room for more than a day before finally venturing out and going to the airport to catch my scheduled flight home. And all the time I thought I was being followed. On arrival at Heathrow, I still felt too upset and afraid to go home immediately so I stopped off at my Croydon office and fell onto my familiar seat behind my desk.

It was past five so Beaty had already left.

I had never ever phoned Donaldson in the past but I had a London phone number in my book that Jack had once given me “for emergencies” although I had no idea where this phone was. I dialed the number. But it rang and rang and I gave up.

I gave it ten minutes and tried again until someone eventually answered it. To this day, I do not know who it was, but it sounded like a young boy of around twelve years old. I asked to speak to Major Donaldson but there was a silence from the other end and whoever answered, hung up.

So, I tried Jack’s number, again one that he had told me I could use in an absolute emergency and to my amazement, Jack answered. I remember blurting out to him what had happened as he listened mainly in silence broken by platitudes like “I see”, “I really don’t know,” “that’s really surprising” and “that must have been such a shock”.

I then started to blow my top at Jack.

“Surprising? A bloody shock? That’s a fucking understatement. What, the hell, is going on here?”

Jack fumbled with words in his usual pathetic style.

“Yes, it can be a very messy business at times,” was about the only sentiment I could extract from him.

“Messy? So, what the fuck’s Donaldson playing at? Where the hell is the fucking bastard, I want to know?”

“I understand he’s in Scotland on business. He is expected back in a few days.”

“On bloody business?” I shrieked, “I thought this was the bloody Foreign Office or civil service! Manned twenty-four hours, seven days a week, Christmas and New Year and never closed. I, myself, have even been phoned on a Christmas Eve.

And I was in bloody Teheran! But when it’s me who needs something, they’ve bloody well gone out.”

“Yes, what I mean is he is on Government business in Edinburgh as I understand.”

It was useless. Jack’s uncertainty about the whereabouts of Donaldson was clear. I went home.

That night was the first time I mentioned to Sarah about moving the business abroad and starting again. I couldn't bring myself to tell her why but I didn't get a chance anyway.

"But, I was about to break the good news to you, dear.

Robert and Anne are getting married soon."

"Are they?" I said, shocked by more fresh news. "No-one told me."

"No dear, you've been away a lot. But we can't possibly just pack up and move. Not now and, anyway, we'd need to talk about it a lot more."

And that was it for three days until I eventually got Jack to fix it for me to meet Donaldson at the Regent Street office. Beaty clearly knew something had happened but, as usual, after just one question to ask if I was not feeling well, she was all for trying to focus on the business.

"Mr Farouk telephoned from Paris, Mr Thomas. He was anxious to meet you. I told him you were away so he said he'd phone again when he's next over."

"We've had the results of the Tunisian tender we quoted for. We didn't win it, I'm afraid."

"The Letter of Credit came in from Kenya, Mr Thomas, but the expiry date is so short I don't think there's any time left. Shall we ask for an extension?"

"Many of the bottles of hospital disinfectant we shipped to Syria were broken on arrival and the customer rejected it. There is a dispute now on whose insurance it is covered by. What do you think, Mr Thomas?"

Clearly there was not much good news, but frankly I couldn't have cared a toss about the business at the time. I was far too worried about how to deal with my other problems and my mind was on what to do about Donaldson.

Naturally Jack was also present when we met in Regent Street. Jack was the most unlikely person to intervene if it came to a physical fight but Donaldson knew that Jack's presence meant he could control things to his own advantage. I was in a rage even before I got to his office.

"What the fuck is this, Major? What the hell is going on? Is this the way the Government treats its agents? Who sanctioned it? You? Who the hell was this poor guy Reynolds whom I'm supposed to impersonate? Is this just one big game? Does her Majesty's Government endorse assassination in the name of security and intelligence? And what are these threats to my family? I assume you know about this?"

I went on and on as Donaldson sat there behind his desk, picking his yellow teeth with the corner of an empty packet of Craven A and scratching his head as though I was boring him.

Jack watched, standing in the corner by the door.

Even then I was behaving as though I still believed Donaldson was perhaps just another pawn in some sort of high level game played out by politicians and senior Civil Servants and that this was just the smelly downwind side of anything to do with International Intelligence. I still believed that he had his own bosses lurking somewhere in Whitehall.



“You knew about this before I went to Amman, didn’t you, you bastard? What more do they want from me? And what if I don’t go along with it? What will happen then? What are you going to do, Major? Shoot me? Shoot my family? Go to fucking hell!”

Donaldson still sat there.

“You can all go to fucking hell! I’m finished,” I repeated and turned to go to the door.

But there was a scraping sound behind me as Donaldson pushed his chair back.

I heard a hissing sound and saw Jack visibly jump from where he was standing.

“If you walk your fucking stupid arse out of here I warn you, Ollie Thomas, you’re bloody finished.”

I turned.

Donaldson was standing now, his hands resting on the bare desk, his face having turned puce. A strand of greying hair had fallen across his forehead and a blob of white spit shone on his fat lower lip.

“You’re in this shit up to your fucking neck,” he scowled.

“Sit down!”

“Fuck you,” I said and turned and put my hand on the door knob. It didn’t turn. I rattled it. I shook it. It was locked.

“Sit the fuck down!” Donaldson roared and sat down himself but his face was still bright red.

Jack cowered close to me and I looked at him. He seemed to nod at me.

“Sit down,” Donaldson ordered again.

I still stood.

I looked at Jack again. His hand was now out towards me, palm down, as though trying to make me relax.

“As I said, you’re in some bloody big shit, Ollie,” Donaldson said, slightly more quietly, “But stop a minute and think, you stupid bastard. Yes, I knew something about Amman. After all, we fixed your nice new passport. Fact is Reynolds made some mistakes. He went native so to speak. But we still trust you, Ollie. Otherwise you might well have met the same fate by now. Someone else might be carrying an Ollie Thomas passport today.”

He stopped, perhaps waiting for that sinister message to sink in. “Trust me?” I shouted. “Since when has trust had any place in all this fucking crap?”

“We’ve trusted you for several years, Ollie. You’re a good agent. Useful. Valuable. Very clever in your own way. Your big advantage is your business, Ollie. Reynolds was an employee. On the books, so to speak. You’re more of a freelance. Not so easy to spot. Look on it as an opportunity. Carry on. Don’t be so bloody nervous. If it all turns out you never know what other opportunities might crop up.”

I stared at him, hardly believing what I was hearing.

I heard Jack coming across as though he, himself, was already more relaxed. It was as though Donaldson had just convinced him by such a brilliant acting performance

that he was certain that I would also be totally convinced and that all my concerns would be completely deflated.

“Opportunities,” I heard Jack say quietly and he nodded pathetically.

Donaldson glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

I will remember this single word from Jack Woodward for the rest of my life, not for the support or encouragement he was offering but as an example of the sort of person Jack was. He was an office boy and a yes man who ran errands and who behaved, as I have often imagined him to be, like some sort of creep.

I suspect he was in the quick sands as well but he was such a creep that he could live with it.

But echoes from the pistol that shot Reynolds have ricocheted around my own skull for years and I have lived with the implications of that shooting ever since, as you will see.

I can barely remember what happened immediately after that argument with Donaldson but, suffice it to say, I knew I had become totally enmeshed.

To struggle at that stage was pointless and to explain to Sarah was impossible.

I had to face this alone.

But I left determined that one day, somehow, I would get my revenge.

## **Jack Woodward**

**The drinking sessions leading to my nightmares** usually start in a fairly civilised manner. Sometimes I start off thinking about people from the past while drinking a cup of tea and munching on a plate of toast and Marmite. But then I progress to the whisky as I've given a lot of thought of late to Jack Woodward.

The last time I saw him was twenty-five years ago, in London at the Cumberland Hotel on Marble Arch. Somehow, he had found out about our newly acquired Gloucester address and I received a letter with a phone number and a note suggesting a meeting. I wasn't at all keen on the idea and even considered writing “moved away” on the card and sticking it back in the post but I mentioned to Sarah that an old friend wanted to meet up and she suggested I go.

“It's nice to meet old friends, dear. You mustn't lose touch.” I didn't mention it was Jack or explain our connection but I think if she had known more she may not have been so encouraging. But, anyway, I took the train up and we met.

It hadn't been so long since we last met but he looked so much older and arrived propped up on a stick. I remember him waving it. He was also nervously rubbing his chin as usual – a man who had spent his entire career under the control of others and completely out of his depth. He also smelt, strangely, of cigarettes but never seemed to smoke.

Perhaps he lived with a smoker. I sometimes wondered about that but I never knew anything about Jack's private life.

Had Donaldson been there it would have been pints of beer, but when Jack was alone it was gins and tonic as though he had a different side that he didn't like showing to Donaldson.

There had also been crowds of people in the hotel with some sort of conference going and it was clearly an unsuitable meeting place, but Jack and I found a corner. Looking back, I remember that last meeting because of what Jack seemed to be trying to ask me amidst the surrounding chaos of babbling conversation, chinking glasses, lemon slices and cherries on sticks. But it was ideal territory for Jack who preferred the anonymity that crowds provided.

Jack was probably nervous about meeting me. After all, he had witnessed some pretty fierce arguments between Donaldson and me that had almost come to murder. So, I suppose, with the crowds around him, he felt safer if I should suddenly turn on him for being party to everything Donaldson had done.

But I think Jack was actually just as much in the shit as me and so I behaved impeccably.

We reminisced a little although it was too noisy for anything detailed.

I think we may have reminisced about Cairo because Jack liked Egypt and the sights, sounds and smells of Egypt are still as clear in my own mind as they were fifty years ago, when I first visited.

I was then in my thirties, lean, tanned and healthy, energetic and needing the excitement. It was a place, not of cars as now, but of thin, brown, underfed horses pulling carts with colourful harnesses and of camels tethered in rows. I can still see the tall palms on their slender trunks and feel the hot sun from the endless, cloudless, blue sky. I would walk down dark, shadowy alleyways with shady traders selling everything from frightened, bleating sheep and goats to gold, perfume and unseen women and watch value being meticulously added to raw Egyptian cotton by men sitting, turning the handles of black and gold Singer sewing machines and making anything to measure. I can still see the busy River Nile with snowy white sails drifting at less than walking pace in the windless heat. The dusty, flat roofed buildings, the colour of the encroaching desert as though they were deliberately camouflaged. From the air, they were often just that – blocks of stones, the same colour as the Pyramids but with dubious, military functions.

It had been Jack who had asked me if I was interested in supplementing what little income I was then drawing from Thomas Import Export Ltd. Looking back, I realise it was Donaldson who had made Jack put the proposal and they knew all along what bait they needed to catch their fish.

Being fresh out of the air force and with the war still on everyone's minds, doing something more for King or Queen and Country was the only reason I needed at the time.

Later on, of course, I thought of myself as a fish caught on a line.

I was like a small fish in a big pond tempted by a thin worm called patriotism and held in place by a sharp but invisible hook called industrial espionage or plain, old fashioned spying.

It may have been both naïve and stupid but it was utterly typical of me at that time.

I admit to still being an unusual mixture of a reliable, faithful little puppy and a Rottweiler with a mean streak.

I also know I'm also a bit of a conniving bastard myself especially if I detect the slightest reason to be a bit impatient of others as you will discover.

I suppose the older I got the bigger the conniving swine I became.

But it was the company I was keeping, you see.

Jack and I continued during lunch in the grill but with silences that grew longer and longer. Jack did enquire about Sarah, if I recall, but, in the way of things, I would not have gone overboard with descriptions of our domestic life.

"Well, thank you", that would have been my response, because she was – at that time.

Jack had never met Sarah so to him she was just a name. But then some concern had shown and I was surprised.

"So, you're not moving abroad then, Ollie?"

This was also unusual for Jack. It was far too personal.

"No, Jack. Sarah prefers England."

In fact, Sarah didn't even have a passport. I ran with four different passports at the same time once. We did get as far as the Isle of Wight ferry once but she hated the thought of flying anywhere.

"She gave no other reason, Ollie?" Jack was pressing me. It was strange.

"No. She just feels safer in England I think."

"Did she say that?" Jack persisted. "I can understand the need for feeling safe. The tentacles of the past can sometimes reach a long way, Ollie."

As usual I failed to pick up any signs.

Looking back and watching the nightmares from behind closed eyes, I now read much more into what Jack was saying.

He was prying. He was checking. He was trying to find out if I had plans to move away or disappear.

So, had he been sent to the Cumberland Hotel? Did his invitation to meet come from the kind heart of a past work colleague or was he there because he was a trained poodle and a yes man who was still being hung on a string?

Twenty-five years is what I have found I need to realize what was going on under my nose.

In my ignorance of what was motivating Jack, I probably found myself laughing. In fact, I know I laughed because I did not understand what he was talking about.

But I needed to say something.

"Ah well. You know women, Jack. They like their home comforts."

But did Jack know women? Probably not. I assumed he was single because he never mentioned anything about a family. In those days one was left to think that someone like that might well have other tendencies but if so it was not a subject for

polite conversation. Looking back, I wonder if Jack was being blackmailed because of past illegal practices. It seems highly likely.

But Jack then summed up our brief conversation about family matters.

“Knew where she was better off then, Ollie,” Jack said and we left it there.

Perhaps Jack had decided he'd got the answer he wanted by saying it himself.

Then it was back to current affairs I expect, as Margaret Thatcher had just come to power and was talking to Mikhail Gorbachev.

But Donaldson was never mentioned. Not even by reference to D.

## **The Voice Inside**

**I only have a few friends who are still alive** but one of them lives somewhere in my sub conscience.

Perhaps I've become a sort of psychopath with a dual personality and it's just another symptom of Thomas's Disease. Whether it is a different person or just a carbon copy of me I am not sure but sometimes I talk to him as a separate entity and at other times I consult him as if I am my own doctor or psychiatrist.

I admit to spending an inordinate amount of time considering my physical and mental health, although I suppose that's natural for someone of my age who constantly wonders whether he'll manage to wake up next morning. Perhaps this explains the short naps of the elderly in that they wake up regularly in order to check that they are still alive.

The phenomenon of the other personality is especially noticeable when I doze off after if I've had a drop too much. Whatever the cause, the conversations with him are highly stimulating and I feel I need to explain in order for you to understand my mental state and my reasons for writing this.

Spending far too much time sitting in the chair by Sarah's log effect gas fire with a glass of Bell's, or even a bottle, in my hand is not a good start. But after a glass, or two, I often find myself talking aloud.

I often talk about Sarah, although if she had been sat opposite me instead of upstairs, she would have been shocked at my dishevelled appearance with the wet stains of whisky around my crotch. But the drinking has been a distraction really.

If I am giving an impression of a long term drunken layabout or an uncaring husband who beats his wife, then the truth is quite the opposite. In the same way that I tolerated Donaldson for so long, I also went along with Sarah's wishes even though they have often led to me sometimes feeling depressed and unfulfilled with my retirement.

Sarah seemed content with a quiet backwater life in Gloucester. I didn't want to retire to live in Gloucester. My plan was to move somewhere interesting like South Africa or South-East Asia but Sarah told me so in no uncertain terms that she saw no need to move.

She cried about it once when I may have pushed the subject too far.

“Please, dear. Stop it. I don’t want to go anywhere. Robert and Anne can come without any problems. It’s fine here. I like it. I feel safe here. We’re both safe here. Please don’t keep on.”

Perhaps Jack had known Sarah better than me when he said: “She knew where she was better off then, Ollie.”

In my efforts, not to worry Sarah with my own problems, I failed to realize that she had too many worries of her own and that these were caused by me and what I was doing.

Hindsight is a terrible thing and can be a trigger for all sorts of nightmares.

But I believed that Sarah liked our domestic life the way it was.

In days gone by she would sit at home, reading, sewing, listening to the radio or enjoying the novelty of watching our new black and white television whilst waiting for me to return from my travels.

She grew accustomed to it I suppose and felt comfortable and at ease with the familiarity. She carried none of life’s baggage that had weighed me down with all its hypocrisy, stress and worry. She liked a simple life and sought no great adventures. I was the opposite. I found suburban England monotonous and grey. I still do. Even high summer here cannot be guaranteed to produce reliable sun. And even when it shines it seems to cast dark shadows on brick and concrete.

What fun is there in that? There is no colour here. It is so bland and so depressing.

I used to enjoy summers here but they are far too short.

How much more pleasant and enjoyable it would have been to spend nine months in sunshine and return here for the summer.

But, despite Sarah’s problems with Croydon, I felt we’d moved from Brick View, Croydon to Brick View, Gloucester. She didn’t like that joke.

Croydon, in the early days had already become a multi-coloured, multicultural society and Gloucester is catching up. Parts of Gloucester have become like the back streets of Karachi, Dacca or Trinidad with local stores selling halal meat, frozen Bangladeshi fish, Pakistani vegetables and herbs and shelves stacked high with tins of bamboo shoots, tamarind, green leaves preserved in brine and half fermented gourami fish. It has, in some respects, become a more varied and interesting place to live, but it is the drab English way of life that I dislike and the backward steps the country seems to be making in so many other respects.

I am a very long way from being what is, these days, called racist, though. Some of my best friends have been Arabs, Africans and others from widely different cultures and I miss them. I miss them badly.

How much better to sit drinking Metaxa after dinner with my old friend Alex in Athens or sharing a bottle of icy arak with Farouk in Baalbeck or sharing just a bottle of Black Label with George in Ghana.

These days, I think I prefer the flair, the imagination and the dynamism of those our politicians have decided, in their bizarre attempts to instil tolerance, that we should call the ethnic minorities. But politicians breed intolerance with their stuffy attempts to address the matter. Every official form I see these days seems to require me to identify my colour or my racial origins. Of what good is that? Surely, it’s racist just to

ask the question. When the census forms come around, I usually put Bedouin in the “other” box under ethnic origin but nobody notices.

I decided, long ago, that it was the natives of Britain who have changed over the last fifty years. Other than a brief phase in the sixties, where now is the flair and style? Where is the imagination? Where is the energy? Where is the sensible but radical thought and determination to change the world for the better?

I am probably just a cynical old man but the young seem to have been de-politicized by excess and too much wealth. They have become less inspired and less adventurous because they have too much.

They go on so-called gap years to Bangkok or Bali after three years learning golf management or public administration at University. They go with their credit cards, mobile phones and health insurance, with their hair styled and gelled, their teeth looking like rows of piano keys and dressed like film stars. And they send email messages to Mum and Dad back home, who like to show they fret about them even though they are probably in the midst of a messy divorce anyway. And even when they have an adventure, such as getting lost for a couple of days in some tame woods, somewhere, the world’s press or TV seem to descend on the area in droves to report it.

That is not adventure. To die in some remote spot with your body discovered a century later is the way to leave your mark because it leaves behind a mystery.

But neither is there a patriotic determination to strive because it is removed from their sense of purpose by excessive wealth and social security. Society has changed. It has been replaced by one in which entitlements supersede responsibilities. It has been replaced by a society that lives risk-free knowing it can depend on a safety net of social security.

This is the type of thing that goes on in my mind even during rational, sober moments. But during the more intoxicated times I can wake up thrashing around in the chair by Sarah’s log effect gas fire to find myself groaning aloud in anger and frustration about the way of the world or its injustices.

I have become a cynical, depressed, old man who gets just as mad about my own past life as I do about the current lives of others.

I didn’t used to be like that.

This is not a sign of good, mental health. So, is it yet another characteristic of Thomas’s Disease or of old age in general?

The psychiatrist living in my head tells me I need to do something before it’s all too late.

He asks me if I care if I die in the process. And I say no because frankly I couldn’t care less. Not one bloody iota.

But after all this dreaming, drinking, dozing and mental I turmoil, I wake up. But then I feel uncomfortable, sweaty, angry and frustrated and I stink of stale whisky.

So, I often have a quick glance around the untidy clutter of the sitting room where I half expect to see three bloody porcelain flying ducks on the wall and have another swig, perhaps direct from the bottle.

I then might relieve myself with a blast of wind direct from my arse and carry on where I'd just left off. But then the nightmares about Donaldson can start all over again.

But there are still one or two things I like, although I have to wait until I am soberer to appreciate them.

One of them is my car.

I have owned several in my time and they always provided a small means of escape from the depressing feeling of being housebound whenever I returned from overseas. My itchy feet are legendary.

Even Sarah enjoyed drives into the countryside and odd weekends away when I first retired and we moved to suburban, bloody Gloucester. But it was only ever temporary, short-lived relief. She would complain about the price of petrol and I would go into the garage and talk to the car and say things like, "Oh well, old girl, perhaps we'll go out next week."

But I used to think of those occasional country drives with Sarah like a vase of fresh flowers. You arrange them so prettily in a vase and enjoy them briefly but they die so quickly. And what is left? The empty vase again. I thought, too, that in later years when age caught up with both of us that even the car would have to be garaged for good or, worse, sold. But I'm still a bit of a rascal and I admit it.

Sarah, bless her, would have a fit. But when the feeling takes me and I feel particularly morose, I have been known to take the car out.

I probably shouldn't at my age – but what the bloody hell.

The Jaguar is getting on a bit now – twenty-five years old, in fact, but I still tinker with it, as Sarah used to say. The phone rang once whilst I was in the garage and I heard her say: "He's tinkering with that infernal car of his again."

But I check it, charge the battery up, switch it on, rev it up and give it a polish. The smell of leather seems to have disappeared over time but perhaps that's my sense of smell. It's still in good nick. One hundred and sixty thousand miles on the clock and it purrs like a kitten with its V6 engine.

I check the oil and often sit in it, even when I myself am also well oiled. One night recently I was so pissed that, even though it was three in the morning, I sat in it and looked at myself in the mirror. I turned the ignition key and, of course, it fired immediately and ticked away like a Singer sewing machine. Then I opened the garage door, reversed it out and walked around it and looked at it in the street light. A few nights later, I drove off in it and, before I knew it, I was in Stroud. I drove out on the Painswick Road as I hadn't been there for months. It was eerily quiet, but a lovely clear night with a bright moon. I stopped and went to look over a gate into a field and watched a fox walking across the field in the moonlight. I was tempted to drive out towards Cirencester and on and on and on. But I suddenly thought about Sarah. So I got back in and drove home. But Sarah had barely moved since I left her.

I slept like a log that night.

It was extremely therapeutic.



But, more often than not, because I didn't like leaving Sarah, I would sit there getting pissed and listening to the only sound I could detect – the blood flowing through my fucking ears.

Blood running through your ears seems to hiss like a river in a meadow. You can hear it bubbling over the pebbles and rocks, like the babbling brooks of old poetry, though, I used to think that maybe the description was better suited to the babbling I did with myself.

I am a babbling Thomas – a quite distinct species to the other type, the doubting Thomas.

Some days I spent hours listening to my ears. Sometimes I moved or fidgeted a little to create another sound but mostly it was because the confounded chair had become so uncomfortable.

Time would pass, minute by minute and I seemed to descend into a state in which it was hard to imagine another world outside the sitting room window. And all that for a man who had been travelling the world for forty years and wished he still was.

I would spend hours trying to imagine those outside in the darkness who were perhaps far less fortunate even than myself. I would imagine the homeless, the sick, those working to keep the wheels of industry turning and those who keep the gas flowing in the pipe that leads to Sarah's beloved log effect gas fire.

I envied them because they were still contributing something and I wasn't.

But after Sarah died I decided there was still time left for me to do something.

There was a big piece of unfinished business to deal with.

### **Assignments**

**“Leave the package with Moatassim who will meet you at the airport back in Luxor. Make your own way back to Cairo. You'll know Moatassim. He's one of our best chaps – Sudanese fellow. He'll use a code. No need to worry. Jack will tell you later.”**

Those were the sort of instructions I continued to be given in the Feathers.

Most of the time, everything went as smooth as silk although my dislike for and suspicions about Donaldson grew more and more intense. But I was too busy to sit and decide what to do about it.

That first meeting with Moatassim was the start of a good friendship and we met several times over one period of two or three years with talks about starting a joint business venture some time. But it never happened. Moatassim was a bright and intelligent Sudanese Moslem with deep tribal scars on his cheeks, but with a strange and touching desire to be British, white and Christian and play cricket for England.

“I like to be the stump; Mr Oliver and I can make very good leg spinning.”

I remember Moatassim's smiling face even now but like other similar friends, Moatassim just disappeared – suddenly. Perhaps he went back to Khartoum. Perhaps he went to Saudi Arabia. Perhaps, more likely, he fell foul of others less enchanted with Western customs.

But during the years after I had acquired the additional identity of David Reynolds I rapidly learned that my particular style and approach seemed to offer all sorts of opportunities. I was actually very good at it and admit that it was all quite interesting although sometimes a little risky. But I often sought out situations well before they were likely to find me.

In fact, I became pro-active rather than re-active as they say these days and I soon found myself able to offer information even before it was being sought.

Clever that, oh yes.

I become very adept at it.

You see, I was still an entrepreneur at heart and quick to see an opportunity. But the better I got at it the more the assignments I was given. At one point they were coming so thick and fast that they were dominating my life to the detriment of my business.

As soon as I arrived back from one overseas trip, Jack would be on the phone with another request for a meeting at the Feathers.

By then, Beaty had become very familiar with Jack's calls although she still showed signs of nerves on the odd occasion that Donaldson himself phoned.

"Mr Woodward for you, Mr Thomas."

"Thank you, Beaty," I would say.

And Jack, never long in getting to the point he had phoned for, would say things like: "Fancy a look at some good quality figs in Algeria, Oliver?"

Catch up with your friend with the parrot?"

Or it might be: "How about trying to sell a few of your tractor spares in Nigeria, Ollie? We've got a good contact with a local chief, and anyway, the Department wants someone to pop up to Kano and then down to Port Harcourt on an assignment. Bit of local trouble with the natives I hear."

Or: "We've had a notice about a commercial opportunity for lorry tyres in Damascus, Ollie. Any interest? For the army, I gather. Might be a few other bits and pieces of interest and a few leads – commercial and otherwise, if you get my gist, once you get there. Build on your connections. What do you think?"

And another time: "Heard there's some medical equipment needed in Baghdad, Ollie. X-ray equipment and the like, but with a few alternative openings for a vivid imagination like yours. You should get out there. Pick up the tender documents. Meet your old friend the General while you're there, Ollie."

Some of the earlier calls had genuine business opportunities attached to them and this is what attracted me but gradually they became coded calls to get me to go up to the Feathers for a meeting with Jack and Donaldson. And the longer it went on the more concerned I became for the effect on my business. But Donaldson would often use his grotesque forms of humour to remind me about the photographs he held or what had happened to Reynolds.

"Best to fly out before Friday, Ollie. Assad needs everything in Beirut by Friday midday prayers latest otherwise we're all in the shit again – you especially. No need to go into the city of course. Keep your fucking head down and don't even think about changing sides and working for the competition. The consequences of getting

caught can be very, very, nasty for everyone – you, me, your family. So, you don't want to get caught out do you, Ollie? Ha ha.”

In the very early days, and in my innocence, I thought Donaldson's warnings were just idle chat about getting caught out by foreigners. Little did I know he was warning me not to stray from his, own agenda.

But why should I have thought otherwise? Bear in mind that this was in the middle of the Lebanese civil war and few people were mad enough to go anywhere near the country. But I was. Beirut itself was seriously off limits for a time, but Cyprus was close enough and I could always get a taxi from Amman up to the border.

Does this sound like fun to you? But that was my life at the time.

But when Donaldson wanted something done to suit himself it became Ollie this and Ollie that.

I had become Ollie after only a few months of knowing Jack and Donaldson. I had become Ollie for Jack, as I had for Sam and the rest of them in the RAF. Everyone else called me Oliver.

Or Mr Thomas.

Or David Reynolds.

Sarah called me Oliver, but only when she was serious.

She called me “my husband” if she was talking about me to friends. She would call me “Sir”, when she was mocking my seriousness. She would call me “sweetheart” sometimes when she felt like it and “Mr Thomas” when she was joking.

But it was “dear” most of the time.

“Go down, now, dear. I'm all right. No need to fret yourself.

It's not too bad, today.”

I loved her calling me “dear”. When addressed by others as “dear”, the word seems to acquire a different meaning. It seems flippant, derisory and sometimes insulting. I feel as though the word has been stolen from the only person who knows what it means and, so, is the only person who is allowed to use it.

I usually call her “my love”, because that is what she was. I called Donaldson a bastard.

I had been calling Donaldson that to his face for years because that was a fair and accurate description of him. He would laugh.

Later, I started calling him a fucking crook as well but, by then, he and I had stopped laughing altogether.

Jack, on the other hand, was still a company man, ready to kowtow to officialdom rather than break out of the mould or take on board views that ran counter to the corporate view. Except, of course, that it wasn't a Corporation but, somehow, linked to British Intelligence.

And Donaldson was the sordid crook who ran the Mafia side of it.

That much I slowly grew to realize although it took me far too long to fathom it out and by that time, I had become firmly entangled in it myself and it was difficult to cut free.

But that is probably why I became a conniving bastard myself.

It was a sort of means to an end.

### **Operation Chrysalis**

**“Never mention retirement to your wife unless you’ve got enough money to live on.”**

Those were my wise words to someone in a bar somewhere, forty years ago. I certainly avoided mentioning it to Sarah for as long as possible but it wasn’t just the money. I had to be very careful. And it wasn’t just Donaldson. I was, I felt, a scapegoat in waiting for certain, other individuals.

Some of those people had very long arms.

I was already deeply involved with Libya when Gadaffi came to power and was at the peak of his international infamy. I became known in many circles only as David Reynolds. I would fly out of the UK as Reynolds and enter Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq or Iran as Reynolds.

And on my return home I would still be Reynolds, a businessman according to my passport and business card and operating, for the purposes of security from a Post Office Box number in Victoria, close to the station.

It was something I had not got around to mentioning to either Sarah or Beaty. I suppose this is a good example of my duplicity but I saw it as just trying to make the most of my predicament. I was trying hard not to be beaten you see.

But I would be Oliver Thomas if I went to Israel, parts of Western Europe or Africa.

Thomas Import Export Ltd was the business I ran from the Croydon office, a legitimate business with interests in thirty odd countries – more if I had had the time. The turnover was never as much as I wanted or, indeed planned, but this was mostly due to the fact that I really wasn’t able to devote enough time to it.

Thomas Import Export was always on the lookout for opportunities, whatever they were.

I would even deal in certain types of military hardware if an opportunity arose and this was why I kept the POB address in Victoria. But don’t misunderstand me. This was very small-scale arms trading, things that came my way and oiled the wheels of relationship building. It was easy because I had built many contacts over the years and, anyway, the main business needed the revenue.

For whatever reason – duplicity or connivance or the desire to provide my wife and family with what I felt they deserved my life rapidly became a bucket of worms and I now want to explain my connections with Malta and Libya as an example of how a bucket of worms became a snake pit.

But is all my thinking misplaced? Perhaps. In hindsight since Sarah died I now wish that I had had the common sense to be more open with her about everything. But I suppose I was too frightened. Direct or hinted threats against me and my family from Donaldson were increasing. He himself was changing. He was becoming even less likeable, if that was at all possible. He was changing from someone who I genuinely

believe started out working for British Intelligence to someone who worked for himself. Donaldson, too, was running a business.

Donaldson was where most problems originated and the starting point for the Malta and Libya episode was, as usual, a phone call from Jack to the office where Beaty took the call.

“Mr Woodward called, a while ago, Mr Thomas. Would you meet him tonight, at the usual place?”

That meeting, as always in the Feathers, led to me flying out to Athens as David Reynolds to pick up a package at a café in Piraeus to take to Cairo. It was easy, routine work and a few days later I was in Dokki where I met up with a man from the American Embassy. Despite his obvious Middle Eastern appearance, the man appeared to be an American national and I decided that he probably worked for American Intelligence.

But, with no questions asked, I handed over the package as instructed at the hotel bar and, job done, flew first to Benghazi being closest and then on to Tripoli on some Thomas Import Export business.

But it was something the American and I had chatted about during our meeting – the growing concerns about plane hijackings and terrorism – that I was to be reminded of over the next few days.

This was also a time of fighting and bombings in Northern Ireland and the time when Gadaffi and Sadat were busy talking big ideas designed to put the fear into the West and create Arab unity where none existed.

I met Gadaffi twice.

It was always very brief and unplanned and he would have known me as David Reynolds. Looking back, I think Gadaffi had been briefed that I was some sort of agent for an anti-British, anti-American establishment. I was, of course, completely the opposite and motivated by the singular and antiquated desire to serve my own Queen and Country. But on both occasions, the Colonel had wandered into the tent where I was meeting some of his entourage. We hardly spoke more than five words and I did not need an interpreter.

You may wonder how I was able to get so close, but I always kept a few trade secrets up my sleeve. They were small snippets of information about where someone might go to buy a few North Korean torpedoes or a few tons of German fertilizer or French antibiotics by bypassing normal controls.

I had honed a habit of deliberately dropping a word or phrase into conversations like scattering wild seeds in a garden. I'd forget about it for a while but be astonished to find when I came back some weeks later that a few seedlings had sprung up and someone was wanting advice on how to make them produce a few flowers and seeds of their own.

I was, I discovered, running a rather specialized, free consultancy.

I never bought and sold anything obnoxious myself, of course, but I was so well connected I could have if I so wished.

I realize now that my own intelligence information was worth a huge fortune if I had been willing to sell it. But I was usually only after using my knowledge to curry favours to carry out the fun job of building contacts.

As I write this, I am still puzzled by my own behaviour. It is the subject of much of my nocturnal self-psychoanalysis.

Was it an extension of patriotism into the realms of naïve fantasy?

Should I be condemned for failing to exploit the value of what I knew for my own and my family's benefit?

Is it a punishable offence that I should not admit to, least of all write about?

Would this admittance so impress a self-respecting, hardnosed businessman that it would turn him into a soft bellied, nodding and understanding being with a social conscience?

The fact remains that I had become uniquely well placed.

In hindsight, I feel I often acted as if blindfolded and so I couldn't see who I was really dealing with.

I dreamed once that I was selling butchers' knives to a parish priest but the priest suddenly transformed himself into a wide-eyed fellow with red horns and a khaki uniform.

My mother had seen it coming when I was nine.

"You should know better than to listen to that nasty boy, Oliver."

At arm's length, this latest nasty boy seemed totally mad but strangely likeable.

Gadaffi mostly lived in a large Bedouin tent similar to what you imagine King Arthur might have lived in with his Knights during country pursuits around Wessex.

Not only was the man himself often to be seen bedecked with exotic caps, multi-coloured ribbons and golden buttons but the tent itself was hung with trinkets and laid out with plush carpets and cushions that covered the packed sand floor.

On the first occasion, I met him he gave me just the quickest eye to eye contact before grunting and disappearing once more as though he knew there was an Englishman in the tent and wanted to have a quick peek. As he wandered in pushing the tent entrance to one side everyone, myself included, got up from our cross-legged positions on the carpet and bowed our heads.

The second time, about six months later, after I suspect word had got around that I had returned, he did more than grunt.

In he came and, as before, we all stood up and went silent.

It was probably a sign of fear.

Then he raised his hand and wandered over towards me and I briefly thought my time was up.

If you've ever seen a recent photograph, you will know that he has a frightening smile that produces a deep crack in his face like an over-baked double split loaf. This feature was apparent even when he was much younger.

I nodded, tried to smile and held out my hand in my British way. But he did not take it. Instead, he stopped just beyond hand shaking distance and stared at me for a few seconds, his facial cracks disappearing somewhere in an instant. Then he spoke.

Strangely, as I thought then, he asked me, in Arabic of course, if I liked Irish people.

Quick as a flash I said, "Yes, but I trust Moslems more than Catholics, Sir."

It was utter bullshit as I have no preference, either way, and it was a very brief response spoken in my very best basic, slow Arabic.

But I had made a point and Gadaffi seemed to smile again, somewhere amongst his craggy features. He did not look at me again, or reply, but just nodded and sauntered out of the tent leaving me with Mohammed Saleh and the others.

We remained standing after he had left and they muttered things amongst themselves. Then they all came over to shake my hand once more and to pat their chests with their right hands. I knew I had done rather well and my trust ratings had shot through the roof.

But that is how I excelled – if you can call it excelling. I excelled at bullshitting.

But I have, as I write this, decided that Colonel Muammar Gadaffi would be a useful case study for psychiatric analysis of the sort I practice on myself when under the influence of Mr Bell although I doubt whether he'd be such a compliant patient as I am with myself.

Gadaffi would be very unlikely to appreciate the consultant's final diagnosis and, if asked, I would advise any psychiatrist not to hang around to wait for his fee.

But Gadaffi's Irish question had intrigued me and when I later left to return to Benghazi I thought deep and hard about it.

You see, at that time, Gadaffi was still young and ambitious and desperately trying to cobble together some sort of union with Syria and his much bigger neighbour to the east. But it was uncertain how genuinely interested Sadat really was.

More likely, Sadat regarded Gadaffi as a nut case but that is only my own opinion.

But, on the occasion when I last met Gadaffi I had come with no specific purpose in mind, other than to meet up with a few friends and Libyan oil industry contacts in Benghazi.

The next day I met up with a man called Farid, with whom I had become very friendly over the months.

We met in the foyer at the Omar Khayam Hotel in Benghazi, drank some bitter sodas and then decided to talk more over lunch.

Now, in those days, lunch or dinner at the Omar Khayam, inevitably started with sheep's brains and I have to warn you that I have dreamed about Omar Khayam lunches many times over the years.

One morning, before Sarah died, and shortly after I had been dreaming, I even suggested to Sarah's doctor that he try eating sheep's brains. I forget how we got onto the subject but I told him I thought it was his duty to eat them as part of his right of passage into the medical profession and that he might have found it educational to dissect them on his plate or put them under a microscope to check for scrapie before devouring them.

Sometimes, if brains were in short supply, the Omar Khayam would serve sheep's eyes but I much preferred brains, especially if I was hungry as there is so much more goodness in them – not much taste but far more nutritional value.

I have often wondered if the onset of Thomas's Disease can be traced back to the past consumption of Libyan sheep brains, although my diet was so varied at times that the disease could probably be linked to many other meals. After all, I have eaten sheep's brains in Iran as well, but food hygiene in Tehran was not as good as in Benghazi. In Tehran I had to call the waiter over to point out that a cockroach seemed to have got its feet stuck in my brain although it had clearly managed to wriggle free having left one of its legs behind. But I digress.

Farid and I slurped our way through our plates of brains although all the while I was concentrating on how to use him. Perhaps you can add exploitative to the growing list of my faults but my main reason for meeting him was his closeness to Gadaffi. In reality, of course, Farid hated Gadaffi as much as I hated Donaldson but that was what made him so useful.

Farid slowly told me he had been asked to do a job that looked as though it might be linked to activity of the sordid type that Gadaffi specialized in.

I didn't delve because I don't think Farid knew what it was either but as the job required him to make a quick trip to Malta we arranged to meet there in a few days for another chat.

After lunch, which stretched well into late afternoon, I took the last flight of the day to Tripoli, stayed overnight in the Libya Palace Hotel and, next morning, I was in Malta.

Now, bear in mind, no-one back home, least of all Donaldson, Beaty or Sarah would have known where I was and I didn't bother trying to telephone anyone as it was nigh on impossible getting phone calls out.

And what would I have said anyway? This was my frequent dilemma.

Should I have phoned to say that I had just met Colonel Gadaffi and was now enjoying a few days in the Maltese sun?

Should I explain my meeting in Cairo with someone I suspected of being from the CIA?

I suppose I could have phoned Sarah at home in Croydon but to tell her where I was would have meant nothing at all to her and all I might have got back would have been a lengthy description of the poor quality of Brussels sprouts to be found in the Co-op.

Perhaps we should add the effects of long term culture shock as another possible cause of Thomas's Disease.

So, I spent two days walking the dusty streets of Valletta and drinking coffee and whisky in bars.

But I wasn't bored as I will explain.

Britain and Malta were not on good terms at the time and much of it was related to Gadaffi's influence just a stone's throw away across the water. Newspaper headlines were full of it and, one morning, as I waited for Farid to turn up I bought an English language newspaper to catch up on developments and, always liking to soak up the



local atmosphere, I sauntered into a cafe along the promenade in Sliema and sat outside in the sun reading my paper.

Malta was one of those places I had always wanted to take Sarah.

It would have been ideal spot to set up shop and build my North African business. It's a sunny paradise although you can almost throw a pebble from the beach on one side of the island to a beach on the opposite side. The Maltese are good people and remind me of Greeks for some reason, though it's probably the way the old men gather to sip their coffee and chat.

So, there I was, soaking up the warm morning sun among a group of such elderly Maltese men seated at the next table.

But behind them were three others, whom I soon realized had Northern Irish accents. Their words, although quietly spoken, wafted over to me in the still air and above the sound of chinking cups and saucers, seagulls and the rustling sound of my newspaper.

It was as though the soft Belfast tones were amplified by the morning air and a surrounding, stone wall. The group was huddled together, their cigarette smoke wafting in my direction. The accents were heavy but, hiding behind my newspaper, I found no difficulty in picking up odd words.

And it was the name Cahill that made me look up from my newspaper and glance innocently in the opposite direction towards the Mediterranean.

I put my paper down on the metal table, beckoned the waiter and ordered myself another coffee using just three simple words of Maltese that I knew so that the Irishmen were not distracted by an English accent.

And, before I knew it, I was on the spot ready to pursue yet another job for Queen and Country, which, to my continued personal regret would prove once more to Donaldson the unique talents of the little fish he and Jack Woodward had netted so many years before.

But Donaldson, of course, was already starting to build his own business and, with my naivety running high, I fell – hook, line and sinker.

“Right place at the right time, dear fellow! Don't know how you do it, old man.”

That's how that bastard Donaldson put it. But what should I have done?

Shrugged and walked away?

Perhaps I should have left my newspaper lying on the table, walked all the way back to Valetta and got the next flight home. But it was not my style to stifle inquisitiveness and what I did next only went to further substantiate the snippets of information that Farid brought with him later and add to all the other bits of scattered tittle tattle that had come my way.

So I stayed there, sitting in the morning sun, later sliding my chair back a little into the shade partly because it was getting hotter by the minute and partly because I needed to retain my anonymity.

I even went as far as to lean over and pick up the Maltese language paper lying on the table next to me to appear to be enthralled by Dom Mintoff's latest protestations so that it would appear to anyone looking in my direction that I was Maltese. Regular doses of hot sun had given me a permanent tan anyway and by then, being fifty-

something and with two days of stubble on my face because I was fed up with shaving, I probably looked surprisingly similar to the genuine, but much older, Maltese sat at the next table.

I strained to listen, wishing I had come prepared or better equipped.

But, after two more coffees and gathering boredom with the newspaper that I could not read, I was pleased to hear one of the three Irishmen call for the bill whilst the other two got up and made to leave.

They passed within a couple of yards of me and on the right arm of one of them was a blue tattoo.

The third man paid the bill whilst still sitting but then he, too, got up and joined his friends who had walked over to lean on a stone wall looking out to sea. They all stayed a while, lighting more cigarettes before strolling off towards a taxi rank.

I, too, paid my bill and stood on the pavement looking up and down the street, glancing at my watch as though I had been stood up by my girlfriend.

The Irishmen eventually wandered off, one of them undoing his shirt buttons because of the heat.

I followed them at a safe distance to a small hotel in Valetta, not far from my own. Then, because I was still waiting for Farid and had nothing better to do, I stayed. I leaned on a wall, but watched the reflection of their hotel door in a shop window.

After what seemed like hours, a blue and grey Vauxhall Victor taxi drew up outside the hotel and disgorged two other men.

Now, to someone who had visited the Libyan Arab Republic too often and had, in fact, only just arrived from there, it was obvious to me they were Libyans. What's more, I was certain I knew one of them. It was the limp in his right leg that gave him away and I could even put a name to him – Ben Youssef.

But there was little more I could do at the time so I went back to my own hotel to check if Farid had left any messages.

He hadn't, but next morning he phoned to say he had just arrived in Malta and we met in a coffee shop close to the Grand Harbour looking over towards Fort St Angelo.

Farid was full of fresh information.

He described to me how he had been in a meeting, two days before, with some of Gadaffi's closest contacts in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Tripoli and had heard about a vague plan to blow up American and British planes on the ground at airports in Europe. He had heard about an audacious plot to hijack a plane just after take-off at Heathrow and crash it into the Houses of Parliament or Buckingham Palace. And he had heard rumours of plans to ship guns, rocket-launchers and ammunition to Ireland to add to the chaos, death and disruption of anything to do with the British because Gadaffi liked that sort of thing.

These plans were well advanced.

And as they were drinking illicit Scotch whisky and getting more and more loose-tongued, one of the more fanatical members had started describing ideas for bombings, hijackings and suicidal plane crashes that were coming out of Beirut.

Naturally, Gadaffi had not wanted to be left sidelined and had particularly liked other ideastouted to steal crop-spraying planes in USA to drop anthrax spores or chemicals on residential areas and government complexes.

In the coffee shop, I ordered more drinks and asked Farid, "How are you able to stay inside?" meaning how was he still able to appear to remain part of the group and still get away to Malta.

"Because I have jobs to do," Farid said. "Today I have to drop papers off to a shipping company. "

"What are the papers about?" I asked him. "I don't know. They are sealed."

"Why did the Colonel ask my views on the Irish recently?" I said, testing Farid.

"Ah, he is very keen to help the Irish," Farid said, "I think the papers I am carrying are connected to this."

"So, you are passing these papers to a local shipping company?"

"Yes."

It was clear now that something was going on and it was logical to link it to what I had heard and seen just the day before.

"You want to help, Farid?" I asked.

"What do you want?" he replied.

"I just need more information. For instance, you mentioned guns, rocket-launchers and ammunition going to Ireland. Can you help?"

Farid looked at me, stroked his chin and said nothing. In fact, he looked away.

But I immediately recognized the problem.

Money.

That hot, still and cloudless Maltese morning is still so clear in my mind and I spent the next few days and weeks risking my life for something that, even now, has never been adequately reported or understood by the British Government. I was on another slippery slope.

"So, can you help, Farid?"

"Maybe, he said. "But it is risky."

"Yes," I said, "I know. But let me speak to someone about this. We can probably do a deal. OK?"

"OK," said Farid.

Farid's advantage was in being a member of a large Libyan family of some influence and in a position where he was able to pick up snippets of valuable intelligence. What's more, Farid held some IOUs from certain people of power within Gadaffi's regime which, he was starting to believe, were well worth calling in.

Also, Farid wanted out of Libya if he could make it.

He wanted to buy some property. Like other Libyans, Farid had been finding it more and more difficult to leave the country but his previous short visits to Italy, France and Switzerland had left a taste for, perhaps, a villa on Lake Geneva, a small place on Majorca or even an apartment off the Champs Elysees. Farid, what's more, had a

few girlfriends dotted around who were proving expensive. So Farid's personal requirement had been for cash in a big way and he was well placed to offer services to British or American Intelligence if they could be persuaded that his information was worth paying for.

Farid, you see, typified the sort of person I would often discover and befriend during my travels and this was what made me so useful to Donaldson.

I thought about the problem for a minute and decided, for lack of any better and urgent solutions to phone Jack Woodward.

Phoning Donaldson's mysterious number and expecting a direct reply was pointless.

But I decided that if I could tempt Jack with some well-chosen words Donaldson would quickly get to know and would suddenly appear on the end of a phone like a genie from a lamp.

I left Farid at the coffee shop and went across the road to a phone box with a big pile of coins. First, I phoned Jack, got through unexpectedly quickly, span him a quick yarn and told him to contact Donaldson urgently and that I'd phone back in twenty minutes.

It worked like clockwork.

Twenty minutes later I was speaking to Donaldson on a crackling phone line and, as expected, he jumped at the idea.

I always suspected Donaldson had found a sort of officially sanctioned Government slush fund somewhere that he could dip into occasionally. Raiding the fund for straightforward intelligence gathering was unlikely to get him too worked up but if there was something commercial in it, his eyes lit up.

Farid was still sat waiting in the coffee bar across the road from the phone box.

I replaced the receiver, backed out of the phone box, walked over to the coffee bar and sat down.

"It's agreed," I said. "What you get will depend on the quality of your information. You might ask how the quality is judged. It's a good question. But, for instance, if they can intercept an arms shipment, you'll get twenty percent of its estimated value paid direct into the Jersey account I set up for you. If you can get names of Irish people involved, you'll get a thousand pounds per name.

"But don't just invent Irish-sounding names, Farid, OK?" "OK."

A wide grin spread across Farid's unshaven, brown face.

Thoughts of villas, swimming pools, apartments and strings of easy European girlfriends were going through Farid's mind at that time.

But my mistake was by involving Donaldson again.

I can see it now but I should have spoken directly to someone in the Government or in Northern Ireland because, looking back, the bastard had clearly only seen it as yet another self-serving commercial opportunity.

But it was urgent.

Sitting with Farid, several ideas of what to do passed through my mind. And none could be dealt with urgently from a coffee shop in Valletta.

I thought about speaking to others in a more clear-cut part of Government but I had no real wish to break my cover as I wasn't sure of the implications.

I thought about phoning my local Member of Parliament from Valetta, explaining where I was and what I was doing. But the idea was laughable. I had read that the man had proved totally inept at resolving minor issues within the Croydon Social Services Department. So, the chances of getting him to deal satisfactorily with a case of international terrorism by phone from Malta were remote. And I would have had the same problem with him as I had with Sarah in not knowing where to start to explain. I certainly had no desire to inform him that one of his constituents was working undercover for a mysterious part of the Government's Overseas Intelligence Services.

So, I had done the simplest thing and sorted something, however unsatisfactory, with Donaldson.

Farid and I parted.

He went back to Libya to see what he could find out and I went back home with plans to return yet again as urgently as possible.

Naturally, by lunchtime the following day I was in the Regent Street office with Donaldson and Jack.

"Operation Chrysalis".

That was the ridiculous code name Donaldson had invented later when I explained more of what I had stumbled on. The fact that I had instigated it and then ran it almost single handedly had no bearing on Donaldson's penchant for codes. And my part in it was finished by the time he had named it.

"We'll code it 'Chrysalis', old chap. Moths crawl out of chrysalises like flutter byes don't they, old man?"

And the brilliant reasoning behind Donaldson's invention was that one of the Irishmen I had come across had a nickname – "Moth". His surname was O'Halloran and police records showed he had a poorly drawn tattoo, supposedly of a Death's-head hawk moth on his forearm.

I was eventually able to confirm this as I soon got far too close to the man.

## **Farid**

**Sarah, bless her, never understood all of my coming and going** and had long given up asking me. Neither, or so I thought, did Beaty understand.

My traveling, around this time, had little to do with my business, which was what I was paying Beaty to run in my absence. My own income was suffering and I found it hard to explain to Beaty. I often ran out of good excuses. Looking back, perhaps I should not have worried but Beaty would always appear to be concerned about the efficient running of the business in my absence. She would seem agitated if I said I was going abroad again before I'd even had time to ask her for a report on the past few weeks.

“But Mr Correia is coming from Lisbon, Mr Thomas and bringing with him the sales people from his Angolan office.”

“Yes, I know, Beaty, but they’ll just have to stay on in London till I get back. It’ll only mean them delaying things by a day or two.”

“But, Mr Thomas . . .”

“Never mind, Beat. Don’t fret. They need us more than we need them. They’ll wait, you see.”

That was the sort of thing I used to say although I knew it was very poor management. In fact, I needed them far more than they needed me. But my priorities had become completely distorted by the stronger drive to do these things for Queen and Country and Beaty obviously knew it. But my flippant words to Beaty were just easy banter and came from someone who was now used to wearing two identities and was self-trained in the art of diversion and a small bit of honest deception of my own.

I was no longer the person I had once been but once I had the scent of something in my nostrils, there was be no stopping me.

It was 1971 when I first met Farid in that coffee shop and agreed his commission.

It was a time of riots in Ulster, IRA threats to bomb the mainland and other disputes and I was up to my ears in it as a shadowy businessman carrying a case with a concealed lining and several passports.

But Farid and I met again, as planned, less than two weeks later.

We sat in the same pavement coffee shop with its umbrellas sheltering customers from the hot, July sun. I wore my horn-rimmed glasses with their plain lenses, my hair parted on the right and an unshaven face. I was David Reynolds, because that is who Farid thought I was. Farid was speaking in his soft accent.

“Yes, I know Abu Hassan. We have met many times. He has told me many things. Our big leader is very keen to give help but he will expect many favours in return I think.”

“Who is he helping?”

“Your Irish friends.”

“And what sort of help is he offering?” I asked again.

“Arms, ammunition, of course. By boat.”

“A boat coming from where?” I asked.

“Benghazi,” Farid said.

“And going where?”

“Somewhere in Ireland.”

“And it still involves Malta?”

“For sure. Malta is very convenient for them. And I am hoping it is a big boat David, because of my commission.”

“So, when? Who is involved?”

“They are already here, for sure.”

“Here? In Malta? Now?” I asked, shocked at the timing.

“Of course. These things are very efficient. You need to be ready.”

I was always surprised how fast things sometimes happened. On this occasion, things happened very fast indeed.

“One man – I think his name is O’Halloran – he is arriving from Rome,” Farid said. “He will meet with others. I don’t know who but they are probably Irish. Then they all meet one called Ali Ahmed, also Ben Youssef, the man with one short leg, you know.”

“You know where they’re meeting?” I asked. Farid had no idea.

“Is O’Halloran an Irish name, David?”

“Yes, so that’s one thousand pounds already. Well done!”

After that we probably joked about the size of the shipment.

It would have been bizarre humour, the sort that discussion about other people’s plans to impose death and destruction always seemed to encourage.

But it had not been lost on me that the British government was already concerned about sponsored terrorism and that Libya was a prime suspect. There was internment in Northern Ireland. Hundreds of IRA supporters were being rounded up and the British military involvement in the province was at a high level. Fear of terrorist activity abounded and innocent lives were already being lost.

Farid and I said goodbye shortly after that.

He went his own way, probably back to his small hotel in Sliema to await developments and, probably, to see a girl and drink some whisky. I found a taxi and went directly to the airport to check on flights from Rome.

Waiting and watching people coming and going at airports was something I was well used to doing. I still have one of my old briefcases, a hard, steel one that doubled as a seat when waiting at small, busy airports like Luqa where seats are in short supply.

This faithful companion became very battered over the years but it always provided a very comfortable seat and always contained some torn-out pages from the ABC Flight Timetable so that I always knew how to change an itinerary from the back of a taxi.

People seem to use mobile phones these days, but my system was far more efficient. During those years of too much traveling I also kept a mental version of parts of the timetable in my head and at Luqa I sat on my briefcase and worked out all the possible routes from Rome.

These were days of crackly arrivals and departures announcements but Malta was a popular holiday destination and, being July, I found myself mingling with families as they emerged from the baggage room in large groups.

It was getting late, around ten in the evening and the latest crowd was already dispersing, when, as I sat on the case with my back against the wall appearing to read my newspaper, I saw a dark, tousle haired man wearing a short sleeved white shirt and carrying a small, black bag and a jacket. He was wandering, alone, through the arrival hall and looked about him as though unsure whether someone might be

meeting him. Then he reached into the pocket of the jacket he was carrying and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and what looked like a lighter.

I followed at a safe distance as he walked out into the night to stand under a streetlight near the taxi rank where he lit a cigarette.

And there it was – in the light from the street lamp and his cigarette lighter – I saw a tattoo on his bare right arm. Standing, as I was, twenty-five yards away in the dark shadow by the closed newspaper kiosk I was unable to see the detail but it was, undeniably, one of the men I had seen during my first encounter at the café.

Meanwhile, the airport, both inside and outside, became unnaturally quiet as everyone departed.

I still stood, unmoving, in the shadow and watched as he waved away two taxi drivers who approached him as though he was waiting for his own transport. Then he started to pace up and down, glancing at a watch on his left wrist. He would wander a few yards from his black bag, turn and come back to it, standing astride it, before looking at his watch yet again.

Eventually, a two-tone grey Austin Cambridge car pulled up. The front passenger door was opened from the inside. O'Halloran, for that is who turned out to be, picked up his bag, opened the rear door, slung the bag on the back seat and climbed into the open front door beside the driver and slammed it shut. For a moment, nothing happened as though they were sat inside greeting one another. Then there was a crunch as the driver put the car into gear, a puff of smoke from the exhaust and the car pulled away.

From my shadowy retreat, I had already worked out what to do once O'Halloran left. I picked up my faithful Samsonite and my newspaper, emerged from the blackness, walked briskly to the queue of waiting taxis, got into the first one and asked the driver to follow the Austin Cambridge.

"Your friend, sir?" the taxi driver asked me. "Yes, no room inside for me," I replied.

"No problem, sir. You know where they're going?"

"No, so don't lose them," I said as we headed off into the darkness.

We followed the other car into Valletta, past quiet squares, along Republic Street and into some side streets where it suddenly turned into a smaller side street with high balconied houses, a few empty, dark shops and then turned once more into what looked like a cul de sac. I touched my driver on the shoulder.

"OK, go past. Drop me just passed the street light," I said, pointing, as the other car turned into the cul de sac and slowed down in front of a red lighted sign that merely said "Hotel".

I searched in my pockets for change to pay my driver and, at the same time, turned in my seat to look out of the rear window as the Austin Cambridge pulled half onto the pavement between two other cars. Its headlights went out and doors opened on both sides.

I, too, opened my taxi door, thanked my driver, paid him through his open window and waited as he did a three-point turn and drove back the way we had just come.



As he drove away I watched two men, one with the bag, get out of the Austin Cambridge and then disappear up some steps into a doorway – the entrance to the small, cheap hotel.

I stood for a while in the shadow of the high stone building behind me but then moved out into the street light and, still carrying my briefcase and newspaper, wandered up the road to the hotel sign, passed it and glanced inside. It was dimly lit but two men were leaning on a reception desk as though checking in. I walked across the road and back again onto the other side. Then, while standing in the shadows outside wondering what to do next, the two men moved away from the desk towards a flight of stairs. It was eleven thirty and very quiet except for voices coming through the shuttered windows of a ground floor apartment behind me.

I decided not to wait and, instead, took a brisk walk back to my own hotel hardly more than a block away.

But by seven the next morning I was back.

Whenever I sensed the call of duty, you see, I was never one to shirk the responsibility. By five minutes past seven I was standing, leaning on the stone wall of the apartment block while the black shadows cast by the rising sun, grew shorter and darker. People passed by on their way to work, some boys came to kick a football and a woman came out to clean the stone steps with a bucket of soapy water and a mop and at seven fifty a short, overweight man appeared and sat on the wet step to chat to the woman as she leaned on her mop. At seven fifty-five both went back inside.

How I can recall such detail from so long ago I don't know but it must be one of the symptoms of Thomas's Disease, referred to earlier. How Sarah, for instance, seemed to have so little recollection of even recent events was a constant puzzle to me.

So please, have pity on a man afflicted with such a terrible memory and I ask to be excused for the detail that follows. But the experience was nerve-wracking and so is indelibly imprinted on my mind.

At eight o'clock, three men emerged from the hotel.

One was O'Halloran. The second was one of the other Irishmen I had seen in the coffee shop and the third was the Libyan with the limp and known to Farid as Ben Youssef. They stood on the pavement in the full glare of the morning sun, smoking and apparently waiting. Then, whoever it was they had been waiting for, emerged from the hotel entrance. It was another European, a man I had not seen before. I sauntered a short distance down a narrow alleyway into the darker shadow for a few yards to be out of sight. When I walked back again, just a minute later, one of the men was stamping out a cigarette on the pavement and unlocking the driver's door of the Austin Cambridge. Thinking I might be about to lose contact with them, I walked to the end of the cul de sac to where it joined the main road and, as luck would have it, found a taxi that had just dropped off another passenger. I hailed it, climbed in and told the driver to wait.

Minutes later, the Austin Cambridge appeared from the cul de sac, turned into the road and stopped almost alongside where I was sitting in my own taxi. The four occupants were deep in conversation, their arms outside, leaning on the open car

windows and they were already lighting up fresh cigarettes. Blue smoke drifted through the open windows.

I wound mine up quickly. I hate stale cigarette smoke. "Where you want to go sir?" My own taxi driver was getting impatient.

"Follow that one," I said and, with that, we followed them a short distance into the centre of Valletta and Republic Street where it parked outside a stone office block. I paid my taxi fare and stood on the pavement and watched as all four men got out, went up some steps and disappeared through an open black door. I then wandered past to see, on the wall, next to the steps a brass plate with a company name written in English, Italian and Arabic: "Sicilian and Mediterranean Shipping Company Ltd".

By now I was very hot, very hungry and very thirsty.

Because I was devoted to doing my bit for Queen and Country, I had barely eaten since breakfast the day before but found myself in a busy street full of coffee shops, restaurants and cafes with the smell of coffee and warm, fresh bread all around. But duty was calling and so, as usual, I stayed at my post, watching the street.

But it was then that an idea struck me.

One block further down on my side of the street was a shop offering motor bikes for hire. So, with one eye still on the black door opposite I went in, paid cash to hire a moped, signed a form, came out and sat astride it, wondering whether I now had time to quench my desperate thirst. But, in keeping with the life of any good, unpaid undercover agent I was still sat wondering what to do when the four men emerged yet again, got into the parked car and drove off.

I followed on the moped, although I have to admit I nearly fell off as I worked out how to drive the wretched machine and find my balance. But, ten minutes later, we were back at their hotel. They parked the car once more and went inside. I watched them go up the stairs and then propped my moped against the kerb next to two others.

But, by then, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

I walked straight into the hotel behind them.

At the entrance, I fumbled with my keys and nothing in particular in my jacket pocket to waste time as I heard them talking somewhere on the wrought iron stairs. Then I heard a door shut and it all went quiet. So, I strolled inside, across the black and white Italian tiles and up to the small wooden reception desk where I hit the brass bell and waited.

A short, fat, balding man in a black waistcoat, the same one I had watched earlier sitting on the steps, emerged. I asked him for a room in English and checked in as David Reynolds because that was the passport I was carrying.

The manager took my passport from me, as was the habit at the time, promising to return it later that day. The practice always concerned me but I was well used to it.

The name of the hotel, too, was only apparent once I got inside. "Hotel Belmont" it said in more wrought iron across the reception desk – not that I had ever seen any beautiful mountains in Malta.

I was handed a key to Room 3 on the first floor and made my own way to a small room, clean but sparsely furnished, just how I always liked them. The washing facilities, though, were in the Italian style of large taps, rust pocked bath, chipped

black and white tiles and big, ornate mirrors and were of the shared type. The toilet, too, was just an updated version of Thomas Crapper's original design with water that gushed like a waterfall once a chain that looked as though it could have held the Titanic to the dock, was pulled. Everything was for the use of all residents on the first floor and I did wonder who I might be sharing it with but I wasn't planning to spend much time there.

I spent the first few minutes listening to the sound of feet walking about directly above me. Then, because it was hot and the single ceiling fan did not seem to work, I went downstairs, out into the street, bought a bottle of water and a newspaper and returned to sit on a chair near the reception desk. As I sat there, the black telephone on the reception desk rang and the fat manager appeared from the room behind, took the call, first in Maltese and then in Arabic, as he seemed to realize the nationality of the speaker.

I heard him say the name McDonnell, quite clearly.

Then, as the man ran a thick finger down the front page of his registration book, I heard him say the name O'Halloran. It was pronounced less well than an Irishman might have, but it was enough. The fat little manager placed the heavy black receiver on the desk and, with a groan of someone who hated climbing stairs, struggled up the steps, holding on to the iron railings to the second floor. I heard an echoing knock on a door on the floor above mine, followed by voices.

Then the manager made his ponderous way down again followed by another who seemed even slower. By the time they arrived in the foyer, I was standing on the stone step outside with my back to the inside. I knew the effect it would have from inside, a black silhouette against the bright sunlight outside, but I was listening hard.

The man who had followed the manager down picked up the telephone on the desk.

It was the Libyan, Ben Youssef with the limp, which explained the slow walk down stairs. My Arabic, as I have said, is not very good but it is more than sufficient to follow the gist of conversations. I heard Ben Youssef pick up the telephone receiver and it was soon obvious that the man on the other line was Ali. The caller was doing the talking. I heard Ben Youssef reply in monosyllabic grunts.

"Ayawuh – Ayawuh – Bookra – Shookrun."

Youssef was receiving instructions and he repeated "bookra" (tomorrow) several more times. Then Youssef, himself, started talking, a few longer sentences liberally scattered with names and words I could still follow.

"Ayawah, insha'ala. Talatta, O'Halloran, McDonnell, Callaghan. Hotel Belmont. Sicilian Mediterranean Shipping Company."

Then I had heard a new name, Guido Perillo.

The Italian name Perillo had been on a separate brass plate alongside the shipping company's office. Guido Perillo was registered as a lawyer but Perillo was a name I knew well.

Having a few friends in Naples whom I visited from time to time, meant that I knew that Perillos were everywhere driving tipper trucks, running back street car repair outfits, providing scaffolding for small construction jobs, travel agents. You name it, they were running it. Perillos were prominent by their sheer numbers and the one I knew was up to no good on a hillside leading up to Mount Vesuvius.

That the fat manager of the Hotel Belmont was also Italian or, more specifically, Sicilian had already struck me.

Over the years, you see, I have developed a fine ear for recognizing nationalities. I could even pinpoint accents even if I did not properly understand the language. Arab nationalities are easy. Libyans, Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanians, they all have different accents. But I could also separate Milanese, Roman, Neapolitan or Sicilian Italian.

I also had a nose for smelling trouble and I knew at that very moment that I might very well have checked into a Maltese Mafia stronghold.

For information, I often stayed in a similar hotel in Naples, near Somma Vesuviano, as the plumbing upstairs had just reminded me. This is why I had also recognized the common Neapolitan family name of Perillo. But the Hotel Belmont seemed to have the additional merits of having Irish and Libyan terrorist connections.

Meanwhile, I was still standing on the stone steps, facing the street, my ears straining to pick up words of the telephone conversation going on behind me. It finally ended in a ring as the receiver was replaced. But it was already enough.

I walked away, down the steps and out into the hot street to think yet again.

That was the way it was for me at that time, in the late sixties and all through the seventies. I can relate a dozen similar stories if you can be bothered to read a second edition of this record.

This story will probably suffice for now because it was the most frightening but, you see, one experience would lead to another. One event would merge with another and somewhere down the line, weeks, months or years later, things would always link up.

It was the lonely lifestyle of travel.

It was keen observation. It was the outcome of years of mixing with people of all nationalities, politicians and businessmen of all types and shades. It was an ear for unspoken messages and a nose for smelling trouble or insincerity – unless, of course, the insincerity was directed at me, in which case I had a nasty talent of sometimes completely missing it because it was so close.

So add this one to your list of weaknesses as well – intermittent short-sightedness in one eye.

But the talent of keen, observation combined with a certain sense of bravado meant I would often quite deliberately put myself into situations such as the one I found myself in, in Malta. This was what made explaining things to Sarah, or anyone else, so difficult when I returned home.

It was impossible for me to know where to start.

I would often arrive home completely culture shocked by the familiarity of my home surroundings and had no desire to start explaining everything to Sarah the moment I walked through the door. My mind would be buzzing with people and things that I had just left behind, things that I knew were still going on and things that I needed to attend to as soon as I got away again. This is not the way a good husband should behave.

And, even after perhaps a week, when I was once more acclimatizing myself with domestic matters, something else would get in the way and the opportunity to explain would be lost forever.

Recently, in a fit of disturbed sleep, I dreamed of a time when I watched Naira notes fluttering down from an upstairs room of a hotel in Kano. But this was not a dream. This was a nightmare of clear visions and memories resurrected from the past. I had been hiding in the back seat of an old Peugeot car, looking up through the side window. I could hear gunfire all around me and watched thousands of notes of Nigerian currency mixed with US dollars fluttering down past the window like confetti. People were running, shouting with red dust, smoke and a fire raging, somewhere. The story is long, complicated and beyond any simple explanation. So should I also write about this?

Probably I should in order to explain myself and, after all, it was all mixed up with that bastard, Donaldson.

But how long should this statement last?

If I did tell you, perhaps it would explain money laundering, Donaldson style, laundering that, on that occasion, had gone badly wrong because someone panicked and emptied a suitcase of the stuff out of the third-floor window of an office block so they could deny possession. But Donaldson, as he always did, engineered a situation that enabled him to be far removed from this fiasco and was able to relax in his Regent Street office and laugh in his usual grotesque manner at my explanation of what I had seen. After I left, he probably picked up his telephone, swore at someone at the New Nigeria Bank and threatened to come around and remove their testicles unless they sorted it.

So does this start to explain the direction we are taking in this statement?

But then there was Beirut, of course, but we will return to Lebanon later because it features in a later episode.

But, in passing, let me just ask if you have ever sat in the front passenger seat of a car and ducked your head in the nick of time before a bullet embedded itself with a crack of glass and a thud into your headrest? Perhaps you have. But, with your head buried between your knees, have you then had to put up with the sound of more bullets bouncing off the car door and the screeching of tyres, as those responsible sped off through rubble-laden streets in a cloud of concrete dust?

Try telling that to your wife a week later when you are back home and still hearing loud bangs in your head. Especially if you are in the middle of eating cottage pie and your wife is asking if you'd like custard with your apple crumble!

## **A Mugging**

**But let me return to the streets of Valletta** and a description of me as I walked, still carrying my rolled-up newspaper away from that hotel.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do and I knew it would be very risky. But I and I alone knew what was going on. I had no need of advice and there was no one to give me any anyway. Perhaps that was part of the excitement and motivation. But, in

fact what I did turned out to be one of the most dangerous and stupidest things I have ever done. Even now I wonder how I got away with it.

I stayed away from the Hotel Belmont until mid-afternoon by sitting in a bar, watching others, thinking, and replacing my badly depleted calories by eating bread, goat's cheese and tomatoes.

Afterwards, I returned to the hotel, retrieved my Reynolds passport from the fat manager and went upstairs to my room where I lay on the bed with the shuttered window wide open listening to the sounds from the street below.

The hotel, itself, was very quiet.

There were no sounds of feet upstairs and I knew the fat manager downstairs was having his siesta as he had potted back to his office chair after handing over my passport.

So, I got up, crept downstairs to the marble-floored reception area in my socks and stood for a while to check if anyone else was around. The manager was asleep, his head in his arms on the table inside the office behind the reception desk. A fan was blowing the man's few, dark, straggly hairs and a couple of meat flies buzzed around a plate bearing the remains of his lunch.

All the keys to the nine guestrooms, except my own, were hanging on hooks behind the desk in front of small, individual, wooden compartments for mail and messages.

It was the only evidence I needed that the room above mine was currently empty. I thought about taking the keys there and then but thought better of it and, instead, crept upstairs to the second floor to stand outside the room above mine to check. It was quiet. I carefully checked the handle but it was, as expected, locked.

I checked the lock, an old one, strong and unlikely to break without an unacceptable amount of noise and force. So, I crept downstairs again and this time took the key to Room 6 and crept back.

I was still in my Marks and Spencer socks, which were, according to Sarah, a Christmas present from my sister Meg in Walton-on-Thames. I had been away that Christmas having got delayed in Karachi so had failed to receive them in person. But I thanked Meg later by telling her they had come in useful when creeping between hotel rooms. Both Meg and Sarah had looked shocked when I told them. I forget how my explanation was eventually accepted.

So I opened the door and went in, shut the door quietly behind me and looked around. It was similar to my own room except that there were piles of dirty clothes on the floor. It smelt strongly of cigarettes and there were signs that several people, not one, were using it. A crumpled pillow lay on the floor in one corner and a prayer mat and towel in another. And, underneath the bed, was a black bag that had been pushed almost out of sight.

I heard a noise in the street below and went to check but could see nothing.

So, I pulled the bag out, opened it and looked inside.

There was a bundle of yellow cloth at the bottom and I touched it. It was hard and I lifted it out, unfolded it and stared at the pistol that lay in my hands.

I have never liked guns. I have handled them and used them, but still hate that heavy, metallic feel and the dreadful feeling of pain and death they convey. I sniffed it, folded it back into its cloth and put it back.

There were papers with notes that I quickly glanced at.

There was a notebook. I flipped through it.

There was a letter written in Arabic and a small, pocket-sized address book with names and addresses in Belfast,

Londonderry, Dublin, Liverpool and London. And there was a list in English. It was the sort of list that I was very familiar with – a shopping list.

But this was way beyond the sort of list I had been given before – the sort suitable for some tin pot group of poverty stricken natives, hell bent on settling a minor grievance by adding to their usual arsenal of sharp sticks with a few more modern instruments.

The shopping list that I held in my hand in that dingy hotel in Malta would have been ideal for someone running a sophisticated and large-scale civil war.

So, what did I do?

I stuffed everything except the pistol into my pocket and crept out. I locked the door behind me and went downstairs to my room on the first floor. Then, after just a quick look at my spoils, I made a decision to check out of the Hotel Belmont very quickly. I wrapped everything I'd found in my newspaper because I had no suitcase or belongings with me and had left my steel briefcase at my other hotel. Then I went downstairs, still wearing Meg's socks.

The manager was still asleep.

I hung up my own key and that of Room 6, left some cash as payment for the few hours I had spent there, put my shoes on and rode away on the moped which was still parked where I had left it outside.

Then, because I was not sure what to do next, I took a ride along the coast road. I rode to a point where I could look over towards the island of Gozo and there I sat in the shade of some rocks to think once more until the sun sank like a red ball in the sky.

Two hours later I had decided to try to find Farid and to leave Malta as soon as possible. I had no desire to sit around, knowing that three IRA gunmen and their Libyan and possibly Mafia backers were looking for one David Reynolds who had briefly occupied the Hotel Belmont, rummaged through their belongings and run off with a shopping list of armaments.

I found Farid later that afternoon in his usual coffee bar.

It was my nature not to talk, at least immediately, about what I now knew. Experience had proved it was far better to keep things up a sleeve to pull out when it suited, rather than come out with it immediately even if one's own mind was bubbling with things to say.

But Farid had had his own pieces of information obtained by means, which he, too, did not seem to want to talk about.

"Trust me, David," he had said. "I spoke to someone today. A boat left Benghazi."

“Already?” I said, shocked by the news.

“Yes. It was all planned some time ago, before we got to know,” Farid said.

“When did it go?”

“Two days ago.”

“Where is the boat going?” I asked.

“Palermo, I think,” Farid said. “After that – who knows – can you guess, my friend?”

I remember Farid shrugging.

“Is it the boat we knew about?” I asked him.

“I believe so,” Farid replied.

“And the name of the vessel?”

“Licata.”

The name had slotted in place like a piece of jigsaw. It was my geography again. I had always been good at it, even in school. In fact, I knew Licata. It was a small town on the southern coast of Sicily and it all tied in with the Sicilian shipping agent in Valletta.

“But, David . . .” Farid stalled and then went on: “I think it will change its name soon – maybe somewhere off Malta. They will change the shipping documents. They will paint a new name on the boat. They will change everything.

They have played that trick before.”

“Do you know the new name?” I asked.

Farid shrugged again.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t know.”

There was not much more that Farid could offer. The rest of the information lay carefully wrapped in my folded newspaper on the back of my moped.

I left Farid for what turned out to be the very last time shortly after that.

I rode to the airport to confirm a flight out for the following morning.

Then, at eight o’clock I drove to the motorbike rental shop opposite the Sicilian and Mediterranean Shipping Company. I handed over the keys and, after a last look at the brass plate and the name of the lawyer, Guido Perillo, found a café and relaxed for an hour or so before starting to walk the half-mile back to my original hotel.

But my problems were only about to start.

In Valletta it was nearly midnight. The streets were quiet. It had become cooler with a fresh breeze coming in off the sea. It was as I was walking into the side street, the last hundred yards or so before my hotel came into view, that I saw someone standing in the shadow of a shop front a short distance from the entrance to the hotel. My adrenaline level was already high and my reflex reaction was to slip into the shadow of another shop doorway and stand there. I was less than a hundred yards away from the other shadowy character and only carrying a rolled-up newspaper containing stolen property so I stayed there in the shadow, sweating, thinking and with my heart pounding.



My first thought was that I was over reacting and imagining things. My second, more realistic, thought was that somehow, I had been seen or that someone knew what I had done, had found out where I was staying and was planning to administer some retribution. But then, I thought to myself, how could anyone know about me and relate my presence to the loss of a notebook and other bits of paper from a bag left at the Hotel Belmont?

At the time, I could not explain it but later I could.

I had checked in at the hotel as Reynolds.

My Thomas passport, though, was in its usual hiding place behind the lining of my case and I hated the thought of losing that by not returning to the hotel. It was vital I got back. So, I stood there for ten minutes, occasionally peering around the shop wall into the street. Whoever it was did not move from the other doorway. Now and again, I could see the red tip of a glowing cigarette and a plume of smoke blowing from the doorway in the breeze.

Then I thought I saw the tips of two glowing cigarettes and decided that the smoke drifting out of the shop entrance looked like it was made by more than one cigarette. What looked like two pairs of feet moved on the pavement and the more I looked, the more it looked like two people, not one.

And the more I thought about who it was waiting there, the more nervous I became.

The problem was that the street was another cul de sac. There was no other way in or out of the hotel and, even if there was a back way in, I decided it was unlikely to be open at this time of night.

So, I decided to take a chance and walk boldly towards the hotel.

But I still had the bundle of newspaper under my arm and the contents were going to be a give-away if I got into a tangle with either the law or worse. So I looked around my dark doorway and then I saw a possible solution – I suppose it was luck, but it had happened to me once before.

In Algeria once, armed with a roll of newspaper containing more than simple newsprint I had been faced with a similar situation of not wanting to be found with anything on my person. I remembered what I had done then and, looking around the shop doorway, the same solution seemed a distinct possibility.

In Algeria, the streets were often littered with the detritus of the daily routine of human life. So, the only problem in leaving a bundle of old newspaper held down by a piece of stony rubble alongside a rubbish-strewn public highway was to remember which stone hid the bits you wished to recover.

The streets of Valletta were far cleaner and swept more regularly but a bundle of old newspaper was, I thought, still not a bad place to hide stolen goods, if only temporarily. I looked around my hiding place in the shop doorway and, as luck would have it, above the door to the shop was a ledge. Above the ledge was a wooden sign showing the shop owner's name but the sign was shabby and in dire need of a coat of paint. What's more it was falling away from the stonework, leaving a small gap and I found I could just reach it by standing on the stone sill of the side window of the shop. So, it was there that I stuffed the newspaper, spreading it flat so that most of it slid behind the sign. But hiding the newspaper was only the first problem solved.

My next problem was to return to the hotel.

The third problem was to be sufficiently alive next morning to recover the newspaper.

But, I couldn't wait all night so I decided to walk briskly towards the hotel as though I had just returned from a happy evening spent in a bar.

Perhaps the decision had been wrong. But no other options had come to my mind and, as I approached the other doorway and could almost smell the cigarette smoke, two men sprang out and bundled me roughly back into the doorway. With a pair of big rough hands around my neck I was pushed backwards so hard that my head hit the stone wall with a thud.

Stars flew around my head and in front of my eyes and I had to gasp for air through the small remaining gap left in my throat. The throttling hands then came up to force my chin back and a knee kicked me violently in the stomach.

It all happened very quickly.

For a second nobody spoke. I couldn't have spoken anyway but when I heard the voice I knew that although this was Malta, far from home, I was involved with a couple of thugs who were probably quite used to night-time forays in the back streets of Belfast.

"Who the fuck you think you are, messin' 'round here? Who the fuck are you, huh? You bastard. Where the fuck is the stuff?"

The words were hissed rather than spoken and a smell of beer and cigarettes on his breath wafted over me. But I then felt something sticking into my ribs. Perhaps it was the gun that had been in the yellow cloth but I never saw it, just felt it.

It was forced between my ribs so hard that the pain was almost worse than that from my throat and my head. Through the red mist and stars, I then saw a face streaked with greasy, strands of black hair just inches from my nose. Then the other face came into blurred view, the one I had already seen at the airport. O'Halloran's hair looked better groomed, thick and wavy but as I tried to focus a muscular arm came up and the back of a heavy fist landed on my cheek. But, just before it hit, I saw the tattoo. To me it looked like a skull and cross bones as the brains inside my own skull rattled and the cheek bone felt as though it had cracked. That mugging seemed to go on for hours. The pain in my head and cheekbone was the worst although both my arms were up behind my back and felt as though they might also crack at the shoulder blade at any second.

O'Halloran said something amongst the noise in my head. "OK. Shut the fuck up. Lost your fucking voice, have ye?"

Even in the middle of the assault, the words struck me as typically Irish and under different circumstances I might have laughed and told an Irish joke. But this was no time for humour. "OK, Sean, that's enough," O'Halloran, said, seeming to show some pity, but his face was only an inch from mine and the spit from his mouth and the stale tobacco breath was taking over as punishment.

He moved to three inches away and, with Sean still holding my two arms up behind my neck and his knee in my back, O'Halloran hissed more oaths through his yellow teeth.

Hissing was probably wise, though, in that the shop owner and his neighbors in the apartments above were probably fast asleep. I suppose I could have screamed but, despite the circumstances, it seemed unmanly. If I was going to die I wanted to be

found with a mouthful of blood and broken teeth not with my mouth open screaming as if I'd been raped.

Screaming was impossible anyway because my teeth were pressed on the stone wall and I could feel the skin of my scalp starting to tear as the hair was dragged out in tufts.

"Like he says, you bastard. Who the fuck are you? Fucking English! MI fucking 6 is it?"

He clearly didn't understand how British Intelligence worked they use unpaid volunteers – but the words were hissed into my face as a statement not a question and proved they knew something about me because I still hadn't spoken a word.

"OK, Sean, let the fucker speak. Where's the stuff you bastard?"

I felt my jacket pockets being checked and my wallet was pulled out. The Reynolds passport came with it. There was little else. There wasn't much in my wallet either, as I never carried much change and my traveller's cheques, business cards and other bits of paper were at the hotel.

"Let's see that. That's him. Just as I thought. Mister fucking David William Reynolds. Fucking company director. What sort of fucking company director comes raiding fucking hotel rooms? Speak you bastard. What's up? Where's the fucking stuff you filched?"

The language was not good and Sarah would have been shocked to know I mixed with such people but the grip on my throat lightened just enough even though the back of my head and ribs felt badly bruised.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I think I managed to say.

"The fucking papers – you stupid fucking sod. Where . . . are . . . they?"

The last three words were spoken slowly as though O'Halloran thought he was talking to an imbecile.

"I'm sorry I don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled as saliva and probably blood ran down my chin.

The grip on my throat lightened a little more. So, did the pain in my ribs, but only because the gun was now pointing directly at my forehead.

"OK, you fucker. Stop messin' We know you were at a hotel earlier. Some fucker broke into our room. It was you. Comprennez? Got it now?"

And so, it went on for several minutes more. I denied everything. I tried to grab my wallet and passport back, thinking this was the most likely response of someone who was the subject of a common assault rather than someone who really had stolen their personal property earlier.

But, miracles do happen and I was saved by another stroke of luck.

Having now slumped onto the dusty ground with two faces inches from mine, a gun at my head and my wallet and passport already inside the unyielding hands of the greasy one, my luck changed.

For above the hissing voices and the pounding in my chest and ears I had heard a car coming. The two Irishmen heard it as well. The greasy one stuck the hand that

was not holding my passport firmly over my mouth and nose and pushed my head hard against the ground.

“Shut up, you fucker. No fucking move, do you understand?”

The taxi stopped, out of sight, up the road somewhere probably near the first shop doorway and my hidden newspaper. I could hear other male voices, some laughter and the taxi engine and above the din in my ears a dog barked somewhere. Then there was the sound of footsteps, of people walking towards the shop doorway where I was lying with two Irishmen sat on top of me. I heard the taxi as it probably did a U-turn in the road and subconsciously wished I was not staying in a cheap hotel in a cul de sac. O’Halloran then hissed through his teeth, directly into my face.

“OK, bastard. Get up. Walk, out of here, that way. No fucking tricks OK? This’ll be right behind you.”

Again, I felt the gun, this time in my ribs as O’Halloran pointed up the road towards where the footsteps were approaching but away from the sanctuary of my hotel. His friend Sean managed to get one last punch into my right kidney, but I was grateful for the chance to stand up straight with my head away from the wall.

“Quick, now, you stupid sod. Walk. Just watch your fucking steps.”

I remember emerging, staggering slightly, from the shop front to see two men walking towards us. They both wore white shirts and dark ties undone at the collar and both carried their jackets and brief cases in their hands – foreign businessmen returning from a late-night meeting somewhere. They looked like Laurel and Hardy but they were talking, laughing and having fun and, suddenly, I wanted to live again.

The Irishmen followed me out, closely, the gun still digging into my back.

Even now, I remember the next ten or twenty seconds.

I remember the two businessmen looking towards me. One of them stepped off the pavement into the road near a parked car clearly to give us room to pass and, as we passed, I took the only chance that was likely to come my way. I ducked, broke away and ran behind the two businessmen who had stopped chattering and, not surprisingly, were looking startled. The Irishmen too, looked stunned and were probably uncertain what to do. To shoot at that point would have been pointless. It would not have brought back their precious possessions and any attempt at using the gun might well have resulted in one of the innocent chaps, behind whom I was now hiding, being shot.

In the split seconds they had, the Belfast men clearly thought better of shooting. But they weren’t going to give up.

They pushed away the two businessmen and tried to re-grab me. But with my adrenaline level running at maximum, I found I was surprisingly quick. I ran. I sprinted across the road, dodged behind another parked car and then ran, keeping my head down before re-crossing the road and sprinting for my hotel thinking that at any second a bullet would embed itself in my back.

And, as I ran into the open hotel door I remember glancing back where the two men in white shirts and ties were standing looking up the road watching the two Irishmen walking the other way. One of the white shirts picked up his briefcase, which had been dropped in the fracas and then they resumed their walk towards the hotel, still looking behind them.

The hotel night porter came over to me. I was panting. "Are you OK, sir?" he asked me.

"Yes, thank you. Now. Thank you."

I was sitting in a chair, holding the back of my head, my nose, my chin and my ribs when the two businessmen walked in.

"You OK, señor?" one of them asked me. "You have problem with zees men, yes?"

"Yes."

"You wanna polizi come, señor, yes?"

They were slightly drunk Spaniards.

"No, thank you. I'm OK," said.

"I shink very homosexual, señor? I shink you lucky we come den, I shink."

This was, perhaps, the most amusing part when looking back, but at the time I had not felt like laughing.

I thanked them went to my room and bathed my wounds. Then, at five thirty, having first taken my Thomas passport out from the lining of my briefcase I checked out of the hotel. On my way up the street with dawn only just breaking but still feeling nervous in case they had waited for me, I recovered my newspaper together with its intact contents from the doorway of the shop I had hidden it in, hailed a passing early morning taxi and went to the airport. I wasn't going to wait for my reserved flight to London so I took the first available plane out, this time in the name of Thomas.

I soon found myself in Nice.

## Aftermath

**It was while I was on the plane, still nursing aching ribs,** a badly cut lip and a swollen, blackening eye, that I started to ask myself how the two Irishmen had known about me and where I was staying.

I knew it should not have been easy for them to trace me. But someone somewhere had tipped them off.

Donaldson seemed unable to explain it when I got back. "Bad luck, old man. Never mind old chap, still in one piece."

That had been the extent of Donaldson's concern.

"So, we're passing all this on?" I asked him, in my purest innocence whilst still wincing from the pain in my ribs.

"Leave it with us now, old chap. You've done your bit. Go home and nurse that black eye."

But I never did find out what Donaldson did with the information I brought back.

As for me, I had read through the notebook and other notes that I had found in the Hotel Belmont on the plane to Nice and over and over again on the connecting flight to Heathrow. I memorized names and addresses and can still remember some.

The information was quite clear and was invaluable.

There were several names – Arab, English, Irish and Italian.

The name Perillo was listed several times with telephone numbers and addresses of people in Dublin, Belfast, Tripoli, Naples and even New York. There was a note of the name of the boat name Licata and beside it another name, MS Bally as though this might have been its changed name.

There was a sheet of paper with what looked like a map of a coastline and the name Donegal. To me, it seemed highly likely that the boat that had left Benghazi, passed through Palermo, changed its name somewhere off Malta and then offloaded most of its cargo in a small bay near Donegal.

I was not inexperienced in things to do with moving things around by boat but no one asked me and as far as I know the boat was never tracked and never stopped.

There are charges that should still be brought.

Questions still need to be asked of things that happened around that time and one reason for me writing this statement, however belated it is, is to request a proper investigation.

My clear mistake was in involving Donaldson but, as I have explained, there wasn't time.

I should have spoken directly to someone in the British Government or in Northern Ireland. But, looking back, I can see it now.

Donaldson was already on his way to becoming a serious crook.

“Operation Chrysalis” as Donaldson himself called it for the few weeks that he maintained any interest was eventually forgotten although I deliberately and provocatively mentioned it in passing whenever another code or name was invented for a job.

I found Donaldson's penchant for inventing code names and using initials for people and organizations quite ridiculous. I told Jack this once. Jack didn't like what I said but at the time I couldn't help myself.

“Are you sure Donaldson's isn't sexually aroused by his fucking codes and initials?”

Perhaps there is a pathological explanation for this type of obsession but in Donaldson's case, this was no disease.

The only obsession Donaldson had was in making any reports he ever made to those higher up the chain sound important and vital to national security and if using codes and initials helped to create this impression, he was all for it. To be frank, though, it was another sign that the man was a fraud, hell bent on preserving his own official job title whilst leaving bags of room to run his own private agenda.

But I had risked my life.

I had found out who was involved, how the shipment was to be made and even the name of the vessel. I knew that it would leave from Benghazi, and when, and I think I know where it had been delivered and who had taken delivery because, later, I also recovered some shipping documents through contacts I had at Lloyds.

That shipment had arrived in Donegal in early autumn. Some of it had probably been hidden in farm buildings near Donegal. They were never searched although I had

made some very astute suggestions about where they might look. Instead, a great deal of it had been distributed and was on the streets and in the hands of the Provisional IRA by early 1972. Of that I am sure.

But I had done my bit for Queen and Country.

And what happened to Farid and his promised commission?

Farid was a good man, living under very difficult circumstances.

His heart was in the right place and he was a very good friend to me.

He never got to buy his fancy apartment in Majorca because six months later his body was washed up on a beach near Leptis Magna with a bullet hole in his head and a rope tied and wrapped around his body and neck.

No one who didn't have other good, Libyan friends would ever have known about this murder. But I know about it.

So who blew the whistle on Farid?

And what was my reward?

Well, there are two things that I remember.

Firstly, I got a replacement David Reynolds passport, even though I could well have managed without it.

"Don't worry, old chap, we'll report it as lost. Not go into the sordid details of who rifled your pockets. Forget it old chap. All in a day's work, eh? Ha ha."

But my second reward came some months later.

I was reminded of this just today when picking through old newspaper cuttings from around 1972.

February 22nd 1972 was the day the IRA bombed the 16th Parachute Brigade headquarters in Aldershot at lunchtime.

March 21st 1972 was the day that six died and one hundred and forty-six were injured whilst out shopping in Belfast. And there were others – similar reports of atrocities committed around that time. The cuttings were held together with rusty paper clips and had lain unread for forty years in a box upstairs in the spare bedroom.

But I had sat and torn them from newspapers just a few months after my walk around Valletta.

And there was another cutting from March 3rd 1973.

I had been minding my own business and innocently walking from somewhere to Victoria Station with my mind probably on things I'd been reading about the war in Vietnam or the referendum on British rule in Ulster when I happened to pass the Agriculture Ministry in Whitehall.

I had already heard police sirens but it was nothing unusual at the time and I carried on my way to catch the train back home to Croydon. It was just after I'd passed the Ministry building when I heard a scream and, almost simultaneously, a huge explosion and I found myself knocked to the ground by some sort of invisible force from behind. I must have been miles away in my thoughts but all sense of where I was or what had happened seemed to leave me.

Everything then went silent but my stomach was hurting.

I opened my eyes and knew they were still working as I was staring at the pavement with dust and bits of glass and metal falling all around me. I then realized that the pain in my stomach was because I was lying on top of my briefcase with the arm and my hand that had been holding it trapped beneath. And I knew my nose was still working because I could smell burning as a thick cloud of black smoke swept past me.

Everything was silent because my ears were still not working but I knew what it was – a bomb.

I struggled to my feet, checked for signs of blood and decided I was still in one piece. I rubbed my ears because I still couldn't hear. Instead I turned around to a scene of devastation.

Smoke and flames were rising from what was once a car, debris was lying everywhere and so were people. Men who, a few seconds earlier, had been wearing pin striped suits were now sat or lying in what looked like dirty rags not five yards from me. A woman was lying with blood trickling from her head. Another man was crawling toward her. Further away and closer to the burning car, bodies lay, some moving, some still, some with smoking clothes. Smouldering debris was everywhere and a black shoe was lying almost next to me and next to the shoe a piece of red tissue which looked as though it might once have been a hand.

But still I couldn't hear and I felt dizzy.

I remember going to the stone wall of the building and leaning on it with my briefcase at my feet whilst I rubbed dust from my eyes and sound back into my ears.

But within seconds' other people were running towards the scene. People were coming out of the Ministry office door, a porter in his uniform standing with his hands on his forehead staring at the scene in disbelief. I did likewise for several minutes as I stood alone trying to recover my senses.

That newspaper cutting showed that one person was killed and about 250 injured in London that day after car bombs outside the Ministry building and the Old Bailey.

I was, I suppose, fortunate.

I was in no fit state to help anyone but declined any need for hospital treatment. My hearing slowly returned, I dusted myself down and walked away towards Victoria Station.

Police, ambulance and fire engine sirens were now everywhere and, due to police advice and rumours of other bombs, train timetables were disrupted.

So, I found myself with about half a dozen other shell-shocked individual in a pub near Victoria Station where we sat around exchanging stories about near death experiences.

But during the inevitable silences between forcibly assembled groups of survivors I sat with my ears still echoing and my gritty eyes staring into a glass of Bell's whisky.

It was then that it registered with sufficient impact that Donaldson had known where I was staying in Valletta that night.



Donaldson may not have actually planted the bomb that had nearly killed me but he was involved. Reasons for everything that ever went wrong pointed backwards through tortuous and convoluted pathways to Donaldson.

So, my second reward for uncovering this IRA gun running activity was to find myself very nearly a victim. Perhaps the Irish muggers in Malta were still after my scalp, although I suspect Donaldson would have put them off trying because for him I was, at least for now, far more valuable alive than dead.

That was my life during the sixties and seventies.

The IRA Malta Libya story will suffice for now because to relate others about Nigeria, Ghana, Serra Leone, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq or Syria will require a second edition or an extension to this statement to equal War and Peace. But sometimes I got so mad with things that I had a desire to close the legitimate Import Export business altogether and see if, by concentrating on my other life, I could do just that as well, or better, through taking bribes or dubious commissions. I could probably have become an international version of Farid. But, then, look what happened to him.

To hell with it if I got shot, I would sometimes think to myself. And to hell with it if I was caught and slammed up in some rat-infested jail in Karachi or Khartoum with the other local riff raff and got fed bread and water. Perhaps I'd be there until some British newspaper got wind of it and managed to take a photo of this thin, bearded old chap wearing a loin cloth who spoke English as if he had once lived in Croydon but who had forgotten who he was. But so be it.

Fuck the lot of it, I thought.

If you can't beat the bastards, then become one yourself and join in the fun.

And hearing Jack's words ringing in my ears like some creepy, hand wringing character from a Charles Dickens novel didn't help.

"Opportunities, Ollie, opportunities."

Yes, I really did stop caring for brief moments – until I thought about my Sarah of course.

Sarah was like a rock on which I stood to scan the wider horizon.

Fortunately, things always looked better from that higher position and so I never did join the bastards but I was very close sometimes.

But for an organized chap like me, my emotions were starting to go all over the place.

For instance, it wasn't so easy making phone calls from places like Maiduguri or Ouagadougou thirty or forty years ago.

I would telephone Beaty occasionally if I had an hour to spare to sit in my hotel room dialling and redialling. By the time my middle finger was red, sore and blistered I might get through. By then I'd have forgotten what I wanted and the shock of speaking to someone with an English accent didn't help. I'd often start off talking to her in pidgin.

And then Beaty would try to engage me in trivial conversation, about who had written, or who was in town, or who wanted to meet me. All this, too, on a poor, crackling line that was likely to break at any second and when all I really wanted Beaty to do was to convey a simple message to Sarah.

But even that, I found impossible to do through Beaty, as my message was far too private.

But Beaty was only doing her job, or so I thought at the time.

On my return, she would badger me to write letters or suggest in her own unique way, that some clients had been disappointed not to meet me when they had visited London. The fact that I might have spent a week talking to sordid characters in Lagos or Baghdad about exports of spark plugs or cans of fly spray whilst also dealing with something Donaldson had thought might be interesting was not something I felt able to tell her.

But still I kept going and, more often than not, I was travelling in the guise of David Reynolds.

Donaldson even stopped calling me Ollie.

He would sometimes address me as, "Ah! Dave, old chap" and sneer.

It angered me, intensely and I would argue with him about it. Jack would, of course, just look away, embarrassed.

"Reynolds, Thomas, David, Ollie, good Lord, what's the difference now, dear fellow. No need to be so fucking sensitive. Indispensable! An asset! Can't think what we'd do without you."

And I recall, now, what I once said in reply.

"In case you've forgotten I have a wife and family who know nothing about all this bloody nonsense."

But Donaldson's response was yet another that I have never forgotten. He had shown no mercy or sensitivity.

"Can't see it makes any difference, old chap. Not now, at any rate. She's married to a bloody spy whatever she might think."

That description really hurt.

It was the first time Donaldson had used the word and, despite Jack being present, the argument developed. Even now, thinking about it, the anger wells up inside me.

When Donaldson called me a spy I felt sickened to the core because my real responsibility, whom Donaldson had just dismissed almost as an irrelevance, was, at that time, sitting, waiting for me at home.

I had phoned her earlier and I knew Sarah was cooking our evening meal because I had said I would try to get home early for once.

"That would be nice dear. We'll wait for you. Robert is doing his homework but I'll make us an apple pie. Doris gave me some lovely Bramley's yesterday."

Phoning Sarah would always bring me down to earth once again and I'd long to rush home to be with her.

## **Guilt**

**I started by writing a statement but perhaps it is also a private confession.**

I have had some restless nights recently and now there is something I need to get off my chest.

After I'd finished writing the statement about the IRA, Malta and Donaldson last Tuesday afternoon I finished off my stock of Bell's whisky. So, I took a stroll to the off license to replenish it.

Two days and three bottles later and I feel able to continue although, in the meantime, I have had some really bad bouts of Thomas's Disease and still have a serious headache.

My current mood is just a little sombre.

Last night, for instance, as I was nursing a bottle and staring into Sarah's log effect gas fire, I heard buzzing like a swarm of bees in my ears.

The whisky was probably to blame, I am sure, but tropical rain was thundering on to a tin roof almost deafening the real thunder from the skies above.

In my mind, you see, I was sitting on a hard, concrete floor, dizzy, just as then, and a toxic, clear liquid of almost neat alcohol made from palm fruit was being handed around in a dirty, chipped cup.

For geographical references, this was me having a nightmare about or dreaming about or just thinking about – I can't remember which – sunny Nigeria. This will certainly explain the weather, the building and the company I was sharing.

The sun doesn't always shine in Lagos and, on this occasion, the heavy rain had started while I was at an open-air Night Club – the Pink Coconut.

The band was still playing somewhere outside, protected from the downpour by some sort of corrugated shelter. Even though I was staring at the log effect fire, I could hear it. The sound of drums and a saxophone was pounding in my chest and a strong smell like stale sweat filled my nostrils. My head had been spinning then just as it was by the log effect gas fire.

I was in a very mixed gathering – a noisy one, and mine was one of only two white faces.

There was an intermittent light of sorts – not firelight, but flashes of blue from the lightning outside.

Sat there, as I was, in Gloucester, forty years later and with a fuddled brain, I struggled to remember and imagine how it was. Then, as it all became clearer and I remembered, I desperately struggled to forget. This is a classic symptom of Thomas's Disease but, by then, it is too late. This is how nightmares start.

The flashes of lightning were one sort of light. The other was a yellow flicker from a dim bulb that dangled in the corner. Two wooden chairs stood either side of a wooden table the only furniture in the room. Suddenly it was all starting to come back and I remember fidgeting in my chair by the log effect gas fire in Gloucester because the concrete floor in Lagos was so hard and uncomfortable.

There was a bluish haze that came from half a dozen glowing tips of strange smelling, hand rolled cigarettes. There was a hissing and splashing like a waterfall, for water was pouring in sparkling torrents from the tin roof, past the window into a deep, muddy flood that was streaming in through the open door. Mice the size of

small rats had scampered for cover when I had staggered in with the others to escape the deluge and my shirt was clinging to me like warm sweat.

Once inside in the dim light and with my eyes barely focusing, I watched an army of nocturnal ants moving across the floor near the wall, up the table leg to a plate of chicken bones – the remains of someone’s dinner. A small lizard was benefitting as well by picking the ants off with its darting tongue as they passed by.

The occupants of the two chairs were already dozing with their heads lying in folded arms on the table. One arm moved, struck an empty beer bottle and it started to roll. It rolled in a semicircle and fell with a thud onto the floor but did not break. Instead it came to rest with a clinking sound against the table leg.

The only other white man present lay, apparently asleep, with his mouth ajar. His head lay partly on the bare, dark brown knees of one of the girls whilst she curled her fingers in his long and greasy hair and leaned back on the wall. Next to her was another man whom she was looking at, rapidly, up and down, up and down, with wide, inviting black eyes and she smacked him provocatively with her spare hand. She was shouting and laughing, laughing and shouting.

The laughter was loud and coarse, laughter to encourage him, and he then responded by sticking his hand into the depths of her lap.

“Aye, keep them hand away, man. You be get too much drunk, man, ha ha.”

The men, too, were punching each other in drunken gusto – the same gusto that was bound to lead to a fight later if something was said the wrong way or a woman showed a preference. Meanwhile, the short, fat, handmade cigarettes glowed, the smoke billowed around and my wet shirt still clung to my back and front.

I looked around, my eyes alighting on the other white man. Frank Marshall was English. This was confirmed by his grey socks, sandals and his pale but grubby safari suit. Like me, but even more so, Frank had fully succumbed to the beer of earlier so he was now missing out on the local liquor. And around Frank, on the floor, sat or lay perhaps a dozen others, mostly men, some in sweaty, open necked shirts or with unnecessary ties that had become twisted or untied. They were dark figures who mostly ignored me because I had already achieved my objective of being accepted into their company – and, anyway, they were now too drunk to care.

The “being accepted” part of relationship building had taken me the best part of two days. We had chatted and laughed and drunk and now some drew on cigarettes, which they sucked once, between thumb and first finger before blowing the smoke into the air and passing it on to the next man. Then they punched each other in drugged shows of false affection, their eyes wide and penetrating and the white parts going pink.

I knew some of their names, like Yemi, Onje, Augustus and Bola and I had their business cards tucked away somewhere.

Others were new.

They shouted in a mixture of English and Yoruba, but the conversation, if that is what it was, had strayed a long way from sober ideas to divert government funds into overseas bank accounts into drunken jokes about women, sex and the merits of several wives. Someone had shouted at me across the floor for my views. But they

had been much too far gone to hear my quieter, muttered answer that one was already more than I could possibly hope to manage.

Except for one person, that was.

She was sitting in the corner. She was sober so she was smiling politely and not laughing but clearly trying to avoid my eye.

Her long, dark brown legs were together, outstretched on the floor and wrapped in a tight and colourful dress that I had watched her hold up out of the muddy water when we ran in the rain. The hidden legs pointed in my direction, but the bare toes flickered up and down, up and down, like the long eyelashes that circled her eyes. She looked just a little out of place. Perhaps it was shyness.

I watched her through the smoke.

Her black eyes, surrounded by that brilliant whiteness, caught the light, shone and sparkled and, now and again, they clearly glanced in my direction. They were alert, thinking eyes, intelligent with a touch of sympathy in them. They seemed filled with worry about where she had suddenly found herself and I knew she sensed my own discomfort. Her look invited me to make a decision. The black skin of her face glowed with a satin smoothness, because she was sweating less than the others were. Her lips were pink and her long, bare arms stretched from strapless shoulders to lie between those straight legs that pointed in my direction and she sat, upright, not leaning on the man next to her, not slapping or punching or laughing or shouting.

And I had already seen her long black fingers, with the wide gold rings, that waved away the cigarette that was offered. Her hair was a miracle of artistry, full of miniature plaits interspersed with rows of tiny, multi-coloured beads that sparkled like her eyes. She listened and watched and now and again I saw her glance at a gold watch on her dark wrist and then at me. She was also distracted by the noise.

Shrieks of high pitched laughter were coming from the other corner where two men in the crumpled remains of business suits lay with two younger, black women, one in a short, tight, floral dress.

One girl looked as though she had already started to discard some clothing but it was so dark and the girl so black that I could not see for certain. But I knew the one who was still dressed. She had earlier introduced herself as Mary. She had sat on my lap at the Pink Coconut and had got as far as sticking a hot, pink tongue into my ear. She was already high on something but whether it was alcohol or some other concoction I did not know.

But after the searching tongue had failed to impress she had pressed thick lips to my cheek, breathed beer and spicy jollof rice over me and hissed noisily into my ear about sharing the air conditioning back at my hotel. I didn't like to tell her that the power had failed earlier and there was no air conditioning but, all the time, she was running her fingers up and down my inner thigh. I had excused myself at that point by going to relieve myself in the bushes.

Oh yes, such were the excitements on offer during visits to Lagos in the seventies.

But, as I sat there in the chair in Gloucester remembering Mary's tongue and still smelling the chilli and fish that escaped alongside it I felt something heavy in my bladder as though the need to relieve myself in the bushes was now a necessary reality.

The half-asleep status had become a quarter-asleep status, as my extended bladder seemed fit to burst.

Had it been three, four, five or six large glasses of whisky?

Perhaps I had had no glass at all and was just taking it direct from the bottle but I really had lost count. For years, I had been getting up at least once per night, sometimes twice.

So, I moved to try to ease the weight on my weakening sphincter as my mind still flitted between past and present and my hand that held the whisky flitted between my lap and my mouth. Someone, somewhere, was telling me that I was sitting by the fire in Gloucester and not in Lagos and that there were no bushes and that a proper bathroom with a flush system and Sarah's pink towels were available if I needed them. But it all became just a rumour that died as the more exotic reality of dreaming took over once more. So, I gave up worrying about my bladder for a while, took another mouthful of Bell's and returned to the past in Lagos.

Such are the symptoms of a really bad bout of Thomas's Disease.

Inside my head, everything was dark with just small patches of oscillating light reflecting off moving, black bodies, pink eyes and crumpled white shirts. My own closed eyes could no longer penetrate the gloom.

So, in my mind I took the cup that was being passed around.

I licked my lips, swallowed and then passed the cup to the next man, who laughed and punched my arm.

"Hey, that good stuff man, eh? You like Nigerian wine eh?"

Better than that French shit, eh? Ha ha ha. You wanna puff as well?"

I shook my head and probably tried, unsuccessfully, to laugh.

But my lips were dry despite the drinking and so I glanced once more into the corner of the room where the black girl with beads in her hair sat with her legs outstretched and now, just slightly, apart. The girl again looked first at me and then at her watch.

You see? Dare I continue to type this and so record it for posterity?

Why not!

But nearly ninety years old, with an overfull bladder pressing on an enlarged prostate gland and still I sensed the erotic heat of equatorial Africa in my groin.

But it was one of the other girls who had then crawled across towards me dragging her short floral skirt across the wet floor with her buttocks raised. She had raised her head to smile a drunken smile and pulled herself onto my lap where she pressed her half-exposed breasts against my chest and took my hand and pushed it up into the wetness between her legs. I knew what she expected me to do but I was now being watched by the other girl in the corner and, instead, I politely pushed her away, excused myself and went outside for a piss in the tropical rain.

And when I turned around I saw the sober girl from the corner standing at the door behind me, waiting.

Forty years have passed and yet I still think about Angie.

About Angie with the shining, black hair, the multi-coloured beads and the long, long legs that later wrapped so willingly around mine.

About Angie with the round and beautiful face, pink lips, white teeth and the radiant and beautiful smile that I remember as though it was yesterday.

Angie was different from the rest and showed me the throbbing passion that was at the heart of everything that is good about Africa.

With Angie I spent a long, long night in a cool, cool air-conditioned room and found the help I needed to see through one problem but found, yet again, how easy it was to forget the most important person in my life.

I can still see Angie lying asleep on my crumpled bed at the Airport Hotel in Ikeja and still see her glorious African smile that filled two, dark nights with sun.

Angie was all about laughing and talking and caressing and touching for hours and wanting to continue forever. Angie was the one, whose naked body I washed in the brown drips of Lagos water that we squeezed from the tap while trying to understand each other's culture and knowing all along that there was so little difference between us.

And when she fell asleep, I played with the tiny, multi-coloured beads and the finely plaited strands of black hair that hung across my own shoulders. As she slept, I stroked her dark brown face, looked into her black eyes and I kissed her. I touched and watched the movement of her pink lips and looked down her silky body to her hips and on towards her long legs, watching her firm breasts gently rise and fall as she lay beside me.

But I lay there for hours, my mind troubled with what I should do about my wife, my family, my business and my other life. This was the defining moment when I felt I had to decide, one way or another.

I was not just at a simple crossroad, though.

I felt I had arrived at a complicated, multiple junction without a map but with signposts pointing in all sorts of different directions. Some pointed to places I knew I didn't want to go, others to places that sounded good but I knew were cul de sacs. Others pointed to unknown places that sounded satisfactory but were shown as via this and past that and by way of somewhere else. And I couldn't turn around and go back to where I had begun because the route was far too long and tortuous and I might lose myself yet again.

The nice places to go meant giving up everything and starting again but still meant someone looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life in case I spoke out of turn or went to the authorities.

And I still had not earned anything like enough to take an early retirement.

I battled with the dilemma of whether to fly home or just fly away, trying to explain the guilt that was wracking my very soul yet building on the guilt just by lying there.

I thought about completely disappearing, losing myself and adopting a new identity. But then, in my mind, I would see Sarah standing by the door still waiting for me to return home for years and years to come and I knew I could not live with that.

And so, those few short days turned into a long, long battle with myself that began on the flight home with me imagining Sarah sat waiting at home. Guilt wracked my very soul.

I knew if I phoned her from the airport on arrival to say I'd be home in thirty minutes, that she would be standing waiting on the pavement outside the front door when I turned the corner of the street.

And before I was even fifty yards from the house I knew she would be walking or even running towards me.

What does this tell you? I am eighty-six years old.

But I have only just matured enough not to feel too stupid to write things like this. I have previously shied away from expressing unmanly feelings and still dislike writing words like the ones that are now starting to spill from my fingertips. But as I might be dead when someone gets to read it, I suppose it won't matter.

Despite what I had done, I still loved Sarah you see. I loved her deeply.

I didn't tell her, of course, but she was the one I would need when everything around me had returned to sanity and who I would need when I was too old to care anymore. And I was more than prepared to do my bit if she deteriorated before me.

So, at that complicated junction in my life, did I eventually decide which road to take?

Yes.

I took the road to what sounded like a big, fine place of light and sanity where the signpost read: "Domesti City via the little village of Patience-while-I-sort-things-out."

And so, as I always did, I phoned her on arrival at the airport.

And, of course, as I expected, thirty minutes later Sarah was standing there when I turned the corner and my guilt tripled in strength as I watched her run towards me to grab my hand and pull me towards the house.

But I couldn't make love to her that night even though I know she wanted me to.

I couldn't for too long and I know that Sarah knew something had happened.

I remember her asking me more questions about that trip than was usual. I hoped that perhaps she thought I was just distracted by my work. I know, however, that I became a different person for a long while afterwards as I tried to fathom out what to do.

We had arrived at the village of Patience-while-I-sort- things-out, you see.

But, as usual, she said nothing. It was though she was waiting for me to have a mental breakdown and come clean on everything. But I am too stubborn for that. Or perhaps I just have a masochistic streak which makes me plough on despite everything.

For months, she watched me, she looked at me and she tried talking to me about nothing. But she never asked me outright.

Perhaps I should have admitted everything including my other double life for Donaldson & Co. Perhaps an argument would have cleared the air.

But my mind was still unsure about too many things.



When at home I would sit there thinking, pretending to read the paper but becoming more, and more, angry about Donaldson and his increasing numbers of threats.

By now I hated the man and was plotting things of my own.

But I could never have told Sarah that what I was thinking might, if it all went wrong, be putting her own safety in jeopardy. It would have been like an admittance of failure of my career and business and I wasn't ready to give that up just yet.

During those long weeks and months, I thought that perhaps she had found out about Angie.

Perhaps I'd said something in passing as a beer-driven joke to Jack or Donaldson or someone else and the joke had somehow got back to Sarah. Perhaps I had talked in my sleep.

More likely, however, was that one of those intoxicated Nigerians in that rain lashed building in Lagos had been a lackey of Donaldson and he had said something.

But what did Sarah do?

Nothing, except continue to wash my sweat ridden shirts and dust covered trousers and iron my suit when I came home and continue to ask me whether I fancied roast beef on Sunday as a treat because I'd missed the last three weekends.

Why?

Well I suppose it was for the same reason that I would also run towards her when I came around the corner and saw her waiting.

You see, since Sarah died I now realize that, all along, she knew far more than I ever thought.

So, does this prove my naivety or does it show the way that Sarah and I knew what was best for each other?

I think that is the case.

Sometimes, silence is like gold.

Perhaps silence is also like diamond, because it would have been that sort of wedding anniversary for us next year.

These recent nightmares are caused by realizing that the one woman I knew I should not have deceived and with whom I should, undoubtedly, have shared my feelings more openly was probably far more intuitive than me. I now think she actually understood everything and she especially understood the acute depths of loneliness that can afflict a man who travelled alone and whose commitment to his job had meant he had become trapped and caught up in the same knots he was trying to unravel.

But I think, too, she knew I loved her and would always be with her right to the end.

And so, I was.

For that I am very happy.

But my eyes are now hurting because they have run dry.

And this typewriter ribbon has also run dry.

Written above in the last few inches of fading ink is my description of a personal guilt.

What follows below, written in the darker, fresher black of a new ribbon, is another sort of guilt. What follows is my admittance to being an innocent accomplice to murder but I had no idea it was to be that serious at the time.

You see, it was quite within Donaldson's style to create situations where people who had become a nuisance either to himself or others would be dealt with in such a way that they were forced to retreat from whatever nuisance they were creating and become compliant. Donaldson was adept at this sort of thing as, having already become a victim, I knew all too well. Compromising photographs and being forced to use a false identity were examples of what kept me on message. But Donaldson's inventiveness had no boundaries.

I handled this one in a completely detached and unemotional manner as if it was just another routine business transaction. I discussed this with myself as I did all such transactions. I knew I wouldn't get paid but the reward was in knowing that it would postpone any immediate impact on Sarah and my family.

I took part because, at the time, I saw no viable alternative.

For this job, I was a subcontractor who subcontracted it out to another.

Of course, Donaldson was the one who had subcontracted it to me but I still don't know if someone had subcontracted it to him or how far up the chain it went. But this is how things happened. Fortunately, sometimes, those that find a corpse lying at the foot of the mountain can point to the vultures living amongst the clouds at the top.

Nevertheless, I still have a guilty conscience and so it forms part of my statement.

But, frankly, whatever happens, I don't really care anymore.

For even now, when I turn the corner at the end of the road,

I may be carrying some clinking bottles of Bell's whisky, but the only thing I still look out for is Sarah running towards me.

## **A Sub Contract**

### **I had talked to Angie about my friend Frank Marshall as we were lying in bed.**

I also mentioned another Englishman who was supposed to be arriving in Lagos the day after. But this other Englishman was not booked to stay at the seedy Airport Hotel where Angie and I were ensconced.

Oh no, this man was very well connected in British Government circles and so, on the invitation of a Nigerian Government Minister, was booked to stay at an official residence in the better end of Lagos.

And anyone with a nose for an opportunity to cash in was sniffing around as the opportunities provided by the arrival of this particular representative of the British government were endless. Imaginations were being triggered everywhere. And, of course, Donaldson was quick off his mark.

It had started, as always, with a phone call and I had been summoned to Regent Street to meet Donaldson and Jack.

“Mum’s the word, old chap. Don’t ask, there’s a dear fellow. We’re all in this shit and what you don’t know can’t come and bite you in the arse later.”

“But it would be nice to know a bit more. I mean, I heard he was a . . . you know. Tell me more about him,” I found myself asking.

Donaldson had grinned.

Jack remained his usual serious, passive self.

“Ah! The bloody homo. The fucking pansy. I know you like Israeli women and are a big fan of Africans as well, dear fellow, but don’t tell me you’re in to queers as well, old chap. Ha Ha.

“Frank will fill you in once you get to Lagos. Fill you in! Ha Ha.

“So sorry about the choice of words, old boy, but you have to laugh to keep sane. But not only is he a queer but a peer. So, what we have here is a queer peer, old chap. You’ve got to laugh.”

I was, facing the familiar silhouette of Donaldson as he stood, his hands fiddling with something in his trouser pockets, before the open window of the Regent Street office. It was summertime and there was the sound of car and taxi horns outside as they all sat immobile in a traffic jam. There was some sort of official thing going on in London – the Queen or something. Security was everywhere.

“He’s a bit lah de dah!” That was Donaldson’s next description.

“Excuse me? Lah de dah?”

“Homo, old chap. Bit slow on the uptake today, aren’t we? One for the chaps and not the bints. Like your friend, Mohammed what’s it in Tripoli that you once told me about. The one with the funny handshake you met in the park one Friday afternoon after prayers. Got it now, my dear fellow?”

“And he’s a frequent visitor to Africa?” I asked.

“Where there’s a big willy there’s always a little filly.”

“What?”

Jack now looked deeply embarrassed.

“Better be careful, old chap. No direct eye contact, alright? Greedy little sod, from what I know. Gets off with anyone who looks him in the eye. Nice touch in cravats, too. Might take it off in Africa, I suppose, if he gets too hot under the collar. What say you?”

“Good lord!” I said, with much innocence.

“Yes, that’s it. He’s a Lord. House of Lords and all that. Got an inkling now who the blazes we’re talking about?”

A few minutes later and it soon became clear that, in Donaldson’s devious mind, Frank Marshall was the ideal person to be involved here and I was being asked to subcontract out a certain job.

“That’s it, old chap. Just fix the meeting with Frank.

Nothing more than that really. Don’t need to know the sordid, bloody details.”

But as usual, it was not enough for me. I needed far more and, under the circumstances, it seemed a reasonable request.

“It would be useful – just a little more. What’s he done for Christ’s sake?”

“No need to know, dear fellow. Just do your job. Check out the few details we need. Just for the record so to speak. Ask the questions. Make sure you swat up on your artillery and your pharmaceuticals. Impress him – though not too much, if you get my gist.

“You know, old chap, you’ve done this sort of thing before. But think Africa. Think jungle, old chap. Think the dire consequences of widespread mud hut terrorism. Think sweat and grime. Think Mau Mau. Think about the famine and mass starvation that might follow an unauthorised coup. Just think you’re doing your Queen and Country proud, old chap.”

“But the man’s well known – famous in fact.” I said with my usual utter naivety.

“Infamous old chap. Think infamous.”

“But what’s he done?” I repeated, knowing all too well what my persistence would do.

Donaldson finally lost his patience and sighed.

I heard him say, “Ffffff,” beneath his breath as he turned away.

The slightest hint of humour was already gone, to be replaced with his usual bristling anger and impatience. The rustling sound from inside his pockets increased but then stopped altogether. The hand emerged. He turned back, pointing to his nose and the voice became more intense.

“Frank will get the job done, not you. You just line it all up, understood?”

“Exactly what job? What does Frank have to do? Does Frank know more than me?” I asked.

Donaldson’s impatience went up another grade. In fact, he stepped forward and leaned on the desk, his face just a foot away and both hands now back inside his pockets. His voice was now a hiss.

How I hated that bastard’s face.

Even after all these years. I can see it now, as it reddened and his lips glistened with spit.

“Frank knows where he is best off. He just does his job, old chap. You could learn a thing or two from Frank. There’s serious money at stake here.” Then he quickly added, as if he realised he had just made a serious mistake: “Not to say lives of course.”

But I stood my ground, facing him, nose to nose and I pushed Donaldson further, picking up on his mention of money.

“Money? What money? Does Frank get any for whatever it is he’s doing? Do I get any? And, anyway, Frank is a friend of mine. He’s no friend of yours.”

I heard Jack cough and move closer to the door.

Donaldson stood up, exasperated, and walked around behind me, behind the other, spare desk and then back to the window. His black silhouette stood there for a moment and then he exploded.

Frankly, it was as though something had finally burst inside the man. It was as though this particular case was giving him all sorts of private headaches.

“For fuck’s sake, man. If there was an option, we’d take it.

The man’s a national security risk. I told you before, the FBI, SASF, the French, they’re all starting to take notes. He’s a fucking liability. What’s more, he’s an international embarrassment. He’s been messing around in his dandy fashion with everyone from Gadaffi to Lumumba and from Ian Smith and Jomo Kenyatta to Nkomo.

“He’s a political bloody fool but too close to you-know-who to get officially chopped. What’s more, we know he’s started taking money in the form of commissions, which he hasn’t even got the sense to realize is just a little on the side of improper. He seems to think it’s a perk. And what’s more he’s so bloody naïve that he’s started spouting on about it rather too openly and doesn’t understand that, if he’s not careful he’ll get it in the neck from someone sooner or later anyway.”

Donaldson went quieter for a second, breathing deeply, as though trying to summon some patience from somewhere and perhaps also thinking he’d said far too much already. He stared with his back to me down into the traffic jam blocked street below with one hand in his jacket pocket.

My own mind was still full of questions and what Donaldson had already said still wasn’t enough for me. The word assassination had not been used but it was perfectly clear to me that I was being asked to take a part in some sort of plot worthy of Guy Fawkes.

Questions rattled through my head about what Frank was being asked to do.

Did British governments really keep certain parts of the Civil Service in order to occasionally use them for jobs like this? Was this all part of their mandate to govern? Did actions like this involve other countries? America? France? Were things like this done with their tacit approval or was this a purely British problem?

Why not just sack the man, I thought, or was a simple sacking impossible due to knock on effects elsewhere? I had no idea. After all, I was only a simple, small businessman.

Then I remembered I had already witnessed one assassination. Was this to be another?

I had been there when David Reynolds had been removed for reasons that were still very unclear to me. Unlike this new target, Reynolds had been virtually anonymous but, by imitating him, I had already become deeply involved in his death. Was Donaldson ordering me to help in another disappearance? Were Donaldson’s own instructions coming from higher up?

I looked behind me at Jack who I knew had been staring at me. But he looked away and I heard him do something with the door handle.

Then Donaldson turned to face me and I heard my own thoughts being spoken aloud.

“I heard you’ve already done it once, old chap. So, you’re bloody used to it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“You’ve got such a bad memory, Ollie. I heard you were the only one there when that poor chap Reynolds got it in the neck. Remember? God knows what went on there. But I heard you had him shot and then stole his passport.”

He then turned away again.

Behind me, I heard Jack do something more with the door handle and exit.

It clicked shut and I was alone with Donaldson.

“You fucking bastard,” I said and I leaned over his desk, knocking his phone and went for him but he seemed to anticipate it and moved just out of my reach. I was already half way across the desk and about to jump onto it as the phone fell with its bell ringing to the floor. Donaldson took another stride back to the window, turned to face me, put his hand into his jacket pocket.

It came out holding a handgun.

He pointed it straight at my head.

“Calm it, Ollie. Believe me I won’t hesitate to use this fucking thing and David Reynolds will die for the second time.”

I stopped half on and half off of the desk, but there was only one thing on my mind.

Sarah.

What the hell had I got involved with?

I retreated from the desk staring at the gun and Donaldson’s red face. A big lump of white spit had settled on his lower lip. My whole body was trembling with anger and fear.

And it was as though Donaldson was reading my thoughts yet again.

“And if Reynolds gets shot, no one will know about it, Ollie, because he’s already dead and doesn’t really exist. As for fucking Ollie Thomas, it’ll be assumed he’s just flown off somewhere to fuck his African bitch and hide.”

Neither Thomas’s Disease nor my most vivid of nightmares allow me to remember what I did or said after that.

I think I felt just as I do now – a total numbness.

I only recall a vision of Sarah waiting for ever for me to come home. Sarah was the most important thing to me and the only way was to continue until I could, one day, find a way out.

But I still remember Donaldson’s final words: “So, better sooner than later, old chap. You’re going there anyway on your own bloody business, aren’t you? There’s nothing to it. All you have to do is to introduce the pansy to Frank. So, fuck off. Get out of here.”

It was meant for me to know that he was in control.

Donaldson had known that I had no reason to go to Nigeria for my own business. Not just at that moment in time.

A few minutes later I left to find Jack still standing nervously in the corridor at the top of the stairs. Behind the closed door, I heard Donaldson laugh.

I went home in a deep sweat to break the news to Sarah that I was going to Nigeria for a week or so looking for a few new agents.

Instead, I found myself up to my neck in a sordid plot, which I did not understand. But, as usual, once involved, however marginally, there was always a risk of implications if things went wrong and it became another case that Donaldson would remind me of regularly over the coming years. There is no doubt about it. I was his shield. He was deliberately putting me between himself and any future implications.

The man's normal demeanour was one of a scowling, bitter but uncompromising man and rare attempts at laughter which normally only accompanied a lecherous leer towards a woman's breast followed by a coarse joke which only he would laugh at. He rarely, if ever, laughed normally. The laugh from behind that closed door was one I will never forget. It was as though he had cracked a joke.

But Donaldson's jokes were not meant to be funny but to intimidate.

To this day, I remember Donaldson's laugh as like that of a ravenous hyena or one on heat calling for a mate. I once saw this in a David Attenborough film but far more often I saw it in nightmares. In these nightmares, it was a flea-bitten animal with yellowing teeth, a sloping back and with Donaldson's face. It would stand, head lowered, sniffing around a carcass that was my own body left half eaten by African lions.

In my sleep, I would cover my ears and try to deafen the noise of Donaldson's laugh.

But Donaldson's allusion to African women had also got me worried as, until then, I thought this particular experience was a secret only between Angie and me. Sarah and I had, gradually, worked around my quiet, guilty patch and everything was back to normal. But it was at this point that I decided that Sarah knew something about Angie.

Somehow, Donaldson had fed a snippet of something into a chain of Chinese whispers. There really was no end to the bastard's list of ways to upset others by scattering distrust.

I really have no wish even to recall Angie nowadays but she still comes back as though, forty years later, her own life, unlike my own, has stood still.

But Thomas's Disease means that my dreams know no boundaries and, as I have explained before, I am regularly haunted by ghosts, people long since thought to be dead, known to be dead or at least irrelevant. But they seem to return as though deliberately trying to remind me of the parts of my past that I have no wish to recall.

In my mind, Angie still looks and sounds the same.

She still has the same, husky, deep voice that reminds me pathetically of holiday brochures, of hot, white, sand and coconut palms that lean towards a flat blue sea.

These days, I have to force myself to realize that even Angie would be in her seventies by now. Perhaps she is dead.

Perhaps, she has young grandchildren who go to school in Lagos in navy blue shorts and white shirts carrying old-fashioned, brown leather satchels over their shoulders.

Grandchildren who laugh and play and run and kick empty coconuts or Coca Cola cans with bare feet and who smile wide smiles at the world through perfect white teeth that they have inherited from their sensuous grandma.

Perhaps they still laugh because, like all children, they had not yet learned what life holds in store.

And, after my brief involvement, I also dream that perhaps they aren't even black.

Perhaps they are only light brown or even piebald.

Perhaps their grandma, Angie, has already died, of old age.

Perhaps she had died with secrets intact or died whilst being tortured to release her secrets.

Most likely, dreams tell me, Donaldson knew far more than me. Perhaps Donaldson even knew about illegitimate children and where they were.

Do you see the nightmare scenario that can arise through being a sufferer of acute Thomas's Disease and having too much time for thinking and dreaming and drinking?

But there is actually so little time left.

I am now an old man and I am writing this just in case something happens to me.

Fortunately, I have already got a good way through this statement but it is far from complete. There is far more to tell and explain and my fingers and hand are hurting although my typing speed has vastly improved. But my head is aching, too, and there is a pain in my chest.

Perhaps it is, because I know what I am about to write about.

On the other hand, perhaps this is my last sentence.

I think I'll stop a moment for a drink.

## **Medical Report**

**I'm feeling better now and it's heartburn I think** although I thought you only got that by eating. It says nothing on the pack of Rennie's about stomach acid being caused by whisky. My head still hurts but the brain inside it is brilliantly clear.

In fact, my brain is far clearer now than before the drink. My brain is as good now as it was sixty years ago. And other parts of me that you might imagine are now completely defunct also still work. Just dreaming about Angie proves that point.

But it's when I stand before a full-length mirror, that I see the problem.

For that is when I see a naked, depressed old man with poor muscle tone and a smooth, white stomach that restricts the vision of what hangs beneath. There are wrinkles in places where wrinkles should never be. My joints look misshapen and many of them crack and squeak like un-oiled hinges. Hands and wrists that were once permanently tanned and liberally scattered with dark and manly hair are now bare, blue veined and blotched with melanin. My nails are often brittle, broken and yellow and athlete's foot is rife. I have knees that sometimes give out under strain



and they hurt like hell if I stand up from kneeling down to mop the floor. I have a backbone that feels as though it will snap every time I stand up and I have such poor hearing in one ear, that my neck is permanently bent on the downwind side.

After I've finished this section, I'm going to the opticians for new glasses. But I hate the bastards with their pure white, clinical attitudes and fancy machines that convey trust and highly honed medical skills but, in fact, prove nothing more than a dubious commercial shrewdness.

"Would you like to try these on, Mr Thomas?" "How much are they?"

"Two hundred pounds but you get your usual over sixty five's discount."

"Fuck me! I only want to see through them, not look like Sophia Loren. I'll leave it for now, thanks."

My hair used to be thick and black and held in place by Brylcreem and combed into neat partings either on the right or left side depending whether I was Ollie Thomas or David Reynolds. Now there isn't much left to cut but I also hate the fucking barbers who scratch across the thin skin of my skull with their sharp combs.

I now cut it myself but my fingers seem to have lost all their precision. They won't bend, especially when cold.

I recently tried to pick up a coin that I dropped on the floor in the off license but felt like an elderly Calcutta beggar, desperately gathering scattered coins. And all the time my back would be breaking, my knees hurting and my eyes, far from concentrating on the location of the coin, would be trying to see how many other people were watching.

The worse thing is if my bloody neighbour Fred Carrington sees me because the bastard smirks.

My eyes run, constantly. Cold saline flows down my cheeks if I venture out in the cold wind and is one hundred percent guaranteed to find the only unblocked duct in my body. It runs into my nose forcing me to stop to wipe both red eyes and blue nose like a sobbing boy. With a white handkerchief, I look like a bloody Union Jack.

And I often drop my stick. It slides off my arm. I know the blasted thing is going to slide before it slides. But it faces one with yet another dilemma of whether to concentrate on the running mucus or the sliding stick.

When I eventually get to meet my maker, I hope it's not a cold day and the Lord welcomes me with a running nose.

But let me introduce you to Frank, Olga and another Lord.

## **Frank and Olga**

### **As usual I blame myself.**

I was the one who told Donaldson about Frank Marshall.

Frank Marshall was already seriously caught up in quicksand before I knew him but as soon as he became Donaldson's man in Lagos as well, the quicksand was to become like deep shit.

In some respects, Frank was well suited to Donaldson's style because Frank certainly didn't run his business on a strong set of ethical principles even though he was supposed to be in pharmaceuticals.

In fact, Frank Marshall managed a run-down business from an asbestos roofed building in Ikeja employing a small team of ladies in faded, green overalls who poured thick red cough mixture from big drums into small bottles, stuck labels on the bottles and put the bottles into boxes. Frank also made money from deals he negotiated for international pharmaceutical companies.

Frank was a commission agent of the old school.

Frank was the underpaid, dishevelled, sweaty, expatriate side of overpaid pin-striped, eau de Cologne corporate life.

He was there for those who sat in plush, oak-panelled boardrooms with Chinese carpets in Basle, Paris and London.

He was there for those who could then claim legitimately that he was solely responsible for the manner in which the orders they accepted were obtained. Bribery is subcontracted out even more often than murder.

In short, Frank ensured that many of the pharmaceuticals selected for importation by the Ministry of Health into Nigeria were not for the well-being of the nation's poor and sick but for the well-being of the officials who ran the Health Ministry and the directors and shareholders of corporate Switzerland and America. But to stay on the right side of what little law was upheld, he was a mere manager of the business.

Frank was a fixer.

The company chairman, to whom he owed so little, was an ex Minister who had once been in charge of the Nigerian Ministry of Health. It was the ex Minister who did the travelling to London, Basle and New York, wearing his Saville Row suits, staying at the Nigerian Embassy and lunching with the manager of the New Nigeria Bank in Cannon Street.

Meanwhile, poor old Frank stayed entirely in Lagos with occasional trips to exotic spots like Kano, Port Harcourt and Ibadan. He had ventured as far as Ouagadougou once and had also been to Accra several times.

So Frank's international business career had not materialized in quite the way he had foreseen when he had first arrived in Lagos with his bag of samples as an immature young export salesman. But, his appointed role as occasional escort or agent for people he thought represented Her Majesty's Government had given him a sense of importance, however false and however short lived.

Frank's English wife had taken one look at Lagos and left him many years before to return to Maidstone. So, Frank lived with a very dark woman who wore a very recognizable and ornate headscarf like a turban. She spoke a very rare, native dialect, a little French and even less English. But it didn't seem to bother either of them as they communicated mostly through grunts and sign language. Sex is, after all, a fairly similar exercise wherever you go.

She had come from a place we once called Upper Volta and Frank had imported her into Nigeria in exchange for a few crates of cough mixture when he went on a visit to Ouagadougou.

Frank called her Olga as if she was a blonde Russian but this was far from the case. I suspect that Olga was actually the closest Frank could manipulate his tongue to say her real name, which stretched to many long syllables and included strange clicking noises unknown to anyone living outside Olga's village.

But Olga acted as wife and maid and they lived an exotic tropical existence in a fortified concrete villa with a corrugated roof and surrounded by rolls of barbed wire, several grubby Alsatian dogs and an ageing Nigerian ex policeman with a pistol tucked in his belt.

Frank spent the mornings in his factory overseeing quality control and production schedules. He then lunched at the Red Lantern Chinese Restaurant, where he had developed a remarkable resistance to no end of gastric complaints and then spent his evenings at a notorious den of sophistication in Ikeja where he concluded his business deals if he could stay awake long enough.

And just to remind you or to connect things up, it was at one of these high society gatherings at the Pink Coconut, where I met Angie.

On that trip, my first sight of Frank was as he pushed his way through the crowds of jostling, sweating, humanity. As always, he was wearing his stained safari suit, sandals and grey socks.

He was shouting, cursing and waving a rolled newspaper. Frank's arrival had been very timely because the hot and stressed Immigration Officer sat at his high desk in his unnecessarily thick uniform and rows of medals, had been questioning everyone's right to enter Nigeria.

And until Frank arrived it looked as though there might be difficulties with my right to enter the country. My vaccination certificate for Yellow Fever was not in order and this was vital for compliance with the sophisticated bureaucracy of Nigerian Health and Immigration Policy. But Frank's newspaper had done the trick, containing as it did several crumpled Naira notes tucked inside. I remember him tapping the Immigration Officer on the shoulder.

"Here, General, whatever your bloody title is, catch up with the news. Have a looksy at the sports page. Lagos Loonies beat the Kano Crappers. It's all there. It'll make your eyes smart."

I can see Frank now.

Frank often spoke so fast that it did not matter what he said or to whom he said it or whether or not English was their first language. And I have never seen Frank in anything except the same, grubby, beige safari suit. He had long hair in an untidy Beatle style that seemed totally out of place in Nigeria. He had a red, sun burned face and, on this occasion, a burning cigarette cleverly tucked between the same fingers that held the newspaper. His blue eyes had taken on a permanent sparkle from too many evenings in rooms filled with ganja smoke or other narcotics.

But, payment received, my passport was duly stamped. It was shoved towards the edge of the desk for me to collect and Frank's General disappeared behind his high

desk to conceal the newspaper and its contents beneath his chair. Frank had grinned, grabbed my bags and shouted at me to follow.

“Come on. Don’t lose me, for Jesus Christ’s sake. Let’s get out of this fucking hell hole.”

Despite his recent appointment of working for the Crown via Donaldson, Frank was not known for his sophisticated use of Queen’s English. Frank’s company car, too, was also less than sophisticated. It was a rusting Peugeot with sagging seats, the body parts held together by layers of dried, red mud.

Frank only had two real friends.

One was Olga and the other was sat waiting in the car with the engine still running.

Frank’s driver, Smart, was a young, athletic Nigerian who, if opportunities for fulfilment had been available, looked as if he should have tried professional boxing or athletics. Smart was not smart but he was very reliable.

He would do anything Frank asked and would drive for hours without a break, even sitting in the car in the hot sun whilst Frank refreshed himself in the shade of banana trees at roadside beer houses.

“So! Ollie!” Frank shouted above the general melee.

I checked myself by visualizing the navy-blue passport I had just had stamped. Yes, this time I was Oliver Thomas, not David Reynolds. But then, of course, Frank only knew Oliver Thomas.

“That’s what some friends call me,” I said.

“Got a cable to say you’d be coming.”

We clambered into the car and Smart drove off into the traffic.

“Where are you staying, Ollie?”

“Airport Hotel.”

“Luxury. Must be on good expenses.”

The Airport Hotel had never struck me as luxurious but I let it pass.

Fried eggs were the only breakfast at the Airport Hotel.

Sometimes they were the only lunch and the only dinner. It was never boiled eggs and never poached eggs. It was only ever fried eggs. I had queried it one morning.

“Sorry sah. No water.”

It was the obvious explanation and I should have known, after all I had cleaned my teeth in beer earlier.

“How are you doing, Ollie? Business good?”

“Yes. Can’t grumble. Dodging and diving, bit of this and a bit of that, you know.”

I would often speak like that to start although it depended on the person I was with.

Frank was a suitable person for this particular style and I needed to create the early impression that, today, I was not in the business of bothering about too much legitimacy. Frank needed to know that anything would interest me if I had a chance to make a quick and easy buck. And if this meant a bit of under the counter stuff to

get around stuffy government regulations that just got in the way of healthy international trade, frankly I couldn't have cared a fig.

This was often true I have to admit.

I would usually keep my agenda flexible in case something cropped up. At other times, I would revert to my real agenda if it had already been laid out.

But behind whatever façade I created and whatever impression you might get I was, in fact, a complete professional in international trading and export.

There weren't many like me then and there are probably even less nowadays.

"Pharmaceuticals interest you this time?" Frank was doing his own prying into my motives for being there.

"Always," I said.

"To ship home or ship elsewhere?"

The number of pharmaceutical wholesalers in England who would have risked their reputation bringing in medicines that had passed through Frank's factory was going to be limited. But Frank was prying and the questions were already sufficient proof that he was going on what Jack must have told him because Jack and I had discussed pharmaceuticals as a ploy before I left. It was unlikely however that Frank knew anything about Donaldson – yet. Such was the manner in which the man operated I was dropped at the Airport Hotel and I thanked Frank for meeting me, told him I had another meeting early the following morning in Lagos and suggested we continue our chat over lunch. With that, Frank's red mud plastered Peugeot drove off in a cloud of blue smoke with Smart at the wheel.

I had fried eggs, rice and beer for my dinner that night. But next morning after an uncomfortable night spent scratching in a bug infested bed that smelled of stale sweat I took a taxi to a much plusher residence in downtown Lagos for my meeting with the spoilt English heir to half of the Scottish Highlands.

Donaldson's plans – or instructions if I am to grant him some leeway over what might, in this case, have been his own predicament – had been quite clear.

My own predicament if I didn't do things right was also quite clear.

But it was simple enough in that I was merely to introduce a senior British diplomat to Frank Marshall.

This distinguished Civil Servant held an Oxford degree in Ancient Greek but his business training had probably been limited to reading "Teach Yourself International Trade".

Unlike most of us, the man's upbringing meant he was automatically destined for the House of Lords and a type of diplomatic immunity wherever he went or whatever he did.

He had risen through family connections to a role as a sort of government advisor on African affairs although, at the time,

Africa was not regarded as a Foreign Office or a Defence Ministry priority. His only knowledge of Africa appeared to have been as a boy of six living with his parents for a year in Nairobi.

Not content with the thought of one day inheriting a Scottish Castle, the odd commission paid into a Swiss account was starting to take on the innocent legitimacy of normal, day to day expenses to top up his income and he was becoming a liability for diplomatic progress on many fronts. He had started out as a spoiled child. Now, on the frail excuse that Her Majesty's diplomats, unlike small businessmen, needed refreshing after seven-day stints visiting the Third World, he was being spoiled by attending too many cocktail parties, staying at too many hotels on Park Lane and eating at too many places like the Ritz at the expense of others. He was in fact thought to be becoming, or already was, a risk to national security.

Having been mistakenly employed by the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence he was known to have acquired information that was strictly confidential and, also since the age of six, he had been well known for being unable to keep secrets for very long.

He would go to Nairobi, Khartoum and Cairo and then back to London for his refreshment and then find an excuse to go to places like Addis Ababa, staying, of course, at The Hilton Hotel. It is strange I had never met him before, but his itinerary and mine had never coincided and, anyway, his choice of hotel would not have been the same as mine.

### **The Red Lantern**

**On arriving at the Lord's temporary Lagos residence**, I was sure I could smell smoked bacon and toast being cooked. It turned out to be a small, private hotel or guest house built in the colonial style and so a full English breakfast would have been very likely.

Surrounded by a high, concrete wall with metal spikes along the top, it hid amongst a small clump of high coconut palms. But the garden was a sea of red mud because it was morning and dark, thunderclouds had only just finished depositing an inch of rain in the space of half an hour.

When I arrived, the hotel's gardener was sweeping flood water full of floating debris, but his toils were in vain. A foot of water had already breached the front steps and a gritty, red stream was running into the open plan reception area where someone else was sweeping it out of a rear door.

But I knew what to do. I took my shoes off, folded my trousers to my knees and put my briefcase on my head as a shelter from the water still dripping off the palm trees. Suitably attired, I waded towards the building and up to the long wooden reception desk. Above me was a high ceiling with a huge, creaking, wooden fan that slowly turned, hitting the top branches of a tamed coconut palm growing from a clay pot. The muddy, red water ran across the scratched marble floor between low wicker chairs placed against dull, unpolished wooden coffee tables showing round stains of tea and coffee spilt from cups.

It was steamy and hot but, despite the conditions, a waiter hovered with a tray and an off-white cloth draped across his arm ready to serve coffee to a few white guests sat in mud stained suits. A white woman in a light chiffon dress and a wide brimmed hat sat with her long legs crossed, nearest to the clay pot and with a cigarette in a

long holder held between her thumb and first finger. Her feet, fortunately, were on a dry part of the floor, proof that the floor itself was uneven.

I had met her once before at the Embassy, the wife of a diplomat but I couldn't remember exactly who she was. She was not the Ambassador's wife, I felt sure, but she was the sort of longer term resident to be expected in a place like this. The equally unsuitably dressed receptionist, sweating in his black suit and bow tie seemed to be expecting me.

"Yessah. Mr Thomas, is it? You are expected. The Lord is waiting for you sah."

I have never forgotten that greeting.

Ever since then I have wanted my entry into heaven, whenever it came, to be announced like that. The pity is that I never told anyone, not even Sarah.

The Lord was not slow in appearing but I have always hoped that the real Lord, once we met, would avoid the visual image that this one created.

Donaldson's latest assignment minced towards me with his hand outstretched like a peacock on a catwalk and I could not help wondering how someone who apparently spent so much time travelling in Africa and the Middle East could look so anaemic and pristine. He wore pure white slacks and shirt, shiny brown shoes with a matching belt and a white hat, slightly less frilly than that of the diplomat's wife sitting in the other corner. But his main adornment was, as Donaldson predicted, a cravat. This was a long, wide, multi-coloured specimen made of the finest silk, which he swished like the tail of a pedigree filly in season.

"Ah, Mr Thomas? Good morning. I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance. Glad you could make it. Sorry about the weather here. Damned messy at times. But been here before, I expect, have you? If so you will be quite used to it. Damned perspiration. Seems destined to leak from every conceivable orifice, don't you think?"

As advised by Donaldson I tried hard to avoid eye contact but became immediately uncomfortable about the way my knee was being touched. We sat in the opposite corner to the diplomat's wife who kept flapping at flies with a handkerchief, which she held in the hand that was not holding the cigarette and we started with a general discussion about my business. I quickly, deliberately and sneakily dropped in a suggestion of some interest in military supplies to North Africa.

But with no prompting he said: "Yes. I have to say that my confidential discussions in Tripoli suggest that arms get in through Chad anyway. So, whatever we can do to ensure we supply direct will limit their clandestine operations. Keep some control. Don't you agree?"

What, on earth, was this man talking about, I thought.

We had only just met yet he was taking no precautions. He could not possibly have known who I was or how a small import-export business based in Croydon might possibly fit around official Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence policy.

And, at the time, I was probably more of an expert on Libya than anyone in the British Government. I certainly knew all about Chad but it was something I always kept to myself.

Then he said: "Cup of tea? I'm sure we can order some."

He waved at the waiter holding the grubby towel and ordered tea before moving rapidly on.

“So, Mr Thomas. May I call you Oliver? Tell me just a little about the other opportunities you’ve apparently been lining up, besides the military ones, which might benefit from my input and a little official backing and encouragement from Her Majesty’s Government. We so need to keep all our options open, but at all times we wear our desire to help British trade openly on our sleeves.”

I had briefly wondered what to say at this point but was well used to handling inquiries about my business, even when they were often at odds with the other jobs I performed for Donaldson & Co.

What I found myself saying was a figment of my imagination but one founded in such confidence that if challenged to give more detail would not have required me to dig too deeply to appear utterly convincing. It was an acquired skill that had required some good practice. I also knew that Frank would back me up.

“Well, yes. I have some pharmaceutical interests here as well – a small, local operation – an agency, distributorship and some small-scale local manufacture. It is a joint project with Pennex Pharmaceuticals. Their headquarters are based in Kent. Do you know them?”

“Oh Kent, the Garden of England. How lovely,” he pronounced with great delight.

“Yes, well,” I said, moving my leg again, “We need a few high-level government contacts to help win a few contracts. Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia – that sort of area. Your name cropped up.”

“As it would, Oliver.”

With that he gave a toothy smile, I got my knee patted and the cravat swung wildly. But the response was obviously positive and I was encouraged to continue despite the hand now resting more firmly on my knee.

“Well. I wonder,” I said, “would you care to meet the local manager of the plant tomorrow morning? Say ten o’clock?”

He’s a British chap – name of Frank Marshall.”

“Of course, I’d be delighted. Here?”

“Well, I thought you might like to meet him at the plant. It’s out near the airport at Ikeja.”

“What a splendid idea. Ah, here’s the tea.”

And that was all I did face to face with the Lord.

I left shortly afterwards to meet Frank for lunch.

The incentive for Frank, you see, was that he had been promised a commission and other benefits and someone had to make this offer whilst trying to explain the whys and wherefores in more detail. That job was, of course, mine.

As the subcontractor living half way down the mountain I was to subcontract the job down to Frank who lived on the edge of the jungle. My job was to persuade Frank to subcontract it to someone else who was living right in the middle of the jungle.

I did my bit of persuasion on Frank over lunch at the Chinese Red Lantern.



But do you now see how easy it is for those at the very top to deny ultimate responsibility for their instructions?

They sit in offices far removed from the factory floor and only venture out to point towards jobs that need to be done.

Sometimes they even get others to do the pointing and nothing is ever in writing of course. After that, they retreat to their offices once again.

But it was obvious that Frank had already heard something before we met for lunch.

I thought he may have met someone on the commercial staff at the British Embassy.

It was the same man who, apparently, would call at Frank's factory from time to time with other requests.

I learned all this at the Red Lantern by plying Frank this time with gin and tonic. The gin and tonic was poured in and Frank's heart poured out. He got more and more drunk and then more and more emotional.

"You're a good mate, Ollie. You see . . . well, fuck . . ."

Frank had been almost in tears and the embarrassment had been such that I had spent most of the time in the Red Lantern studying the food-stained red flock wallpaper, which is why I remember it.

Frank's south London accent, that he had almost forgotten in favour of Lagos speak, improved all the time, as the gin proved amazingly effective. Quite why I had plied him with drink I don't know, but I had an uncanny urge to find out how Donaldson worked on others and Frank proved to be an excellent case study.

Frank was more used to beer, the local concoctions, and other forms of exotic stimulation, the sort that was inhaled, rather than drunk. His Beatles hair cut was lying down across his sweating forehead, his eyes were red, his tongue was loose and his soul was being hung out to dry. But fortunately, in this state, his speech was slower and much easier to follow.

"See, Ollie, this time the bastard came with an official, bleeding letter from the Embassy stating that all British subsidiaries operating in Nigeria should adopt a code of practice when dealing with the Nigerian Government. Code of bleeding practice! I ask you, mate, what a load of shit!

"Anyway, we are not a subsidiary anymore. Wholly owned Nigerian buying raw materials from the stupid fuckers back home. So much for their commercial savvy, eh? But it was as though the commercial attaché himself was as clean as a whistle and all the rest of us were on the take or bribing officials left right and centre just for the bloody hell of it.

"We all know what they get up to at the Embassy. They can be as corrupt as any in the ranks of pen-pushing bleeders in the Nigerian Ministry of Health for example. If they can make some dash without too much fuss they will. But I was one of the few fucking local Brits they knew who was dealing direct with the local assholes. The rest, particularly those silly sods with their fucking suits and polished shoes passing through on short trips, all go through the Embassy and always seem to know who to see. They seem to know before they even catch the bloody B Cal flight out. They are promised action but that money may need to be placed in certain accounts.

“They aren’t disappointed either. Fuck no. The money disappears from where it is put and they get the contract – a thousand times the size of the dash. It’s the same with all types of business here – telecommunications, roads, civil engineering, water, electricity, medical equipment. You know, Ollie, mate. All those public services, utilities and things that’ll still never fucking work properly even after the next fifty years.”

How right Frank was. He was telling me nothing I didn’t know but I listened nevertheless.

Despite his condition, Frank had vision and was still being realistic.

We all knew it.

Millions of pounds of good Nigerian money, money that would be publicly announced as destined for improvements to the country’s infrastructure. Money that would never flow down to the pockets of the millions who really needed it but that would end up in the pockets of Nigeria’s elite, the military, or in the pockets of international businesses who would never complete their sides of the bargain. Money that would end up in the private bank accounts of diplomats, politicians and other middlemen, men who, if the folks back home ever knew about their extra-curricular activities, would and should have lost their jobs and the hefty pensions that always came later.

This is the sort of money that seeps through cracks in the system and lines the pockets of people such as Donaldson.

And if I had wanted to, I could have lined my own pockets.

If I had I would certainly not be sitting here in Gloucester typing away on this old machine.

“So how does your own Chairman fit into the scheme of things?” I asked Frank.

It was my turn to pry because I was already pretty sure that this was Frank’s weak spot. And I had not yet got to the point of giving Frank the envelope that contained a passport and air ticket from Lagos to London.

Frank sat back in his Red Lantern chair, his eyes flashing beneath the greasy strands of hair.

Meanwhile, Mr Ho the proprietor was fussing around his best customer, clearing the dregs of tinned chicken and sweet corn soup and handing it to his apprentice, a serious Nigerian boy aged about ten who scurried off towards the kitchen dropping spoons and forks all the way.

The red wallpapered walls were splattered with the chicken and sweet corn soup of previous diners.

Frank leaned forward again and downed the last of the gin, the thick slice of orange and a small lump of ice sliding out, down his chin and on to the tablecloth.

“His fucking Excellency, you mean?”

He laughed a drunken, bleary-eyed laugh and then beckoned with his forefinger to come closer.

“Shhh – not so bloody loud, Ollie. Got me by the short and curlys, ain’t he? Know what I bloody mean, mate?”

We stared at one another for a moment. Frank's eyes were moving from focussed, to wandering, to half shut.

"Go on," I said, to encourage him.

Frank looked inside his empty gin glass.

"Get us another, Ollie. It's good to chat. I only get to talk to Olga when she's finished fucking me and we never go into much detail as I'm always too knackered."

I suppose that showed a degree of sensitivity and intelligence remaining inside Frank and I suddenly felt sorry for the man. He couldn't have been more than thirty-five. Yet here he was living with an African woman he couldn't talk to and caught up in some sort of quagmire, unsure what to do and merely succumbing to the inevitable. I knew the feeling and perhaps I had been lucky. But for the grace of better fortune perhaps it might have been me sitting there dribbling onto the table with Mr Ho's special chow mein noodles dangling from my mouth.

But Frank went on with the verbal diarrhoea, probably a precursor to the gastric version that was to come later.

"You mean His Excellency, Doctor fucking Abu Fayinke, one time head of the Ministry of Health, now Chief Executive, puke, puke, of Pennex (Nigeria) Ltd and still the unofficial controller of all the sodding freaks and pen pushers who claim to be working for the good of the nation's health? Also, brother to this chief and that chief, friend to every politician in Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt and Kano? Also, the best mate to all the chiefs in Sokoto and Rivers State, first cousin to General whatsit and every other big tit in the army? Mr Fucking High 'n Mighty? Wined and dined by six of the world's most unethical pharmaceutical companies and on the best of dishonourable terms with all those who run the Nigerian Central Bank. I shouldn't be saying it like that but you've got to live here to fucking know, mate." He stopped and then added: "You mean that Chairman?"

"That sounds like him," I said.

Frank then looked down, sadly at the gin and noodle splattered red paper covering the table.

"You know what else, mate? Even the bloody ex policeman who sits guarding my fucking house allegedly to protect me from every cat burglar and murderer this side of Maiduguri is really there to stop me escaping at dead of night. You think he's more likely to shoot raiders or shoot me?"

Frank now started tugging on a corner of the red paper like a sulking boy. Then he tore a piece off, twisted it expertly between his thumb and first finger to form a small, rigid cone, stuck it up his nose and used it to soak the mucus that was running from each nostril.

Meanwhile, Mr Ho brought the next gin, left it by Frank's elbow and left.

Frank said nothing for a while clearly waiting for the nose plug to work. Eventually, he extricated the sodden twist of paper, tossed it on the table, grabbed the glass and all but downed it in one.

"But why? Can't you just pack up and go?" I asked Frank, whilst looking at the wet plug which had landed near my plate.

"Got me by the short and curlys," Frank repeated. "How?" I asked.

“Not enough money that’s how. You need money to fix things around here. I got as far as checking in at the bloody airport once until someone suddenly decided my passport wasn’t in order. Got into a right fight. Fucking bastards said I didn’t have the right stamp in some place on page thirty-six, no bloody signature on this and that, no bleeding cross on a T somewhere . . .”

“The Embassy – couldn’t they help? It’s their duty to help a British citizen.” I asked although I already knew the answer.

“Don’t make me laugh, Ollie – conniving bleeding swine, they are. Seem to think I don’t play by the local rules so leave me to my own bloody ends. Wash their hands so to speak. I got arrested once for peeing against a wall and was carted off by my shirt collar with a bamboo stick the size of a bloody tree trunk stuck down by belt.

“God forbid. They all bloody do it. You see notices on all the fucking walls in Ikeja. ‘No Urinating Here’ but everyone, including the fucking women, deliberately piss on the notices themselves. Or go shit behind them. But me, oh no! White you see. Got dragged off around the corner, paid my fine from my wallet and walked away. I told the Embassy. They laughed. Shouldn’t piss on walls they said. Fucking useless bastards.”

Frank paused only briefly.

“I found out the bloody Immigration Officer was in the pocket of his Excellency as well. Also, he pays me in Naira. What’s the fucking use of that? I came here with nothing. The wife’s got the house in Maidstone and a new bloke. And . . .” Frank tailed off, tearing off another piece of red paper.

“And?” I prompted him to say more.

“Then there are all the others. Those you met the night we went to the Pink Coconut.”

“Augustus and Co?”

“That’s them. Oh, great friends. Any or all of them could get me arrested at a moment’s notice if they wanted. The only one that’s OK is a girl called Angie. But one is a senior police officer. Know that? I know you thought he’s in Defence but, well, he is sometimes but it’s more like a protection racket.

That’s the way it is. Bloody confusing. They carry all sorts of fictitious business cards. Another one is a lawyer. Know that as well? Another is a brother to Major Big Tit. And one is the fucking manager of the bank where my money goes. They watch me like hawks between using me to act as the authentic, white face that goes with some of their money laundering activities. Scary, innit?”

“And what about Pennex back in England?” I enquired with great seriousness.

“I’m nothing to do with them now. It’s sold I think. Here, we’re wholly owned Nigerian Company but I didn’t know it was happening till it happened. His Excellency’s bright idea.” “So, what do your pals, whom I met that time at the Pink

Coconut, think I’m here for?”

“You think they really care? As long as there might be some swag at the end of it or they thought you might be looking to me to help swing a thing or two. I’m the honourable white face again you see. They smell a nice, big lump of dash somewhere. So, I am the buffer between white hypocrisy and black corruption.”

We both sat back, probably looking and feeling exhausted.

For a moment, Frank looked, temporarily, a little soberer. I chose that moment.

“So, what do you think I’m here for now?” I said because we had still not yet discussed the other business.

Frank looked bemused again.

“Christ knows,” he said. “I just got a message you were coming. No one spoke you understand. Someone left a letter from the Embassy with one of the girls at the factory marked Private and Confidential. It just told me to meet you. Name, flight number, that sort of thing. I assumed it was the fellow from the Embassy from Florence’s description and I smelt another chance to get me out of this fucking hole. But it was signed by a guy called Jack Woodward.

“I knew the name Woodward,” Frank continued. “My dishonourable Chairman has a habit of name dropping sometimes.

He likes to make out he is connected at high level in UK and even mentioned MI6 once. Fucking crap. But the note said ‘we’ God knows who ‘we’ were – understood my predicament and would try to find a way out in return for a few favours.

“The message said to call someone at the Embassy but it wasn’t an Embassy number, I know that.

“I called but it took a whole bloody day to get through. I spoke to the chap who answered the phone. He sounded foreign – not sure where from – not English – Arab possibly – there’s a few Lebanese here. I asked him what was meant by favours. Course, he didn’t know. He knew nothing and, of course, there was no one there to ask. They think I’m mad. So, in the end, I just turned up to meet you.”

Frank leaned forward holding his head as though to stop it spinning around, which it probably was.

“That’s about it,” he concluded forlornly. “Well let me explain,” I said.

I then went on to describe my meeting with the Lord earlier in the morning and that he would be visiting Frank’s plant at ten the next morning.

But then I came to the tricky bit.

“Can you arrange a further visit to your other factory, Frank?”

“What other factory?” Frank asked, suddenly appearing even more sober.

“The one you plan to build to allow for your expansion plans. The one you’d like to build amongst the lush green forest up near Ibadan. Ask Smart to take him there. You don’t need to go. Just say you’ve got another site manager up there.

Smart has friends near Abeokuta doesn’t he?”

There was no need for me to say anything more.

Frank clearly understood what was needed and he fell silent for a while. As I waited for him to think, I beckoned Mr Ho to bring us some coffee.

The chipped cups and saucers arrived and for a while we sipped the coffee in yet more silence although I could sense Frank was tempted to drink his direct from the saucer which was already half full anyway.

Finally, Frank said, "Mmmm."

Taking this as understanding, I said, "So, do you want to know the pay-off?"

"That would be very nice." Frank said it without looking up from his saucer, which had parted company from the cup and now sat on the edge of the table ready to fall off.

Suddenly he sounded extremely polite but perhaps he was at the end of his tether. He then looked up and tried grinning, although the result was not a pleasant sight.

"Want to know what I've got in my case if you agree?"

"That would be nice as well," Frank replied.

I bent down to my briefcase and, at last, produced the brown envelope.

"Jack Woodward gave me this for you. In my opinion, you'll need to get an urgent haircut and a new suit or something to look like the photo or you might get recognized by your Immigration friends. But, in there, is your chance."

Frank stared at the envelope.

"I was told to give you this. It's a British passport with correct stamps and everything else you'll need, or so I'm led to understand, and an air ticket issued in the name on the passport. It's all in order. You just turn up at the scheduled hour. Fly out of Kano so you don't meet your Immigration Officer friend. Call Jack on arrival in London and he'll sort you out with some more money as well."

"OK," said Frank. "So all it means is that Lord Fancy Pants needs to get permanently lost, is that it? But I don't do anything and you don't do anything."

Frank had said it aloud.

It didn't sound nice like that but we were both pretty much in the same sort of shit.

"That sums it up," I shrugged, but with a nasty picture of Donaldson in my mind.

"Permanently lost" was also one of Donaldson's favourite expressions. It was used to describe the fate of anything that was no longer required, from a piece of paper to a human being and I remember how he had put it to me as he stood, silhouetted against the window.

"Just think of it as another German or a bloody Jap old chap. The enemy, you know. You probably shot down one or two of the bastards in your time. Never thought of it twice afterwards, did you? Did your job for Mr Churchill and that was it. Hey presto, back in the cockpit and on to the next one.

And, on this occasion, you don't even have to pull a trigger."

Now it was to be Frank who had to organize the details.

But even Frank was to be removed from the actual task.

Surprisingly, Frank had seemed aware that such a job might come his way.

Perhaps Jack had already pre-warned him of a need to pay for his release from his prison. Perhaps Frank had already done something similar so was used to it.

But our final minutes in the Red Lantern were spent in agreeing that Smart might be just the man to carry out the deed.

In fact, Smart turned out to have all the attributes for the job.

From what I heard later, once the honourable Lord had been introduced to Smart, Frank's athletic driver, deliberately dressed, for the first time in his life, in a new pair of tight, white slacks, red socks and a royal blue, open necked silk shirt the battle was half won. Smart looked really smart for the first time and even Frank had made an effort and worn a cleaner safari suit.

And so it was that the Lord went to inspect a non-existent pharmaceutical factory the following afternoon.

He was never seen again, having displayed none of the skills required for a miraculous resurrection of the sort the other Lord specialized in.

Smart had looked and behaved smart for just one day. There were some-short term diplomatic difficulties between

Nigeria and London when it appeared that the Nigerian authorities were not exactly falling over themselves to find out what had happened to the son of a diplomat and ex politician. Perhaps it was an unfortunate bush incident, after all several known criminals and bandits operated in the area. It was also perhaps a fortunate coincidence that two French businessmen had disappeared just a few weeks previously. One had been found naked and murdered on a patch of wasteland near the airport.

The other had disappeared without trace.

And Donaldson had found a way of ensuring that a few well-placed suggestions as to what the man, with his particular habits, may have been up to, soon laid the story to rest. One Sunday newspaper had a field day on speculation and even the extended family of the Lord in Scotland shut up for the embarrassment that might have occurred.

But guilt over my own contribution has never been laid to rest because Frank . . . well.

Poor Frank.

To this day, I am not certain what happened.

But Frank never made it to Gatwick airport. Something went drastically wrong because he was picked up at Kano airport with his false passport and ticket and he, too, disappeared. And the next time I went to Lagos, this time as David Reynolds, Pennex (Nigeria) Ltd wasn't there.

When I crept around one night to look it was just an empty, boarded up factory surrounded by barbed wire. Someone had even stolen the asbestos roof. Frank's concrete house had also been treated in the same way. Frank, too, seemed to have been obliterated. No one knew where he was or where Olga was.

Embassy staff just shrugged and said they had assumed he had returned to England.

Jack also shrugged and said he was mystified and that Frank's unclaimed expenses were still showing in the accounts.

Donaldson would say nothing specific but he never lost an opportunity to use Frank's and the Lord's disappearance to his own advantage.

"I heard they're still looking into the Lord's disappearance, Ollie."

The man was always called "The Lord". There was never a name or an official title.

At times the poor man was mentioned in the same way as one might recall a sick dog that had had to be put down. At other times, though, Donaldson would infer that high-level investigations were still going on, that scapegoats were being sought and that arrests might be on the cards. And at those times he would look at me as though I was the sacrificial lamb, tethered and ready to be offered up if there was ever a necessity to save the skin of himself or others.

The only one person I could find to blame was the one who had handed Frank his passport to freedom at the Red Lantern Chinese Restaurant – myself.

But my discussion with Frank at the Red Lantern had continued well beyond the handing over of that brown envelope.

As usual, one thing led to another. Frank and I opened a fresh bottle of gin after the coffee and Frank's revelations about money laundering Nigerian style were an eye-opening experience. As I've said, one thing always led to another.

Shortly afterwards I was able to put Frank's information to very good use.

## **Gathering Evidence**

**"Will o' the lisp, more like, ha!"**

Donaldson once tried to make a joke about my good friend William Akinbiyi. I didn't like Donaldson insulting my friends.

William had a pronounced lisp, which Donaldson, after meeting him for the first time in London, found amusing. We were back in his Regent Street office.

"So, that's your black friend, Will, is it? I liked his mithing ethith and his yeth, thir, no thir, free bag fool, thir."

"William's an honest man, unlike some I could name," I said to Donaldson.

Donaldson had already drunk beer and several glasses of wine and was in a bad mood. He turned to face me.

"And what the bloody hell are you implying, now?" he shouted.

I didn't reply but continued to sit in the chair on the other side of Donaldson's desk, twiddling with my fountain pen and staring at the floor between my legs. My own anger was welling up inside. The bastard's silhouette moved from the window. He grasped the back of his swivel, leather chair, turned it around, sat in it and then swung back to face me from his side of the desk. His face was flushed as if silence from an accuser was getting to him.

"For fuck sake. The whole bloody place is awash with corruption. Top to bloody bottom. The only way to get to the bottom of it is to chance your arm a bit."



It was one of those occasions when Donaldson tried to turn the suggestion around to imply that he was the innocent party.

In other words, to beat them you needed to join them.

But then, still sitting staring at the carpet between my legs and unable to look Donaldson in the face I asked him the other question that had been troubling me since he had asked to meet my friend William with a problem concerning Nigeria.

“That might be so, but what the bloody hell has this got to do with Her Majesty’s Government? If anything, it’s the problem of the Nigerian government not ours.”

This was just the sort of question Donaldson disliked. There was a moment’s silence before he exploded again.

“Christ’s sake, man. How many times have I got to say it? Instructions are instructions, understood? Just get out there and get to the bottom of it.”

“What bloody instructions?” I asked, “Whose instructions? You think I don’t know what you get up to Major?”

I was pushing it, still not wanting to directly accuse him of manipulating things for his own financial gain because I didn’t yet have the evidence. But he knew what I was getting at.

“Instructions are to be obeyed, otherwise shit hits the fan,” he replied, clearly still trying to play the innocent one.

I tried to keep calm, speaking slowly but firmly. But I was already mad about things that Donaldson had said during lunch with William.

“Fuck you!” I said, “No. I’ve already told you. I’ve got several visitors coming over in the next couple of weeks on business – my Angolan agent is coming, then I’ve got a Tunisian chap. I dislike letting people down and . . .”

But I hadn’t been allowed to finish, because Donaldson’s chair creaked as he suddenly leapt up and leaned over the desk towards me. One of his big hands clamped on to some paper, crumpling it still further. The other slid across the polished surface knocking the black telephone, which gave a sharp ring of discomfort at being hit.

Jack, who had been cowering near the door as usual, jumped.

“Go now.” Donaldson had shouted. “Not next month, not next week, A-S-A-P, got it? This is fucking urgent. Cancel the bloody Angolan. Postpone the fucking Tunisian. Leave the bloody country on the next available bloody flight. This is the best chance we’ve had for months. It cannot be delayed, do you understand? It is imperative we nip it in the bud.”

A few more, well-worn phrases poured out along with the spittle from Donaldson’s thick lips, but it was the intense anger and desperation that unnerved me. It was as though Donaldson’s personal livelihood depended on it and as though he himself was under enormous pressure to act.

But, as usual, he finished his tirade with a direct threat. The Frank job had only just passed and memories of Donaldson’s threats made with the gun pointing at me were still very fresh.

Slowly sinking back into his chair, he swung it around to face the window again and fell quiet. Then he took a deep breath and spoke in short sentences in a surprisingly quiet voice as though trying to control his impatience and anger. He was still facing the window.

“You know, Ollie, old chap, once you’re embroiled it’s difficult to pull out without all sorts of complications setting in. Government doesn’t like it. Always looking for a scapegoat to save face. I’ve seen it before. They watch you like a hawk. Got to stay one step ahead. Wait for them to lose their jobs. Blasted civil servants always linger though. Asking questions, tipping off Ministers. Don’t know what it’s like at the sharp end. Comfy offices, good pensions. Bloody paper shufflers.”

I was not clear exactly what he was trying to say as I already thought he was one of those paper shufflers with a good pension, albeit enhanced by income from extra-curricular activities. But he then swung around again and leaned back. Again, he spoke in those strange, short and incomplete sentences.

“You’re a man who likes a bit of spice in his life, Ollie. Never seen you as a bloody paper shuffling civil servant. Like the cut and thrust. Bit of a loner. Not one to sit behind a desk all day. Like me in a way. Need the excitement. But once you’re in it, you’re in it. No way back. Need to make a living. Save for the future. Got a wife and family to think about, but ideal chap for these sorts of jobs. But there’s a lot at stake here old man. We are – all of us – up to our necks in shit. Marked men, one way or another. Step out of line and your fucking throat’s cut. We’re all pushed and leaned on from somewhere. I’m leaned on. You’re leaned on. But the pushing and leaning has to stop somewhere, Ollie.”

Donaldson had paused, perhaps for effect before continuing.

“But you, old chap, are bottom of the scrum, so to speak. Who the fuck do you lean on?”

I knew Donaldson was watching me although I was still staring at the floor. But I was seeing Donaldson, yet again, for the man he was. I looked up to see him staring, unblinking. Jack was coughing nervously in the corner.

I shouted back at him.

“You know who I lean on, you bastard – my wife. But I don’t lean on her in the way you lean on me. I rely on her for a touch of sanity. There’s a clear difference – not that you’d understand it. She is the one bit of common sense left around here. Perhaps if you were sufficiently human to have someone yourself, you’d start to understand, you bastard.”

Donaldson stared, his face reddening all the while and his lower lip trembling. It was as though a nerve had been touched.

He then took another deep breath.

“Then you know what to do, old chap. Go out there for her fucking sake.”

And with that, Donaldson got up and went to the window to stare down into the street below. But it still wasn’t enough for me.

“And what if I don’t go?”

Donaldson continued to stare down into the Regent Street traffic.

“Then she’d soon get to know about the shit you’re involved in, old chap. What’s more, she’d get to learn a hell of a lot more if, one day, you failed to make it back in one piece.”

He stopped, apparently waiting for things to sink in again.

But I was by then hardened to this sort of comment.

We had been here many times before and I just sat there thinking.

Donaldson was being driven by personal gain but it was taking me far too long to piece together the evidence.

I glanced over at Jack who had clearly been watching the scene. But he averted his eyes.

Jack never had the look or manner of a sophisticated crook.

He appeared to be a lackey, up to his eyeballs in the shit as well. And did he really understand or have the balls to realize what Donaldson was up to?

I wasn’t sure. I stared at him.

As far as I knew, Jack never ever went to the Whitehall office.

He seemed to operate loosely through Regent Street without an office, desk or even a chair. He would stand in Donaldson’s office as though he had just wandered in and was about to wander out again. But then Jack was a yes man as I knew.

But I, at least, was starting to see things in a different and perhaps more accurate light. It was as though the shadows that the new light cast threw a clearer picture on the truth. Jack reminded me of a show I had watched in Singapore where stiff, unmoving, Chinese puppets made from flat, lifeless cardboard held on sticks were, once reflected from behind, brought to life as moving beings with changing shapes and characters. If you had the patience to follow it and could tolerate the tinkling music coming from a cheap, wooden xylophone a story slowly unfolded.

I thought about the hundred or more assignments I had been given by both Jack and Donaldson over the years.

Some could be considered legitimate in that they may, I suppose, have been of use to British Intelligence. Perhaps these had been requested and sanctioned from higher up.

Others, however, were more akin to commercial investigations like industrial espionage. These might have been of more use to bigger businesses or other organizations that could find ways to use what I found out or even sell it on. But approved by Government? It was unlikely. Donaldson had always tried to make these latter assignments smell a little better by a touch of perfume from a bottle marked “best interests”.

This fresh proposal that Donaldson was so worked up about clearly fell into the latter category but he was so visibly stressed that it looked personal.

So, that’s why I was pushing him. I was trying to make him feel so uncomfortable that he cracked and so shed some light on his motives. But Donaldson was made of granite as hard as that used to construct his office in that tenement block in Edinburgh.

It seemed to me that Donaldson was somehow behind this unfolding Nigerian drama that was to involve William Akinbiyi, just as he had been behind the Frank affair and probably the Libyan-Irish affair.

A silence had descended but I could hear Donaldson breathing heavily.

I looked at the quivering Jack Woodward and shook my head at him trying to provoke him into doing or saying something.

“So, what do you think, Jack?” I said and added, after a calculated pause, “Old boy, dear fellow”.

I was mocking Donaldson who shot me a look but said nothing.

Then he turned to Jack with a look that was enough to turn a bottle of milk sour. Jack was expected to say something. Jack was there to back up Donaldson, say the right thing, lock the office door whenever necessary, smooth things out, calm things down and gently persuade me to go along with things. He was there to say yes, yes and yes again.

To my great surprise, Jack opened his mouth.

“It needs someone with commercial contacts, Ollie. Not the usual government or diplomatic ones. There’s a lot of it going on.”

He then shut up and looked at Donaldson who was still staring at him with an expression that suggested that this was a fair start but not enough. I could see what Donaldson was thinking. “Keep going you stupid fucker. Give him more. And if you don’t help me out here, God help you as well, you pathetic bastard.”

Jack clearly saw a problem and tried again, stroking his chin.

“Yes, a lot going on.”

It was laughable. God knows what Donaldson thought.

What Jack meant, of course, was that there was a lot of bribery and corruption going on but no one needed a small-time office manager and yes man to tell us that.

But Jack was, you see, doing his imitation of a Charles Dickens character. In my mind, I often compared him to Uriah Heap, a character you may recall that was noted for cloying humility, obsequiousness, and insincerity. Jack was similar although instead of making reference to his “umbleness” like Uriah Heap, Jack referred to his, and everyone else’s sense of “duty”.

Uriah Heap wrung his hands but Jack’s particularly nauseous side was a sort of sickening fawning accompanied by the stroking of his smooth chin.

Jack clearly never grew out of this mannerism as he demonstrated when we met at the Cumberland many years later and asked about Sarah.

But, yes, Jack was right about a lot of things going on in Nigeria.

These sorts of things had been going on for centuries and, as far as I know, still go on.

But Donaldson had clearly had enough. “You fucking sort this or . . .”

He was pointing a fat finger directly at Jack and it was the first time I’d seen this.

“If it’s not sorted in ten minutes all fucking hell . . .” He got up and went out, slamming the door.

He didn’t go far though.

In the brief silence that followed and while Jack and I looked at one another, I heard a match being struck outside the door. Donaldson was having a smoke.

But he was unusually stressed.

I sat and stared at the floor again waiting to see what Jack might do or say. I planned to say nothing. This time it was Jack’s turn.

He moved a few feet and came roughly where I could see him out of the corner of my eye but then reverted to his Uriah Heap character. This time it was the bullshitting version.

“You are the best, Ollie – the one D trusts. How’s the Nigerian business? Going well I hope.” Jack was probably wringing his scrawny pale hands.

“I haven’t been back recently,” I said. “What happened to Frank rather put me off.”

“Ah, but there’s commission in this one, I believe.”

I turned to face him and found he was not wringing his hands but wiping his chin and looking at me as if I always went weak at the knees at the thought of money.

“And why the bloody hell would Nigeria want hardware?”

I asked, meaning military supplies but knowing full well that this particular need was highly unlikely. But I was helping Jack out of his predicament.

“It’s not that. It’s to do with aid money, apparently. It sounds complicated to me but D knows much more.”

“Aid money?”

“Apparently, it’s been happening a lot lately. Money earmarked for agricultural projects, schools and that sort of thing. But it goes astray. Finds its way into the Central Bank, then, hey presto! – gone!”

With that Jack ran both hands across his chin and then his cheek and forehead as though the mention of the subject was giving him a hot flush. Then he held both hands up like a magician who had just made a white rabbit disappear.

“D knows a lot more,” he said without adding any more value to what he had already said.

Of course, D knew more.

D was the instigator probably. D was the mastermind. D ran a whole division of the Mafia.

But I was astute enough to need to know details of my remuneration.

“And how will our mutual friend, D, work out my commission if ever we found a way to stop it. Ten percent of a million pounds’ aid package seems interesting. But ten percent of a stolen Sunday morning church collection doesn’t sound like much.”

There was a pause.

Jack was never that quick when it came to mathematics.

“Yes, well. I see. I hadn’t thought about that. You would need to speak to D.”

Jack would never have made a good businessman. But he was good at ensuring the availability of cups of tea. Jack was like Mohammed who cleared the parrot’s droppings and he was brilliant at being the conveyor of bad news wrapped up in auras of uncertainty and naive innocence.

And then, as if to demonstrate his commercial prowess he said: “I’m not sure D wants it stopped. Apparently, it needs to be redirected.”

Ah! I thought. Now we’re getting somewhere. Perhaps Jack had made a mistake and was now revealing secrets. I could see it now. This was not a plan to track money and make sure it didn’t get into wrong hands. This was probably an attempt to track money and then launder it or a crude plan to move it

directly into private pockets, probably Donaldson’s.

“I see,” I said. I was tempted to rub my own chin but didn’t.

But it was as if Jack was so dim that he couldn’t see what was going on under his own nose, though, perhaps, he was temporarily overcome by the power of sitting in Donaldson’s chair because he had moved around to face me on the other side of Donaldson’s desk and sat down.

There was a few minutes’ silence. Donaldson could still be heard outside.

But Jack had given me more reasons for suspicion and I was intrigued.

“OK,” I said. “But I need to understand more.”

Jack went to the door, spoke to Donaldson and he returned still puffing on his cigarette.

It seemed that around two million dollars was lying in a Swiss bank account, destined to fund the purchase of medical equipment for several small, rural health clinics in Nigeria.

Whether this was an accumulation of charity donations or not I didn’t pursue.

It certainly didn’t sound plausible but then all jobs coming from the Regent Street office looked dubious.

But Donaldson was particularly wound up about this one as though there was a lot at stake and he was worried about losing something substantial.

I smelled a rat somewhere. I knew I was being used but decided it might help prove my case against the man and if I could find a way to screw things up for him good and proper then I needed to seize it.

I agreed to help saying I needed a lot more information as soon as possible and left.

I contacted William to say I was flying to Nigeria and wanted to see him, booked a ticket and met up with Donaldson and Jack again the day before I was due to fly to check if everything was still in place.

Jack handed me a small buff folder.

“The bank details are in the file, Ollie.”

“Thanks. So, my suggested plan of action is still on?”

“Yes,” said Donaldson.

“Nothing changed?”

“No,” said Donaldson.

“And I receive one per cent?”

“Yes,” said Donaldson and then added, “I met a chap from the Nigerian High Commission. I told him you would be helping out.”

“You did what?” I was shocked that he’d already broken my cover so to speak.

“Don’t fret. Trust him.”

Donaldson rarely used the word trust. Trust wasn’t something he understood and he always found difficulty saying the word. He rolled the “r” like a Scotsman and missed the last “t”, so that it sounded like the word truss.

Trussed up was probably what he meant anyway.

“What chap from the High Commission?”

Donaldson tapped his nose, “Need to know basis old chap.

No need to worry, it’s all sorted. Relax.”

I suspect that, by telling me not to worry and to relax, Donaldson was really telling himself.

I saw something in his eye that meant he was now far less stressed.

Donaldson had fixed something but I didn’t yet know what.

## William

**This time on my arrival in Lagos, there was no Frank** to meet me and take me to the Airport Hotel in Ikeja.

But as usual, once I’d made my own way to it, there was no telephone, the electricity was off and the water was of the brown drips variety.

I doubt if it has changed much during the last forty years but I ate a dinner of fried eggs and rice, which I admit was as good as anything served earlier on the plane. And then, as night descended, I walked the short distance up the red and dusty road to the club, the sound of drums and saxophones increasing as I got closer.

And, mixed with the sticky, humid, air, was the usual Lagos smell – dust, beer and stale sweat. I actually like it and, for a while, I forgot about Donaldson and why I was there.

The Pink Coconut club was largely a tin shack open to the air and mostly for the slightly better off locals. But as one of the few, or only, white faces there I found myself, as usual, surrounded by ten or more girls standing, waiting and chattering outside the entrance waiting to be taken in. Then, as usual, I ran the gauntlet of the men in charge and was asked to pay ten times the normal entrance fee.

But one of the most persistent girls held onto me with her sticky hands and escorted me inside, where we found a wobbling, metal table and hard metal chair in the dark shadows, somewhere under the corrugated canopy. She ordered me a beer and for half an hour I sat there, sipping cool beer, soaking up the atmosphere and listening

to the loud and throbbing music that blended jazz and blues with a unique West African sound.

And while I sat, I knew eyes were looking in my direction from the darkness. It was normal but I never felt intimidated. Whispering something to the girl sitting alongside to make her laugh would always break the ice. I called to one of the other group of girls who were still lurking in the shadows behind and cracked another silly joke to make them laugh. I bought some more beers, shared them amongst the girls and then sat back while the band played on under dim spotlights and as the flying ants, mosquitoes, moths and bats flitted around.

That night I had not had to wait long before William Akinbiyi turned up.

It was past eleven and I was on my third beer but I heard his characteristic, loud voice as he approached through the shadows behind. It was a voice that broke through the music. "Yeth. You mutht have theen him. You thaw him path thith way?"

I glanced around and the girl sat by me, helping me drink my beer with her hand on my thigh looked behind too.

"Ah. Yeth man. No worry. I thee him, now."

William's gleaming white teeth were the first sight to emerge from the darkness.

"Hey, Mr Thomath – Ollie, my man," he said pushing his way through from twenty yards away, "Glad to thee you.

Making yourthelf at home, I thee."

Then the tall figure of William appeared, holding out his big hot hands.

William's greetings were always the same. One large, sweaty hand would grasp mine. The other would be slapped hard around my shoulders. He scraped up a chair in the dry dust opposite and sat down.

"Hey, haff girlfriend already. Very nithe."

The girl laughed and got up. "You wanna beer?" she asked William.

"Tuthka."

William slapped her as she squeezed by and the hand stayed there briefly, a finger easing its way under her bottom.

She shrieked, wriggled and moved away to get his bottle of Kenyan Tusker.

"So. Lagoth again, Ollie, my man?"

"Nice to be back William," I replied.

William Akinbiyi was one of my many business contacts.

He was an importer of farm tractors and other agricultural equipment and had taken over the business from his father who had died in a farming accident while William was studying at University in England. We first made contact when I was looking for distributors for tractor spares and I met him at the back of a concrete-block house in Ibadan.

"Yeth. I can thell one hundred a year with all thpare parth. We thervith tractors all over Nigeria from Lagoth to Kano, from Maiduguri to Calabar. No problem."



Confidence oozed along with the glistening sweat from every pore of William's body and he had used his English University education to impress all those with lesser qualifications.

These included a wide spectrum of local chiefs and politicians from crooked Christians in the south to money grabbing Moslems in the north. As such William was well placed to know a thing or two about how to manipulate the wretched system that had evolved.

But William had his honourable side.

Despite his size, his speech defect and his occasionally coarse behaviour he was likeable. The hard, extrovert layer was a form of protection because, beneath that hard, outer crust was a softer layer. He believed in fairness, respect for others and that you took as much as you could – but only by hard work or by being better than the others.

But it was the more visible, coarser streak that gave him an edge of respect from those in the more dubious quarters. They did not possess the sensitivity to recognize his deeper, nicer side. They thought that he was, like them, mean and selfish in all his dealings. They thought, too, that his respect for others was limited, like theirs, to those who could be snuggled up to, for material gain.

That hour with William was spent in drinking and listening to music but the next morning, after my breakfast of more fried eggs, he came to the hotel and we sat in the shade offered by some wooden scaffolding to discuss how to deal with the latest assignment set by Donaldson.

I told him exactly what Donaldson had told me – that large sums of money collected by charitable donations was going astray rather too often than made sense and that we were going to try to put a spanner in the works if possible.

I didn't tell William that I rarely believed a word Donaldson said because that meant telling him about my experiences of the last twenty years.

But for William poor people who gave to charity had no right to see their hard-earned cash being siphoned off into the pockets of the rich and those with know-how and influence. So it was not difficult to persuade William to ask a few questions and dig around a bit in banks and other places in Lagos.

We brainstormed a few well-placed villains likely to be behind it all and William came up with a very likely candidate. It proved to be spot on and what's more William knew where he lived and had a way to contact him.

I left him to do his further digging and I went off to see another of my business contacts to see if I could get an order to cover the cost of my trip. Two days later, we had devised a rough plan and were off on our mission.

We took a mid-morning internal Nigerian airways flight and by afternoon were bouncing along a red, dirt track in a hired car with the sun flickering between rows of banana trees on either side.

The car was swerving to avoid potholes filled with red, muddy water and William was driving with his sunglasses on, his seat on the farthest adjustment backwards and with one hand on the steering wheel and the other lying across the back of my seat behind my neck.

“Long way but muth get there before dak, Ollie, my man. Not eathy to fine thith plathe.”

Throughout the ride, we went over the plan as best we could although we knew we had to be prepared to change things to suit the rules of their game. I ended up telling William that Donaldson had said he was the bee’s knees.

“Bee’th knee’th, Ollie? What the fuck is that? I ain’t no little bumble bee. I’m a wothp with a thting and yellow and black thtwipes. Ha ha.”

Eventually, William stopped the Peugeot that was, by now, covered in red dust from roof to doorsills and we walked towards a big, concrete house along a muddy track somewhere in Calabar.

“Thith ith the plathe, man.”

Later, in the same house, I sat around a table with William and another Nigerian man in cumbersome ethnic dress of white and gold. A short, fat lady, presumably a wife, in a long colorful dress served up a meal of spicy fish soup and mashed yams as a bottle of Black and White whisky circulated.

Much later, William and I groped our way back down the dark track to William’s car and headed off, slightly the worse for wear, to find somewhere to stay for the night. And on the way, we chatted again.

“You thee, Ollie. There ith a lot of money going athtray. Millions.”

It was true and a simple plan for transferring the two million US dollars destined for health clinics across the whole of Nigeria had been made very clear over the fish soup and pounded yams. William’s digging and intuition had proved invaluable.

Our host for dinner had, only a year or so before, been the Minister charged with delivering the state’s health care.

But the one-time Doctor and student from a British medical school who had risen to such heights had, suddenly, found himself to be missing a friend or two and so was out of a job again. Having reached the heights, the only way now was in a downward direction and so he was looking for some income. He already had one or two accomplices but what he really needed was a legitimate company to bounce the deal off and move the funds somewhere.

That the one-time Minister seemed to trust William and me to help was, undoubtedly, down to Donaldson having said something to the Nigerian High Commission because the subject cropped up as we were emptying the bottle of whisky. “So, we are in good company, Mr Thomas. The wheels are well oiled so to speak. But it’s all done and dusted so to speak.”

And then the man had gone on a long and tortuous explanation of why the medical equipment wasn’t really needed anymore now and that there was a far better use that could be made of the allocated funding if it was transferred elsewhere for other projects.

It was all the usual hypocritical nonsense and I think I probably dozed off or focused on removing hundreds of needle-like fish bones from the soup and analyzing the other strange ingredients.

I remember our host describing how he had recently joined other high-powered dignitaries in visits to local hospitals and schools, all desperate for funds and, for

good measure, speeches had been given about the evil ways of international big businesses that drained the country's limited resources on needless infrastructure projects that always failed to deliver. And the press who followed in droves had been encouraged to take many photos of poverty and terrible living conditions.

Mostly they had been courted for votes, of course.

I deliberately woke myself up as we arrived at the crunch point.

He was saying: "We'll soon find a far better use for the funds. But it's the bureaucracy you understand. It takes so long to get the funding in place and then we have to line up all the medical equipment. By then the need has gone."

"So is the equipment already ready and waiting to be shipped," I asked noticing that William still had his eyes shut.

"Of course," he said as though I should have known. "And, of course, it is already paid for. We just need to find a way to release the allocated funds to use for other humanitarian projects. This is where you come in."

He passed the bottle to me once again and I filled my glass.

Then I hit William with the bottle to wake him up but his head stayed, resting on his chest.

"Yes," he said. "Your company will receive a number of Letters of Credit to cover the shipment. The total amount will be around two million dollars. The equipment is already paid for and waiting to be shipped. So, you don't have to buy it.

That would be a real complication and we would not want to put you to so much inconvenience. Then you will receive the shipping documents. You present them to the bank as usual and, under the terms of the credit, the funds will be paid into the Swiss Bank . . ."

My ears perked up. This was why I was wide awake.

He finished, ". . . and that's it. Simple! No problem!"

I jumped. "I would prefer that the money is paid direct to Thomas Import Export so we can deduct our charges first," I said. "Then we'll transfer the balance."

"Oh no, there has to be some trust here. But your percentage will be transferred immediately."

I was expecting it. It was the first sign that the plan I'd put to Donaldson had changed.

"OK," I thought, "I wasn't expecting to make anything, although one percent for my troubles might have been nice."

The question now was whether the rest of the plan would unravel. That plan had been that I would hang onto the whole two million dollars while the scam was reported to the Government and the charity concerned. The authorities were then supposed to pounce.

Donaldson's job, as a servant of the Crown working for British Intelligence, the Fraud Squad, Interpol or anyone else that might be interested, was to arrange the pounce.

William had missed all of this but suddenly woke up with a grunt.

We left soon after that and groped our way in the dark through the bushes to find the car. Once in the driving seat, William fully woke up.

He was still speaking as he drove us around the town looking for somewhere to stay.

“Nithe man, Oliver. Good food. Very fat you thee. Big money. Big idea. Well connected with all them high-grade politician around Calabar. He was Minithter of Health one time in the patht. Knowth all them big chief in Lagos too. Have big farm ath well. Told you already about that. Many people taking big dash to keep quiet. Travel a lot ath well. London, Thwitterland, U Eth A. Well known by High Commithun in London. Belong executive club with British Caledonian and Thwith Air. Friend of Thentral bank and ethpethially New Nigeria Bank. Talk to all them foreign politician too. Yeth, he very fat man. “

William suddenly braked and the car skidded to a stop and I thought he had spotted a place for us to stay but, instead, he looked straight at me and added: “He altho fucking big bathtard Ollie.”

The final, concluding sentence made us both chuckle.

“What to do then, William?”

“Good quethtion. Ha ha.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him, that my worst fears were coming true.

“I think we just keep to plan A, William. What do you think?” “Yeth, Ollie. Plan A is the bee’th kneeth, Ha ha.”

Two days later and I was home.

Three weeks later I arrived at the office to find Beaty with what looked like a smile on her face. A Beaty smile was a very rare sight.

“Oh, Mr Thomas. Such good news. I’ve just opened the post. We’ve got six letters of credit for the medical equipment contract you mentioned. All confirmed. I can hardly believe it!”

Beaty must have seen the look on my face which was hardly one of ecstasy.

I felt so sorry for her but I couldn’t possibly explain.

“Ah! Good, “I said, trying to look pleased. “Let’s see.”

“Here, Mr Thomas. Look! The big one is for nearly half a million dollars, the smallest for two hundred thousand. I totted it up and it’s one million, nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars. What do you think, Mr Thomas?”

“Mm,” I said, “That was quick. Surprising really.”

“That’s because you went out there, Mr Thomas. I knew you’d win a big one sometime.”

Beaty was almost beside herself.

I’d never seen her so enthusiastic. She was actually smiling although the sight was little better than when Donaldson smiled.

“Yes, good old William,” I said. “He’s done his stuff.”

“But the expiry date is so short, Mr Thomas. Look. It all needs to be shipped within eight weeks. How on earth will we organize it in time? And how are we going to buy the goods to start with?”

But I expect you have already thought about that, Mr Thomas.”

Beaty was actually very good. She was far better than Jack and commercial realities rarely passed her by.

Normally, such an order would have required me to buy the goods in advance which meant cash. But, for an order of this size, a bank loan would have been the usual route and a charge on our house would have been the security. There would have been other ways but if I didn't get paid for whatever reason, the upshot would be unthinkable.

Bankruptcy would stare me in the face and I have experience of that scenario as you will learn.

But this was no ordinary deal. The medical equipment was, as our friend in Calabar had confirmed, already paid for and ready to be shipped.

Beaty knew nothing of course.

“Special arrangement, Beat,” I replied. “The goods are all ready to go and suppliers will get paid when we do. All we've got to do is process the paperwork. Margins aren't too good, but we'll make a little. Christmas bonus, Beaty.”

“Oh, Mr Thomas, that would be nice.”

With that I seemed to put her mind at ease and she set about her typing once more.

But let me explain now that the most commonly sought skill for fraud, especially international fraud, is to know how to get paid for supplying absolutely nothing.

Empty containers are a good one or containers filled with crates of stones to give weight.

An Iranian dealer I once knew was highly skilled in this type of business. All he needed was an accomplice or two living near his foreign suppliers.

The accomplice would arrange for right footed army boots to be shipped through one port and left footed boots through another port on the other side of the country. Naturally he refused to accept delivery on the basis of incomplete shipments or wrong contents and also didn't pay his supplier.

The shippers then auctioned off the containers as useless waste and guess who bid the highest? Yes, the same chap.

He then spent a week sitting in the dust of his warehouse in Tehran, carefully matching up the boots again and, hey presto, found himself in possession of two container loads of perfect pairs of army boots that were worth a small fortune.

In my case, all I had to do was wait whilst someone, somewhere, organized the shipment of eighteen containers of medical equipment. Then wait for the shipping documents, certificates of origin and all the other pieces of paper to arrive to submit to the bank.

A month later, all the documents arrived in the office, everything seemed in perfect order, Beaty did her usual perfect checking job, I double checked them and we submitted them to the bank.

I assumed then that the money would be released and paid to the specified bank. It would have been nice then to see my one percent paid but I didn't hold my breath.

I got on with other things and I assume Beaty thought everything had gone like clockwork and waited for her Christmas bonus.

Not having the heart to tell William what had happened in case he thought I was totally inept and naive, I paid him his agreed amount immediately.

Then I went to see Donaldson.

I was perfectly calm as I listened to his explanation.

"What can we do, old chap?" said Donaldson. "You've done your bit. I understand, the Government wants to keep it under wraps at present. Let them deal with it through normal diplomatic channels. I'll keep you posted."

While Jack stood nervously rubbing his chin by the door, Donaldson went to the window of the Regent Street office and looked out. But I could distinctly see his reflection in the window glass.

Donaldson was trying not to laugh.

Oh yes, I thought, case proven.

I said nothing but took a deep breath and then looked at Jack Woodward to see whether anything similar had registered with him.

But no, there was no expression from the man except one that suggested confusion, uncertainty, doubt and a total lack of comprehension. He stood there, rubbing his cheeks and chin as usual, a man completely under someone else's control or completely out of his depth. Here was an ex-serviceman who had become a yes man, probably on a minimum wage and standing there like a dumb waiter too scared for whatever reason even to say boo.

I gave Jack the same smirk I had seen on Donaldson's face in the reflection and then turned and spoke to Donaldson's back.

"Ah well," I said, "you win some and you lose some. I'll be on my way, then."

It was then that Jack managed to find a few words.

"See you soon in the Feathers, Ollie."

"Sure," I said and walked out.

On Christmas Eve, I gave Beaty her bonus.

On Christmas Day, William phoned me at home from Nigeria.

"Ollie, I don't understand." "What's the problem, William?"

"About the two million poundth medical equipment." "You paid me my commithun."

"Yes," I said.

"But I think thumthing went wrong, Ollie."

"Yes, I know, William. But don't worry I was expecting it. You did your best and that's why I paid you."

"Did you get paid, Ollie?"

"No, William but, fortunately, it has only cost me some time."

“But you know what, Ollie? The fucking bathtards sent thirty thix Merthaydeeth cars in the containers inthted of medical equipment.”

“Mm,” I said, “I was expecting something like that. There’s been a spate of theft of brand new Mercedes around south London.”

“You get a Merthaydeeth, as well, Ollie?”

“No, William, still got the Ford.”

“All of them are fucking bathtards, Ollie.”

“I know, “I said. “Have a good Christmas, William.”

“And you Ollie.”

### **Good Advice**

**After I left the Regent Street office with Donaldson** smirking at his own reflection and Jack still playing with his own chin, I may have looked and sounded calm but inside I was fuming.

I walked towards Victoria station planning to go home but the anger was not subsiding and I didn’t want Sarah to see me like this. So, as I passed the Duke of York pub, I went in, ordered myself a pint and went to sit alone in the corner to think.

I needed to do something about Donaldson.

In fact, I had decided to act some years before. So, why hadn’t I?

Well, that was simple. I had kept going partly because of Donaldson’s blackmailing tactics and threats but also in the faint hope that things just might start to ease up and that my link with Donaldson might fade.

But it hadn’t faded.

In fact, it seemed to be entering a new phase of fraudulent deals involving huge sums of money. The problem was that I didn’t understand how Donaldson operated.

I gulped down mouthfuls of my beer.

What exactly was he up to? How did he operate? What were his plans?

Whatever, it was perfectly clear to me that he had built a parallel career on the foundation of his official job. But more concerning was that I had become an integral part of it. I was being used as an innocent messenger and a provider of useful information. I was like a sales representative for a company with plans to join the Mafia or one that had already joined.

But for a salesman in a company like that, resigning was a problem. You already knew too much. And this was the reason for the blackmail and threats to person and family. They were designed to keep me from wandering.

So, would it be more and more blackmail and threats until I’d earned my keep and then the threats would be carried out anyway just to keep me quiet?

The more I sat and thought, the more the worry and anger inside me grew.

I downed the last drop of my beer, went to the bar for another pint and returned to my corner.

There I started to think about Thomas Import Export Limited. It was my small business that I had started by myself with limited private funds with youthful ambitions to gradually build into something important and international in order to provide Sarah, the children and myself with a good income and, when the time came, an asset to finance our retirement. But it was still far too small and it felt as if it had become just a convenient tool for Donaldson to bounce his fraudulent deals off.

As I drank, I was watching two men playing darts. The board was old and worn with so many holes in it that, more often than not, darts would bounce off the board and fall onto the floor.

Thomas Import Export was also being played with. There were only so many holes it could bear. And I was also being played with.

I was still doing unpaid jobs for Donaldson that were wrapped up in a cloak of secrecy because I still believed that what I was doing was linked to British Intelligence and I was still where I left off after the war in doing things for the sake of patriotism.

But how many times had I, in the middle of one of Donaldson's assignments, suddenly thought to myself that what I was doing just didn't add up or make any sense? But, believing as I did, that Donaldson worked for the Government, I had always put it all down to the way these things worked. "Benefit of the doubt" as Sarah often said.

So, what should I do now?

I got up to order a third pint but this time, instead of taking it back to my corner, I paid for it, leaned on the bar next to a small group of other men and withdrew into my thoughts.

Donaldson was clever and I still had no idea how to deal with him.

I'd already dismissed ideas of speaking to government officers, a minister, my MP or the police for fear I would not be believed and for fear that Donaldson would take action long before I got anywhere. I still felt very alone.

I drank half of the pint glassful in one swallow and put the glass back on the wet beer mat.

"Need a new TV, mate?"

I looked up at a young man in open necked shirt and jeans who had moved away from the other group. He was winking at me. Long black straggly hair hung down to his shoulders.

"TV?" I asked.

"Yeh, mate. Watch TV do ya?"

"Sometimes," I said, "when I'm around."

"Cheap," he said. "Job lot. Me and me mates have a van around the corner. Nice quality."

"In the TV and radio business, are you?" I asked.



The young man took a mouthful of his beer and grinned.

“Yeh – today, anyway.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“Nah,” he said. “Got to move on. You know how it is, mate.”

“Yes,” I said and took a mouthful from my own glass, “You’re right. You definitely have to move on.”

“In business yourself, mate?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Dodging and diving, mate?”

“Plenty of that,” I said.

“What’s your specialty, mate?”

“International arms trading,” I said for a laugh.

“Fuck,” he said. “Really?”

“Yes,” I said. “Hence the ducking and diving.”

“Fuck,” he repeated. “Got anything in stock at present?”

“Only if you order a forty-foot container load.”

“Bloody hell,” he said and his voice dropped to a whisper.

“Yes,” I said. “It is bloody hell, I can tell you. My advice is never get involved. Keep life simple.”

“Fuck me,” the young man said. “Who are your customers?”

“African despots, Middle East terrorists, IRA.”

“Jesus!” he said. “Your own business?”

“Yes,” I replied after taking another swig. “Want to buy it?”

“Your business is for sale?”

“Yes, just waiting for the right offer.”

“How much, mate?”

“Free,” I said.

“Fucking free?”

“Yes.” I replied. “But it comes with a liability.”

“What’s that then mate?”

“You get followed everywhere, your family gets threatened and orders only come from the head of the London Mafia.”

”Jesus Christ!” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve asked Jesus Christ, but he’s not interested in buying it either.”

“Not surprised, mate,” the young man said. Then he laughed a little which suggested he thought I might be pulling his leg a little. I decided I needed to put him right.

“You think I’m joking?” I said, staring into my empty glass. “What would you do if you wanted to get out of the business?”

“I’d shoot the bloody head of the London Mafia to stop him destroying me, mate. You gotta get out of this bleeding mess, man, before it’s too fucking late. That’s what I’d do. Shoot the fucker.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s exactly what I thought. Want another pint?”

“Ta, mate. Don’t mind if I do. Now, what about a nice, new TV?”

“No thanks,” I replied, beckoning to the barman. “I’ve got to go home to check to see if my wife is still alright. She’s probably sat watching the TV as we speak. But enjoy your drink. And thanks for the advice.”

## **Back Scratching**

### **It was Farouk who provided a way to solve my problems with Donaldson.**

As usual it started with a phone call to the office. “It’s Mr Farouk, Mr Thomas.”

To me, Farouk was like Smith, Jones or Brown. I knew dozens of Egyptians with the name and I asked Beaty to ask which company he was from to give myself time to think.

“He says it’s not business, Mr Thomas. It’s private.” As soon as she said it, I knew which Farouk it was. “Alright, Beaty, I’ll speak to him.”

Beaty handed me the phone but looked at me as though she was being bypassed in some way. The look was becoming increasingly noticeable as if I should notify her of everything I did, even private matters. Perhaps it was because she was always in the office and I wasn’t but it was still my business and she was being paid by me. I was becoming more and more concerned about Beaty’s increasingly strange manner but, in my usual fashion, put it down to her age and dismissed it once again to talk to Farouk.

Farouk and I had known each other for many years.

The first time we met was a day of clear, bright blue sky in the mountains behind Beirut at a hotel on the road to Zahle where the white snow still lay amongst the rocks in the shade.

This was long before the civil war had started to rage and before the city had been bombed into concrete rubble. We had met to discuss pharmaceuticals but had ended up talking politics.

I think that Farouk called himself Farouk for business and political reasons as he was actually a Christian born in Alexandria into the Coptic Church. He also looked more European than Arabic and my suspicions about his name were confirmed when I once heard him being called Frank and saw a letter from Germany on his desk addressed to Franke. But let us not go into that for Farouk was a good friend who I trusted.

He ran the business from an office in Amman but also had a small warehouse in Beirut and another tiny office in Damascus and was helped by a small team of Jordanian and Egyptian salesmen selling mostly to pharmacies. Farouk had tried hard to keep his religious background quiet. But with all the difficulties in the region, his political opinions had matured into a clear set of bottled up principles which he seemed relieved to express to a well-travelled English businessman who offered a good ear well practiced in the art of extracting useful information.

Farouk's pent up political frustration had poured out over a delicious meal of humus, lamb cooked in yoghurt and mint, all washed down with too many glasses of arak.

And it had soon become apparent that Farouk was not averse to dabbling in other imported items in order to supplement his already substantial income from pharmaceuticals and cosmetics and to satisfy an appetite for small scale subversive politics.

What helped Farouk in this was his network of affluent pharmacists and medical practitioners who were reasonably well-paid professionals and far more inclined to prefer a steady, peaceful co-existence with their neighbours than the angry, unemployed residents in the Palestinian camps.

So, after we had finished the bottle of arak I agreed to help Farouk by organizing a few deliveries of other items, not in large quantities, but carefully concealed in boxes of codeine tablets, antibiotics and bottles of hospital disinfectant.

"Only for defence you understand, Oliver. We do not want to cause trouble. There is already too much of that simmering here."

Indeed, Farouk had no need of guns for they were to be found everywhere in Beirut and most nights were to be heard going off after the restaurants had closed. At the time, hand grenades were less easily available but once bought and imported into the UK in boxes of Tunisian dates ready for the Christmas market were not difficult to re-export. I was well used to this sort of trade, believing that wealth creation through added value was far more important to the British economy than strict compliance to customs requirements. And it was only on a very small scale.

So, a few weeks later, Farouk received his consignment disguised and packed in boxes that were clearly labelled: "Disinfectant – Hazardous Chemicals – This Way Up".

I suppose that admitting to a little arms trading, however small scale, might be a good excuse to charge me sometime but it was never a particularly profitable exercise although I suppose I could have specialized in it and made a fortune. But I have always disliked things that make a loud noise and kill people. So it was just a passing interest, you understand, a useful service I sometimes provided to oil wheels.

In the seventies, I had several suppliers of such things in my address book.

They call it networking these days but I used to call it sniffing around because these were the days before the advent of telex, fax and email and when telephone calls and cables were also unreliable. So, sniffing around was a high, fixed overhead for a small business, like mine.

But after that first small successful deal with Farouk, our friendship remained at a very low key. We met up in odd places like Paris or Brussels to reminisce or

complete another small deal, which in most cases were for less interesting things such as hospital disinfectant and throat lozenges. But the business was almost secondary. What we possessed was friendship, mutual respect and a good understanding and, if he is alive today, I would love to see him again.

Farouk would cable his needs in code to the office and Beaty would pick them up without really understanding the message. Neither did she have to deal with packing his special needs inside boxes of detergent because I did that myself in the corner of a small warehouse I rented in Brixton.

But "5/10 Metro" would have been enough of a message for me to arrange a quick trip to the Paris Metropole on October 5th, pick up a small shopping list from Farouk and have a quick chat over a meal in a Lebanese restaurant.

Sarah and I were still living in the Victorian brick place in Croydon but, with surprising speed, Farouk seemed able to afford to buy an expensive apartment in Paris, surrounded by other Lebanese.

Farouk had become one of my sources of ideas and contacts but he also said that he owed me one big favour sometime. It would usually be as we shook hands outside an exotic place called the Byblos Hookah lounge and restaurant near the Champs Elysees.

"Thank you, Ollie," he would say as we emerged from the hot, smoke filled room into the Paris lights. "You scratch my back for me and so I must scratch yours someday, yes? I don't forget your English saying. You just let me know when you have itch. Ha ha!"

I waited too long but, eventually, decided that the time for the back scratching to be reciprocated might have arrived.

Farouk was one of my friends I managed to keep secret from anyone, be it Donaldson or Beaty. Keeping just a few secrets like this was one of the few ways I tolerated the bastard for so long. Sometimes I regret not having spent more time on business of the sort that Farouk and I did. It was a missed opportunity. Perhaps if we had gone into some more formal partnership I would have opened my offices in Paris and Tokyo and this shabby character sitting here typing on this ancient machine might have become a multi-millionaire. Perhaps I would have been sitting in the sun by the pool at my villa overlooking the sea near Cape Town and about to don my suit by Armani, my shoes by some other Italian cobbler and my socks by Debenhams. Whereas, instead, I am sat here looking out at a rainy day in Gloucester wearing a twenty-year-old shirt, some Marks and Spencer's slippers and trousers with the damp and dubious stains around my lap area. I really must dig out another pair.

But I couldn't take the business into the more exciting directions that I wanted simply because I was too distracted by ensuring Sarah and my family remained unaffected.

Mostly I operated as Oliver Thomas but there were many circles within which I was also David Reynolds.

I still felt sorry for the real David Reynolds but using his name whether for Donaldson assignments or my own did open other doors. After all, I still had the business to run. Both characters looked similar although Reynolds was much less acquainted with shaving cream and a razor and his hair was parted on a different side.

But it was still risky for the circles sometimes overlapped and the problem was bumping into people who knew me by the other name. Horn-rimmed spectacles with plain glass in them were what I wore as Reynolds but Oliver Thomas tried hard to appear better groomed and clean-shaven.

Farouk knew me only as a businessman called Oliver Thomas who ran an import-export business from south London.

Farouk believed I was just rather well connected with people whose identity he had no reason to ask about but whose status might be useful to him if he continued to befriend me and complete the odd deal through me.

Farouk knew I was a frequent visitor to the Middle East but he saw no reason to ask too many questions. This suited both of us and was the way it had always been. If Farouk had been with me and someone else had referred to me as Mr Reynolds, a wink and a nod might well have been enough to satisfy Farouk. In fact it might well have served to increase the trust, such was the nature of our relationship.

So, it was Farouk's constant reminding of a desire to scratch my back sometime that provided a possible solution to my problem with Donaldson.

So, when Beaty took Farouk's phone call and said, "He says it's not business, Mr Thomas. It's private," it was timely as the Nigerian case and the Mercedes cars had just passed and was still very fresh.

Farouk had arrived as a foot passenger on a morning crossing from Calais. It was odd for a man just wanting to chat about old times and I suggested he hire a car and drive up to Croydon. But Farouk did not like driving on the left so I took my own car and met him at the Red Lion pub outside Dover. It was a cold, wet day, a far cry from the open-air restaurant in Baalbeck where we had last met.

It was also a very difficult period in the Middle East, the era of Black September and Wadi Hadad's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and another Leila called Leila Khaled. Bombings and hijacking were almost common place, but it had never stopped me visiting countries like Lebanon.

I thought about all of this as I drove down to Dover. I also thought about Donaldson as I knew from meetings in the Feathers that he was well versed on the politics and clearly maintained a few old contacts of his own there whom I knew. As a result, I also knew he was not liked. He was regarded, even then, as untypical of an ex British Army Major working for the British Government and seemed to have formed a reputation amongst the few who knew him as a bit of a wide boy.

Apparently, he gave the impression of always being on the lookout for business opportunities, which ran counter to what others saw as his official reason for being there. But it all fitted perfectly with my own opinions.

Farouk would have summed up Donaldson fairly quickly if he had known him but Farouk's weakness was in being impressed by a proper English businessman with skills of persuasion honed over many years and who was also a source of new English words and amusing expressions. Farouk liked well spoken English.

So, Farouk and I met for the first and only time in the Red Lion.

We ate steak and kidney pie which was a disgrace to the human palate and an utter embarrassment to me who was used to being entertained at great expense at Paris's best Lebanese restaurants.

Farouk then gave me a small order but I think he was, by taking a ferry to Dover to see me, trying to show that he was saving me the bother of going to Paris. Farouk, you see, was already feeling that he owed me something.

A few weeks later, however, we met again, this time by accident.

I had taken a Royal Jordanian Airlines flight to Amman with an idea to meet another of my agents and then move on to Damascus.

I didn't tell Donaldson where I was going but he seemed to know already.

Donaldson was on my mind for all the usual reasons of threats and insults, but he had recently told me I was being tailed. Putting someone on my tail in Amman would have been very simple for Donaldson and it had probably been going on since well before Reynolds was killed.

"Go careful, Ollie. Big Brother's watching. And don't be away too long. We've got another job coming up in Nigeria again shortly."

I tried to ignore him as I was there solely for my own business.

I checked in at the tiny Al Shams Hotel behind the mosque off Sharia Zarqa, dumped my small case of white shirts that Sarah had ironed just a few days before on my bed and decided to take a short walk, because the cooler evening air would be a pleasant way to waste half an hour and to think before I turned in.

I took a mazy route through the busy souk just in case I was being followed and then walked along the pavement surrounded by the smell of charcoal fires, spicy chicken, lamb kebabs and night flowering jasmine that hung over the iron railings and the stone walls. I then crossed the wider road near the mosque.

A dim street light cast a dark shadow beneath the canvas canopy of the grocery shop with its open sacks of dried fruit, rice, herbs and spices and rows of bottles and tins. Black dressed women with round, brown faces, looked at me without turning their heads as they wended their way home from their evening shopping. A fully lit coffee shop was still busy.

And then I saw a familiar face amongst its customers.

Farouk was seated amongst some tables set well back from the pavement outside the entrance. He was with a group of much younger men, some of whom were relaxing by pretending to be much older men – sharing pipes, tilting backwards on the back legs of chairs or sitting cross-legged on a red carpet behind. I automatically switched direction in order to give myself time to think because, as usual with Jordan, I had entered as David Reynolds.

But Farouk only knew Oliver Thomas.

It was far too early to return to the hotel so I put my glasses in my jacket pocket, pushed a hand through my hair to change the styling and tried, in an instant, to become Oliver Thomas.

But the time had been right, the atmosphere conducive, the young men were relaxed and probably a little high on whatever it was they were drinking and smoking and I had, in part, come to see Farouk anyway.

So, I turned back, wandered into the café through the clutter of tables and greeted Farouk in Arabic.

“Farouk! Salaam Alekum!”

Farouk stood up, perhaps unsteadily.

He grabbed my right hand and then my wrist and held it for a long time, shaking my hand and, in the way he had greeted me when we met at the Red Lion in Dover, planted brotherly kisses on both my cheeks. I was then dragged towards the main table and invited to meet Amin, Farid, Fouad, Talal, Bashir and several others and was given coffee and invited to smoke and was soon immersed in their excited conversations.

Time stood still.

“Why George Best so crazy? He is so brilliant at football. Why they send him off? You see Beatles? Why they play with crazy Indian man, that Ravi Shankar? They run out of ideas already?”

Hey, what about all that oil in the sea? How can they dig in the sea? You go to America, Mr Thomas? You see moon landing on TV? We watch here. Very good. We have no scientist like that in Amman. Maybe we go in fifty years. I want to be first Jordanian to go on moon. No, me. I have better map of solar system. Ha ha.

Have you read any Solzhenitsyn books, Mr Thomas?”

Oh yes, this was one of the most enjoyable nights I've ever spent.

After football, George Best, Rolls Royce and North Sea oil and after more smoking and drinking the talk degenerated into more laughter and jokes about girls said to be wearing short skirts on the streets of London. And then they laughed again as they discussed their doubts about whether such wonderful sights would ever be witnessed in Amman. They were young, intelligent, fresh and well educated.

We then talked about Ireland and the IRA and bombs and terrorism, of Catholics versus Christians and of Jews versus Moslems, as though they were still talking about football.

Then we talked about Christians versus Moslems and Moslems versus Moslems. And because, by then, they were all drinking something transparent that looked like but wasn't water and breaking up huge blocks of ice with the sharp end of a small, ornate dagger that Amin had pulled from his belt, I soon found out that they were all Christians.

And suddenly I noticed the chattering had gone quieter.

We then leaned forward to the centre of the table where Amin had stabbed his dagger. The conversation became softer and more intense and some of it had been very difficult for me to follow as they were speaking in fast Arabic mixed with English and a little French. Two of Farouk's friends, it turned out, were Lebanese.

But during the joking and laughter, Farouk told them that his friend, Mr Ollie, was a good man who had helped him out whenever possible and that Mr Ollie had very good connections. And so, as the conversation became quieter, passionate and more intense, their eyes brightened further and they all started to look around to see who was passing on the pavement and on the road.

Fouad and Bashir, particularly, were getting agitated.

This was not just the drink, although that was helping, for I could see something else in their shiny black eyes. They were fired with a passion inflamed by resentment and a determination for some form of justice.

Later, much later, we parted and I went back to my hotel with far more on my mind than I had started out with.

But then, in the spring-like warmth of the following afternoon, on the road out towards Jerusalem, I sat with Farouk again and built on the achievements of the previous night. The restaurant we stopped at was beneath some delightful tall palms but it was also next to a small herd of camels that urinated in gallons and dribbled and spat green froth.

I started by giving Farouk just a few snippets of information that I'd picked up over the years from recent visits to Beirut, Damascus, Amman and Tripoli. It wasn't much but enough to prove to him that there was more to my work than just running a small trading company. I showed my knowledge of Middle East politics and then dropped names of people whom anyone who regularly read Middle East newspapers would have heard of as string-pullers on opposing sides.

I mentioned casual meetings in hotels where I often picked up snippets of intelligence and I used the word "intelligence" deliberately and frequently.

I showed him how good I was at dangling a carrot or two before the faces of hungry individuals who would then look upon me as a good source of more carrots.

And I did this because I knew Farouk, himself, had been one of these individuals.

"Ha ha. I like your English words, Ollie. I now see the man sitting on the donkey holding a stick with a carrot is you. I think maybe I am the donkey."

"Oh, no Farouk, you're not a donkey. And I do not ride on your back. It is me who has become a stupid ass."

We were sipping ice cold arak and dipping pieces of flat bread into plates of humus.

Farouk looked at me, puzzled.

"You? A stupid ass, Ollie? No, I don't think so."

"Oh, yes my friend. I have decided I am a very stupid one and a very naïve one."

"No, I can't believe. Why so?" Farouk asked and I could see he thought it was the start of yet another English joke.

He was holding a small pile of oily, green olives in one hand, a glass of arak in the other and his mouth was stuffed with bread and humus.

"Because I started out in life by believing that all people were innocent, you see," I replied. "Even when I was nine years old my mother warned me about it. But I took not enough notice. As a young man, I would go along with the wishes of others in the firm belief that they must know far more than me just because they were older or held a higher rank. But later, too late, I discover that they are not so innocent but guilty of serious crimes. But they continue to use me to do all their dirty work."

Farouk stopped his chewing, his eyes wide and curious.

"Yes, I am the stupid ass, Farouk. Others have been riding on my back for too long. And the one who holds the whip and smacks my legs to keep me walking is becoming very heavy."



You see, Farouk, the more you feed people, the greedier, fatter and heavier they become. And, what's more, this stupid ass is becoming older and weaker and his back is now bending. But this stupid ass still stumbles on thinking he can see a big sack of carrots ahead that will feed him forever. But each time it is

like a mirage in the desert sand."

I stopped and looked at the camels but I knew Farouk was looking at me.

I heard Farouk blow air through his mouth.

"So, does your wife, Sarah, know, Ollie?" Farouk had cleverly hit my sensitive spot and he continued.

"If it's serious and what you say is true then you must share it with your wife."

"I cannot tell her, Farouk," I said, "because I feel it may hurt her too much. I can only tell my friend."

"So, do you want to tell me, Ollie?"

I was still staring at the camels but suddenly felt vulnerable.

It briefly crossed my mind that I had just behaved like some sort of smooth salesman, pouring out a syrupy story aimed at attracting sympathy and an order to meet my sales target. But I hadn't started out with that plan. What I had just told Farouk was honest, truthful and from my heart. It was like a load had been lifted from my chest. For the first time, I had shared something of my inner self with another man.

But I had said nothing specific.

No names had been mentioned although Donaldson was clearly the villain in my own mind. And I had said nothing about what I did for the bastard.

"It is far too complicated," I said.

And with that, it was as though I had just wasted one huge opportunity. But then, perhaps fortunately, I remembered another English saying that Farouk might like.

"But," I said, "as we say in England, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Let me give you some small examples."

And with that I took up where I had left off and went off at a tangent.

I dropped in words like "official secrets", "information gathering" and "military intelligence".

Farouk just listened.

"So," I concluded, "it's not just Thomas Import Export. Too much of my time is spent on all these other jobs and too much time is spent away from my wife and family. Too much of my energy is spent on doing the dirty work of others and too little time on my business."

And as we got stuck into the main course of our lunch, I went even further and fed Farouk a banquet of insights into political and military intelligence.

I didn't say I was a spy because I hated the word and I was, after all, only self-trained in that job. But then I added spice to his meal by sprinkling it with other English words like "fraud" and "money laundering" and dropped some names into the

conversation just as Farouk himself dropped lumps of ice into the silver bucket that contained our bottle of arak.

And, when we were sitting back in our chairs at the time when, in England, we might have been ordering brandy, I felt it was time to go even further.

I felt no guilt and no fear. Perhaps I had been emboldened by the arak but I was at a stage of going for everything or nothing.

And to support what I said and because if nothing is ventured then nothing is gained, I offered examples of gross hypocrisy, of levels of distrust and of how people hid their real agendas. Possibly I embellished bits by slight exaggeration but it was only to ensure I'd made my point.

"You have it here, Farouk," I said. "It's widespread. Corruption and greed is universal. But do you have clever people who are so well connected that they can divert charity money donated by innocent, well-meaning ordinary people for the poor of Africa into the pockets of the already rich and take a lump for themselves while they're at it?"

"Would you expect senior Government officials to get rich by diverting arms shipments to terrorist groups who then blow up the very people that the Government is there to protect?"

"Can you imagine these same Government officials using blackmail to protect themselves?"

"And do you think a democratically elected British Government would really sanction the killing of one of its own foreign diplomats just because he didn't turn out to be as good at the job as they hoped if there wasn't money in it somewhere?"

Farouk listened intently, his head nodding or shaking at the appropriate times.

All the while I could see I was well on the way to convincing him that there might be a way, at last, for him to scratch my back.

But I still wasn't finished because I then related a story of corruption, greed and double standards actually within British Intelligence itself and dangled unanswered questions that I knew would hang in Farouk's nostrils like the pungent smell from the camel piss next to us.

"Why, for example, do you think the British Government's stance on the Middle East sometimes appears ambiguous, Farouk? Is it because they are fed lop-sided stories? Who might be giving intelligence to the wrong side? Who's telling fairy stories? Do we have a traitor in our midst? A man who's moved from one side to the other to feed his appetite for personal wealth? Could there be someone working to counter the good works of others just to line his own pocket?"

And as I finished my story, Farouk's black eyes were as ablaze as the students from the night before. A spark had ignited inside him.

He became furious as though he owed it to his British friend Ollie to do something. So furious had Farouk become, in fact, that jokes about scratching backs were temporarily forgotten. But as Farouk's eyes opened even wider, he finally asked me the question I'd been waiting for.

"So, who is it, Ollie? Who is the fat man riding on the back of the donkey?"

And I was finally able to name one Major Alex Donaldson and, knowing Farouk's love of English expressions I added:

"So, that's him, Farouk. Major Alex Donaldson. Now there's a subject for a bit of target practice. When you're ready just give me a nod and a wink and I'll tell you where to find him. No skin off my nose, as we say in England."

Farouk was driving us back towards Amman and, although his driving was showing the effects of the arak I knew I hadn't lost a friend when he said: "I think the time has come, Ollie, for me to scratch your back."

"Well," I said, "I've had a really bad itch right in the middle of my back now for thirty years and I just can't find a way to reach it with my own hand. And I'm now getting too old to be a donkey."

Farouk laughed and swung the steering wheel just in time to avoid another man on another donkey. We left behind us a cloud of dust.

"OK, Ollie, I have some very good back scratchers with long arms."

## **Set Up**

**It was only a week after my meeting with Farouk and I was in the Feathers again.**

It hadn't been my suggestion to meet but Beaty had left me a message that I picked up after five one evening.

"Mr Thomas. Can you please meet Major Donaldson this evening at seven at the usual place? Beatrice."

The usual sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach appeared but this time it was accompanied by another. Since the Nigerian scandal and my meeting with Farouk any thoughts about Donaldson brought out a different feeling. Yes, it was anger, but it was an anger tinged with a confidence that came with believing I was becoming more in control.

It was seven thirty though by the time I made it back to London and walked into the thick blue haze in the Feathers. Betty the barmaid had, by then, long moved on somewhere to be replaced by two new barmaids, Polly and Nancy.

I must have been abroad when Betty left but, in a moment of sarcasm induced by another of Donaldson's threatening comments about my family, I had said something about Betty going.

"Got tired of the local lecher, did she?"

Jack had looked the other way. Donaldson stared me straight in the eye.

"You're so unbelievably, bloody naïve, Ollie. Why don't you just fuck off abroad again?"

The barmaids may have changed now but the usual two stools were already occupied by Donaldson and Jack and Jack was, as usual, sticking a little wooden stick into a fresh bowl of shrimps when I strolled in this time.

I squeezed myself between Jack and the back of another man leaning on the bar. Donaldson, on the other side of Jack, knew I was there but was deliberately looking away from me as he always did. The arrogance was something I was well used to.

“Ah,” said Jack, trying to be polite. “Sorry about this but something urgent cropped up apparently. D knows. Pint?”

“Half,” I said, “I don’t want to be late.”

It was Polly who pulled me a half pint of Bass.

“Shrimp?” asked Jack.

“No, thanks,” I said. “Well? What is it?”

Jack nodded at Donaldson who was still looking to the other corner of the bar where a game of darts was in progress.

“Yes, I saw him,” I said. “Has he got a tongue?”

Jack dug his stick into another shrimp. I took a mouthful of my beer. Then I took another mouthful. Then I leaned on the bar, took a spare stick and prodded a shrimp. I examined it. I licked it. I smelled it. Then I put it back in its dish.

“You can’t do that,” said Jack.

“Do what?” I said.

“Lick it and put it back.”

“The vinegar will kill any germs,” I said and took another, longer drink from my glass. It was already almost empty. Then I stared into space.

My anger was at tipping point but I had had an idea earlier on the train up from Croydon.

“Right, I’m off,” I said as loud as I could. “Thanks for inviting me. But I’ve got a business to run.”

Polly looked at me. The stranger on my right picked up his glass and moved away.

I put my half pint glass down ready to go.

It had happened before and was guaranteed to start Donaldson off on the wrong foot and I knew it. Sometimes it meant I started with a slight advantage and was able to keep it going a bit longer than normally. Inevitably, though, I eventually lost.

“Cheerio, Jack,” I said and turned.

Donaldson moved. As I turned he was right behind me.

“Business first, Ollie,” he hissed as though for the ears of the stranger on my right who was still moving away. Then he blocked my way and waited.

“Corner,” he said and nodded towards a small, spare table and three chairs in the opposite corner to the darts board.

“Mm, business,” I winked at Jack. “It must be urgent. Are you joining us or do you want to finish your shrimps?”

“Yes,” Jack said, nervously.

“Yes, you’re joining us or yes you’re staying here to finish your supper?”

“Yes,” said Jack and followed me as I made my way to the corner.

It soon became clear that Donaldson had a job for me that meant me flying to Athens and then to Cairo. It was nothing new and I had done similar jobs before.

“Pick up from Dimitri at the usual place and time. Transfer to Tahir, who is coming up from Khartoum.”

“When?” I asked.

“It needs to be there by Saturday, next week.”

“Then use a carrier pigeon.”

“That’s you, you fucking asshole.”

By these later years, Donaldson’s language had gradually changed.

He seemed far less comfortable using expressions like old man and dear fellow. In fact, his language was now very coarse and sounded more like those characters from Northern Ireland that I had met in Malta some years before. So maybe it was the company he was keeping. He went on.

“And before you ask what it is, it’s confidential. Don’t lose it. It’s sealed and someone will be watching the transfer so no fucking messing about. Got it? If it doesn’t arrive in the state it started off, then all hell will break loose this end. Do you fucking understand?”

“Naturally,” I shrugged.

I’d been here before and it was pointless arguing.

Nowadays such jobs might not need a courier and can be sent on the Internet.

In those days, and it’s not so long ago, it was different. I could actually see the changes coming even then, but time was not on my side. I am, for what it is worth, a form of life that, along with other veterans, may well be nearing extinction.

I got up to go.

Jack pushed his chair back.

Donaldson sat staring into his beer, clearly not a happy man for whatever reason. So, I decided to liven up his evening and sat down again.

Jack hesitated, nervously scratching his cheek. I think he would have preferred it if I’d left.

“By the way,” I said, “I was in Amman last week – as you probably know anyway because I twice saw someone watching me from the shadows. I think it was Kamal this time. He needs better training. That aside, I got wind of a demand for some nice fresh Dollar bills in exchange for suitcases full of unfashionable Dinars. All cash, of course. Sounds like trouble brewing again in Beirut and someone needs to top up on arms. Extremely attractive exchange rate terms being offered, I understand. It might be something the US or British authorities should take an interest in. It all sounds very dodgy to me. “

I knew Donaldson would like the sound of this. It was his comfort zone.

“If you want any more, call me,” I added and got up again. “How much?” growled Donaldson without looking up from his beer.

“What do you mean how much?” I replied in pure innocence.

“How many dollars?”

“I’ve no idea,” I said, “I was only given the Dinar amount and that runs into several millions, but the exchange rate means it won’t be anything like the same number of dollars.

But I understand they are willing to pay twenty percent more than you’d get in a bank.”

I could see Donaldson doing mental arithmetic.

Jack seemed to be counting something on the same fingers that were scratching his chin.

“I can’t say more, here,” I said looking around. “But I have a name in Beirut.”

“Who?” asked Donaldson looking up, clearly concerned I was about to leave and go back to Croydon.

“Sorry. Need to know basis,” I said touching my nose and knowing that this would madden Donaldson beyond even his normal boundaries.

He stared at me, his eyes furious. But I knew he wouldn’t explode in the pub. Explosions were reserved for the Regent Street office.

“But I’m not going,” I said, “so don’t even ask me. This is one for someone who isn’t known so well in those parts. It needs someone fresh. Someone preferably willing to operate incognito but with some understanding of the way these things happen. I don’t want my cover blown. It wouldn’t do any of us any good if you understood.”

I was now deliberately tempting Donaldson to fall into a trap but I still kept going.

“And I wouldn’t want many other people knowing about it either,” I added, deliberately lowering my voice.

Jack sat down.

“We need more,” Donaldson said, “far more.”

“Of course,” I said. “But don’t expect me to talk to anyone else. It’s far too dangerous for me and for the Department.”

“I’ll deal with the bloody Department,” Donaldson said, and fell one step further into the trap. Then he added: “So who needs the fucking money?”

“Look,” I said, trying hard to retain the initiative, “I’ve got to go. I need to pack. I’m so busy at present and I’m supposed to be in Paris tomorrow afternoon and you also seem to want me to go to Athens. There are only twenty-four hours in a day.

So, if you’ll excuse me . . .”

“Sit the fuck down,” hissed Donaldson. Jack jumped. “I’ll deal with the Department. We’ll find a way to deal with this.

Who needs the money?”

I pretended to be thinking whether I should reply.

“Someone linked to Assad in Syria,” I said and got ready to stand up again.

“So, it’s Moslem?” Donaldson asked.

“Yes, of course. They think they’re losing.”

“Would someone need to go out there?”

I blew a jet of air through my mouth.

“Go out there? Of course, we’d need someone out there. Bloody desk bound bureaucrats aren’t any good. This needs a pro. Don’t you have anyone in place in Beirut who’s up to it?”

I watched Donaldson doing more mental contortions. His face was turning puce which meant that either he was about to explode or that he was slightly drunk. I knew it was both.

“No,” he said and he looked at Jack who was sat looking worried with a finger now stuck in his mouth. “Nobody. You’ll need to fucking go. You’ve got the local contacts. You could round up some third party to do some listening-in or something. No need to get directly involved.”

“And still blow everything?” I said. “No, I’m just too well known.”

“So, who the fuck is the guy on the ground that you’d use?”

“Probably Talal Abdullah,” I said.

“Who the fuck’s that?”

“Talal Abdullah,” I said. “Talal at the AUB.”

“AUB?”

“American University of Beirut.”

“Ah yes,” Donaldson said. “But how the fuck can the AUB help over these few million Dinars?”

“Politics, man,” I said and I knew I was pushing my luck.

“Talal will know. But it’s an ideal time to get in there during this lull. I’ve crept in and out during occasional lulls in the past and it’s usually OK if you keep your head down. I doubt it’ll last long though. No one thinks it’ll last. Now is as good a time as any.”

Donaldson looked at Jack. Jack looked away.

If Donaldson was even thinking of sending Jack it would have been an act of total irresponsibility. But clearly Jack saw the possibility and his face went a strange shape. But Donaldson was no fool in decisions like this.

“Look, I’ve got to go,” I said once again and stood up. “If you decide what to do, call me after Friday when I’m back from Paris. Frankly, though, I couldn’t care less. And I really don’t think it’s anything to do with the British Government. It’s gross interference in another country’s affairs. I’m just passing on the news.”

With that I left, leaving Donaldson and Jack still sat around the corner table.

For once I had felt in control and Donaldson was clearly unsure what to do or say. But, this time I’d dangled my own carrot and it was over Donaldson. The test was whether he’d reach out to take it.

If he did, I decided it would prove my case against the man once more.

And if he did, then I wasn’t responsible for the consequences.

I wasn't really planning to go to Paris.

Farouk was the only person I ever travelled there to meet and Farouk, I knew, was still in Jordan. So, I spent the next two days in and around my office.

On the second day, the phone rang.

Beaty answered it and I knew from her expression it was Donaldson. I could hear his voice, even from where I was sitting. He clearly thought I was away and in Paris.

"Ah, yes, good morning . . ." Beaty said politely. But she got no further.

"Fucking Thomas back yet? You know where he is?" I heard his loud voice so clearly.

"Ah, yes . . . ah, no. I mean yes, but he . . ."

"Come on, you stupid bitch, when's he back?"

"Back? From where, Major? He's not....."

"Look here, listen. When he gets back tell him to call me pronto, OK?"

I heard the phone being slammed down. I was facing away from Beaty and my head was deliberately buried in a catalogue.

Beaty was still trying to play a game and continued to hold the phone for a moment. Then she said, as if the person was still there, "Thank you for calling. Good bye."

Then I heard her start her typing again and I turned to face her. Her face was red and her neck was as pink as her twin set. She coughed.

"Major Donaldson?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, Mr Thomas. He'd like you to call him sometime," she said and coughed again. Then, as I continued to watch her, she bent down to her handbag which she always kept at her feet, withdrew a white handkerchief with some pink embroidery on it and blew her nose.

"Got a cold coming on, Beaty?"

"Uh no Mr Thomas, it's just a tickle."

"Donaldson's a bastard," I said.

"Yes, Mr Thomas."

"Are you afraid of him, Beaty?"

"A little, Mr Thomas."

"Why's that, Beaty?"

"He's . . . uh, not very polite and . . ." she spluttered and blew her nose again.

"Bastards are usually very rude, Beaty. It's the only thing they're good at. What did he want?"

"As I said, he would like you to phone him."

"All in good time, Beaty. Anything else?"

"Uh, no Mr Thomas, thank you," and she sniffed before starting her typing again.



As I watched her, though, I started to recall some other things she had recently said to me. Beaty was hiding something.

“I have been trying to bring myself to tell you something, Mr Thomas, but it’s all very difficult, you see.”

Beaty often looked and sounded embarrassed but she had recently been showing signs of genuine concern about something. But I, because of my own desire not to bother her more than necessary, would tell her not to worry. I would dismiss her obvious concerns as though they had been nothing worth bothering about, as though it was just typical of her to fuss about nothing in particular.

“Don’t worry, Beat. Nothing to worry yourself about. Don’t fret. Got to catch the train.”

And I had gone out again without giving it a second thought.

Then once, some months before, after I had just got back from somewhere when perhaps I was too tired. Maybe I had been a little harsh on her. But I could now remember what she said.

“I’m very sorry, Mr Thomas. But it can be quite stressful here when you are abroad. We really need to talk sometime, Mr Thomas, privately.”

I could now remember her eyes looking at me almost pleading with me to pry into her concerns. But again, I would lose the chance, believing she was feeling overworked.

“Never mind, Beat. Don’t let the system get you down. Life’s for living, Beat. Take it easy.”

But what was it that was making her so stressed?

Now, as I watched Beaty sniffing and wiping her nose, her voice kept echoing back.

“There was a phone call for you, Mr Thomas. Beirut again. You . . . you . . . you need to be so careful, Mr Thomas. It’s such a – such a dangerous place, these days.”

And another time.

“Does Mrs Thomas know about this, Mr Thomas?”

Or had she said, “Mrs Thomas needs to know, Mr Thomas,”?

Then I remembered something else, some weeks later.

“Mrs Thomas must know, Mr Thomas...where you are . . . always . . . just in case. I can always inform her . . . if . . . if something goes wrong.”

As I watched her now, sniffing and tapping away on her typewriter I suddenly felt sorry for her. Her eyes moved up from her typing and peered at me from behind her spectacles. They looked damp, worried, caring and perhaps guilty.

Stupidly, I turned to study my catalogue again. I was eventually to deeply regret that lost opportunity.

But I decided to phone Donaldson later that same day.

Phoning Donaldson was a mysterious process in itself. The number I used was answered, if at all, by a man who always said he’d get a message to Donaldson. Usually Donaldson would phone the next day or even later.

This time, he was on the phone in twenty minutes. Beaty took the call again.

“It’s Major Donaldson for you, Mr Thomas.”

The call took less than half a minute. It was a summons to attend the Regent Street office urgently and I arrived during the London rush hour. As usual, Jack was also there.

“Beirut,” Donaldson said as an opener.

“Yes?” I replied. “But I’m not going.”

“Not asking you to, old man. Thought I’d do this myself.

Got a gap in my diary and there’s a bit of a lull out there at present. Need to refresh myself, get my head around the current situation. We need someone with some proper understanding of the ways things work.”

Donaldson was surprisingly polite. He went on: “Been doing some digging. This man Talal. Any good?”

“Talal Abdullah? Yes. I’ve known him for several years,” I replied. “He’s an Iraqi doctor. Christian. Works for the Americans and French I think. Good starting point.”

“Ah, just as I thought,”

Donaldson had donned his old Army Major style. This usually only ever lasted a short while but it made a pleasant interlude. I jumped on the opportunity.

“Talal’s the one who told me about the funds. He’d give the necessary lead and set a few things up. He’d probably use his networks to get something moving.”

“His motivation?” Donaldson had now donned his Senior Intelligence Officer style.

“He doesn’t want to see any more money being made available. He’d want to screw things up for the Palestinians.”

“Exactly what I thought.”

Donaldson paused. I waited. Jack shuffled by the door.

“Who’s the guy you know on the other side – the Syrian side? The one you see with your other hat on?”

“You mean Ashur Mohammed?”

“That’s him. Do you have his contact details?”

“Yes, but he moves around a lot so no guarantees. But Talal will help you,” I said.

I could then have resorted to questions about the relevance to British interests of all this, but I was not in the mood to put Donaldson off or question his opinion.

A few briefer questions and that was my day finished. I went home because Sarah said she’d do roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

A few days later Donaldson got on a plane for Beirut for his first overseas jaunt in several years. Next morning, I phoned Farouk in Amman.

Then everything went quiet for ten days until Farouk phoned me from Paris and invited me to fly over to see him.

We met in the late afternoon in his smart new apartment off the Champs Elysees for a glass of French wine and we talked generalities – politics, the new agency he’d

signed with a Japanese pharmaceutical company, that sort of thing. Then he invited me out to eat.

“We must celebrate, Oliver. You need to enjoy yourself more. Life is too short. Why did you not bring Sarah?”

“She hates flying,” I said. “Anyway, where’s your wife, Farouk?”

It was a poor attempt at diverting the subject from my private life and I knew Farouk’s wife was still in Amman.

“She will join me in Paris soon. We need to make more money first. My two sons are growing up and we will bring them to Paris to go to the University.”

“You’re doing well, Farouk, I can see,” I said, looking around his smart apartment and sipping my wine from one of his crystal glasses.

“Yes, Oliver, but you are not. I can see it in your eyes. The donkey needs to shed its heavy load and find a fresh field of green grass. Why do you not move away from London? You can run your type of business from anywhere. You are a clever man, Ollie. You could be such a brilliant and successful businessman with all your connections. You are such a passionate man and the most skilful in your trade. You still have plenty of time. Your wife, Sarah – I think you cherish her beyond everything. I can see it in the way your eyes move when I mention her. You are like a teenage boy in love with a secret girlfriend. But things are still eating into your soul. You look like a tethered lamb trying to break free before he is sacrificed.”

I was actually touched by Farouk’s words but also quite shocked.

I know I’d said rather a lot when Farouk and I had met for lunch in Jordan but I had no idea that my appearance shed such a strong light on my worries.

Had my problems become so physically obvious?

I was standing by the large plate glass window facing the street and I turned to look outside. It was getting dark and lamps were shining onto the wet street below.

Perhaps I was hoping to study my own reflection but it was Farouk I saw approaching me from behind. He tapped me on the arm.

“Maybe we have just cut the lamb free, Oliver. Can we hope so?”

I didn’t know what to say but Farouk smiled. “Come,” he said, “let’s go and eat.”

We walked without talking whilst sharing a large black umbrella to protect us from a thick drizzle to a packed Lebanese restaurant called Noura.

I knew that Farouk was well known but I was surprised at the number of his friends I met that night. We ate mezza and drank arak and, around ten o’clock, all the tables were cleared and a space made for a small group of musicians and an Egyptian belly dancer.

Up to this point Farouk and I had said nothing about Donaldson.

But then, as the music and singing grew louder and the temperature inside the restaurant grew hotter, Farouk leaned over towards me and beckoned me to come closer. Then he whispered in my ear.

“Have you heard the news about your friend, Ollie?”

I tried to appear unsure who he was referring to. "I have many friends, Farouk. Which one?"

"Your friend, the British Major."

"He's not a friend, Farouk. But what news?"

"He is no more," Farouk said. "I think you have an English expression. Pushing up the daisies, yes?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"Well Major Donaldson is doing just that. It seems he got caught in some crossfire on the road to the airport. It was very unfortunate."

"Mmm," I said, "You mean he's dead?"

"Yes, someone scraped him off the ground and he was later pronounced dead at the hospital."

"When was this?" I asked.

"Two days ago," whispered Farouk as the music suddenly got louder, the clapping started again and the dancer swirled around and thrust her hips in our direction.

"The lamb has been freed, Oliver," Farouk said.

Then we both joined in the clapping.

## **A Mistake**

**I only felt a little guilty for the cock and bull story** I had invented to tempt Donaldson to go to Beirut but it did not last for long.

It was some two weeks after I met Farouk in Paris that the Daily Telegraph had a small paragraph on an inside page that was headlined 'British Army Major Shot.' I bought a copy of The Times to double check and found an almost identical paragraph as though based on the same official press release. 'The Ministry of Defence has confirmed that Christian militia were behind the shooting of a British Army officer in Beirut. The officer, thought to be Major Alexander Donaldson is believed to have been working for British Intelligence. The Ministry was unwilling to comment further until more information became available.' That was it.

After that, nothing more ever appeared in any newspaper or on any item of radio news as far as I know. It was as though the extra information was never made available. Perhaps none had been sought.

I gave it a few days and thought I had better telephone Jack as a sign of my deep sorrow on the news. But Jack sounded unaffected as well.

In fact, he sounded positively, and unusually, breezy.

"I can't comment, Ollie. Bit of a shock, I know. But, as you well know, Mum's the word. It's a dangerous sport, but there it is. Had a good innings and then got bowled out."

And that was about it.

Jack did not appear to be going through a long period of deep mourning as though he, too, may have been grateful to whatever had happened.

So that was that.

I had a quiet smile to myself, shrugged and carried on.

And because I now had a bit more time unhindered by assignments and threats from Donaldson, I started to look for some fresh business.

This was exactly what I had wanted to do for twenty years but for Donaldson sitting on my shoulder issuing his threats. I felt free.

Sarah noticed a difference in me but, of course, I never told her why.

We were sat together eating a Sunday roast lamb and mint sauce lunch on what I recall was a bright spring day. At least it seemed bright for Croydon. But perhaps that was because Sarah had placed a bunch of yellow daffodils in a vase on the table.

She was smiling.

"It's so nice to have you home at dinner time, dear. And you're looking so much better recently. You don't have that troubled look on your face."

I saw an opportunity.

"So, how about us moving abroad," I ventured. "I could run the business from anywhere – South Africa, Malta, the Far East, Australia? It could be quite a shrewd move in the present economic climate."

"Oh, no dear, let's not rush into things. Let's see how things go for a while. You never know."

"You never know what?" I pursued.

I watched Sarah concentrating on slicing through a piece of meat on her plate. I also noticed the usual look of uncertainty in her eyes. Her smile had also gone and I thought perhaps I had gone at it like a bull in a china shop instead of tiptoeing around it.

With hindsight, I now know it was something else.

"Let's just wait a while, dear. We don't want to jump from the frying pan into the fire," she said.

"What frying pan? What fire?"

"Oh, you know dear, we need to be really sure that things are safe and right. We mustn't be too rash."

"It's not rash, my love," I said. "It's a very good time to go."

We're not too old and not too young. Robert and Elizabeth have gone their own ways. It would be a fresh start. You'd like it in South Africa. Why not come with me and see what it's like?"

"Well, let's just wait and see, dear. I hate the thought of flying. Just you enjoy your lunch for now. The vegetables are so fresh and I always like a leg of lamb in springtime."

That was it. Decision delayed once more.

But, whatever we were to do in future, I still needed to make some bigger money. What I needed was one or two big, profitable orders. But I was, by then, in my very late fifties and other things had already moved on. Many of my older contacts were as old as me and already retired or had sold their businesses to other, bigger companies with whom I had no useful relationship. I could see that Beaty was too often sat there without enough to do and what little regular business we did was only enough to pay increasingly high overheads and an inadequate salary for myself.

So, with my business looking very jaded after too many years with too many distractions but with Donaldson gone, I started an urgent search for more sales.

But I was interrupted once again.

And, as ever, it started with the telephone ringing.

“Call for you, Mr Thomas. It’s a Mr Creighton.”

I had no idea who it was.

“Mr Thomas? Oliver Thomas?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I said.

“Bill Creighton, Ministry. Don’t think we’ve had the pleasure before.”

“Oh!” I said, whilst still reading something or other on my desk.

“Like to pop in, Mr Thomas? Catch up? Talk? Quick cup of tea?”

“What about?” I asked.

“Catch up. Cup of tea.”

“Where?”

“Usual office. You know. Thursday afternoon? Three pm?”

“Which usual office is that?” I asked.

“HQ, of course.”

“You mean the Ministry?” I was shocked. Normally my only direct contact with a Government Department was the tax office and I phoned them.

“Of course. When shall we say?”

There wasn’t any more I could extract but two days later I went up.

I arrived on time and was directed by the reception desk to the same numbered room on the fourth floor that Donaldson had used on the two or three occasions I had been there. But I barely remembered the place. I waited in a corridor to be seen.

Eventually when I was called in it seemed there had been a reshuffling of staff, as Donaldson might have called it. The man called Bill Creighton was sat in what I just remembered as Donaldson’s office and in what looked like his old chair. Creighton may have also re-shuffled the furniture slightly but he still exhibited one of the apparent qualifications for the job. Like Donaldson, he stood with his back to the window, a black silhouette just slightly shorter than his predecessor, with a perfect egg shape outlining his bald, head.

When his hands were not in his pockets he used them to twist the ends of a pointed moustache that extended beyond his cheeks into the silhouette. His shadow looked, to anyone with any imagination, like the head of a black cat.

I have never understood what they all did in that concrete office block. This particular room was along a long corridor and the whole edifice seemed occupied by men in dark suits with middle aged secretaries fussing around, coming and going through stained, wooden doors, along dark corridors carrying pieces of paper, grey folders and cups of tea. It was deadly quiet except for the clatter of typewriters behind closed doors and the hum of photocopiers in recesses in the corridors.

Telephones never seemed to ring either but quiet meetings, perhaps held in whispers, went on behind those same closed doors. The meetings were followed by quiet exits, more shuffling down corridors and all accompanied by the rattling of now empty teacups in saucers.

I was forced to wait nearly an hour on a chair by a photocopier before Creighton eventually called me in. I felt like a schoolboy reporting to the headmaster.

Creighton spoke in short bursts of incomplete sentences. "Now then, Oliver – may I call you Oliver – sorry for the wait and all that. Ha! Sorry we've not had the chance to meet before – get to know one another. Things changing around here – change of government and all that – different politicians, different ideas and all that – cuts and axes – you name it. You've heard about it, I'm sure – read the news and all that. Essential changes of staff ensue. Ha! Restructuring, reorganising – you know the deal – been around a bit by all accounts – I've seen your file."

There was a slim, buff folder on the desk before him which looked as though it contained about three sheets of A4.

"Is that it, there?" I interrupted.

"That's it. Nothing much in it to worry about. But it's budgets and all that now. D's not around the place either, any more – poor bloody blighter – never mind – got to get on with it. All getting on a bit anyway – probably my last stand as well, ha!"

Creighton stopped twisting his moustache, went to the desk, flipped open the almost empty file and closed it again. Then he sat down.

"Cup of tea?"

"No thanks," I said, "I'm too busy."

"Of course. Sorry for the wait."

"Yes," I said, "but you already apologised for that."

"So I did."

"I've only been here once or twice before," I said.

"Yes, the file's not big," he replied, flipping it open.

"But I did a hell of a lot more than will fit in that," I said pointing at the folder. "But then I used to meet Donaldson at the Regent Street office, not here," I added.

"Regent Street office you say?"

"Yes, the one near Hamley's."

"Near Hamley's you say? What office is that?"

"Donaldson's other office," I said, "The main office. But there was also his other office in Edinburgh."

“Edinburgh, you say?”

“Yes, the one in Morningside.”

“Morningside?” There was a pause. “Mmm,” Creighton said, scratching his bald head.

I knew then he had no idea about Donaldson’s other offices. Case proven yet again, I thought. The bloody Ministry knew nothing and I hardly registered on their books. For a chap who thought he had worked his socks off for the Queen and country for twenty-five years almost non-stop, I was as about as important to them as the two-millimetre thickness of my personnel file.

I sat back and stared at Creighton. I wanted to wring his neck.

“Mm,” he said once again, “Ah well. Anyway, here’s the gist. You know the score – signed the forms to keep mum and all that. Got to get on with life or what’s left – Ha! Retire, old chap. Buy that country cottage at last. You’ve done your bit – getting too complicated now. You know the way it is – IRA – Middle East – clearing up Callaghan’s bloody mess – Jimmy Carter – general state of the economy and all that. Ha! Still got your own business by all accounts – going well is it? Good. Got a pension? Good.”

It seemed clear to me after only three minutes that this office was specifically designated for use by self-important, jumped up bureaucrats to spout shit.

Creighton never stopped to wait for answers to his string of questions but that is about all I can remember of the short time I sat there.

There were no thanks, no gold watch and no speeches over drinks with old friends and work colleagues. I had been dismissed and told to retire.

I walked out in a daze.

I assumed it was partly the upshot of Donaldson’s visit to Beirut and so I had sensed that changes were likely, but at fifty-nine or whatever I was, I still felt young.

Or at least I felt young until I caught sight of myself in a shop window.

It was then that my predicament suddenly came home to me. The reflection in the window was a shock.

An old man, resembling myself but looking older, more worried, and more depressed than I had imagined, stared back at me. That pathetic image with its hands in its pockets was the force that made up my mind about the business.

Thirty years in business and I still had nothing like enough in the bank and, whilst the problem of Donaldson was now gone, tensions were now starting at home because Sarah wanted to move to Gloucester to be closer to Robert who had moved there with his job.

My plans, of course, were to move much further away than Gloucester but I was on very weak ground without the money.

I needed a rapid solution.

Then: But excuse me while I draw the curtains and have a quick drink before continuing because what is coming next might well bring on nightmares and a serious bout of Thomas’s Disease.



I've just had a couple of drinks and taken a deep breath so here goes:

My money problem looked likely to be solved unusually speedily after a strange encounter in Trafalgar Square. I was taking a short cut and dodging pigeons when someone came from behind and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Mr Thomas ain't it?"

"Yes," I replied. "Good lord! Good morning! What brings you here? Ron, isn't it? We met recently in the office down there, when I was left sitting around for an hour."

"That's it, Mr Thomas."

"And while we waited, we shared a cup of coffee from that infernal machine that, when kicked, churned out tepid brown water."

"That's me, Mr Thomas. Fucking awful place ain't it, mate."

"Not as exciting as some places I've been, I have to agree," I said.

"Time on me 'ands now, Mr Thomas. Got the push. Like you 'ave I 'eard. Not that I ever knew what you did, like. But times are changing ain't it?"

Looking back, I now know that taking a tip from such a source had been a mistake. But Ron, who now held a position of authority seemingly little better than the one I was about to move to – he had just started work in the rates office at Wandsworth Council – had been happy with the twenty pound note I gave him for his services. The man had engaged me in a long, meandering conversation whilst scattering small pieces of sliced, white bread from a plastic bag.

Pigeons were everywhere.

"Still running your own show, Mr Thomas?"

Wings, feathers and bird shit flapped around our heads.

"Young Forsyth's going out your way, Mr Thomas."

"Forsyth? Who's Forsyth?" I asked for clarification.

"Yeh – you know, mate – military bloke – the Embassy in Lisbon. You know him. Sure, you do, mate. Going to the Gold Coast or Ghana or whatever they bleedin' call it these days. It's to do with supplies for the army or something. Big stuff I understand although its only rumour like. But surprised you didn't know, Mr Thomas. In fact, your name cropped up. I thought they were gonna call you. Your sort of business ain't it?"

Apparently, Forsyth had only recently arrived in Accra from Lisbon or so Ron led me to believe although the name was completely new to me.

If he had been from Cyprus or the Lebanon I might well have known him but Portugal had been slightly off my patch and so it was no surprise that our paths had never crossed. So, Brigadier Royston Forsyth was a bit of an unknown quantity and as Ron clearly had no precise idea what was required in Ghana I tossed ideas around in my head for a whole week wondering what, if anything, to do.

But, for the first time for many years, and having been officially retired from whatever unofficial position I had held for thirty years I suddenly felt a free man able to move around unhindered and able to concentrate on making a decent pot of money without other distractions. So, I plumped on making a move to find out what was

going on and, with my imagination running at an unnaturally riotous pace, also started thinking about my, and Sarah's, retirement.

I dreamed for a day or so about sunny skies and a big, modern bungalow on a breezy slope facing the sea near Cape Town, spending happy hours gardening with Sarah, visiting the vineyards at Stellenbosch and inviting Robert and Anne to fly out to join us from time to time. I felt like a different man, one whose domestic considerations were at the centre of all things. But what I needed to bring all these imaginary visions to fruition was a decent pot of money.

So I took the bull by the horns and contacted Forsyth by telephone on the London number that Ron had given me. I gave him a brief summary and dropped a few hints that I was a man with some experience in the sort of business that he was probably interested in, that I would be visiting Accra shortly and would appreciate an opportunity to meet.

"Yes," I said, "we've done a fair bit with West Africa. It's mostly been Nigeria up to now but we've had plenty of experience around North Africa and the Middle East and we've been operating for some twenty-five years. We're well established."

I often used the word "we" when necessary as there are always customers who feel more comfortable dealing with a big organization than a one-man band.

Forsyth, it appeared, was in London for a briefing session but was moving to Ghana within days. He agreed to meet in a week's time in Accra and as it all sounded very positive, I tried telephoning my Ghana agent, George Owusu to tell him I was on my way out and I might need his help.

Unfortunately, all local phone lines were down and normal communication was impossible and so, not wanting to waste time, I decided to fly out unannounced, hoping George would be there when I arrived. Unfortunately, George wasn't.

If you've ever popped out to visit someone expecting to find them in and then found them out, it's frustrating. But if you've flown all the way to Africa, believe me the frustration is far worse.

When I arrived at George's office his secretary, Mary, was lying across her empty desk in front of the Mitsubishi fan by her typewriter cracking chicken bones with her teeth and spitting the fragments into her waste paper basket.

Mary broke the news of George's long-term absence immediately on my arrival. Then she continued her crunching and spitting. I have never forgotten the accuracy of Mary's spitting.

Even sitting, as I do so often, in Gloucester with my glass of whisky against my lips, I can still hear the bone fragments bouncing into the centre of the metal bin and Mary's husky, Ghanaian accent.

"Sorry, Mr Thomas, sah. Mr Owusu is gone to Kumasi. Maybe he'll be back soon – sssssspit."

Mary was vague but as accurate as she was ever likely to be. I knew she really had no idea of where he had gone, whom he was seeing or how long he was likely to be. That had been the first setback because without George it was going to be difficult to find anyone I could trust to do what I wanted. But time was short.

I decided to call Brigadier Forsyth on the number he had given me and so returned to my hotel to test the local telephone network. Surprisingly, this time it worked and Forsyth agreed to meet the next day at a local hotel.

Perhaps I had been feeling tired.

Perhaps I was feeling old and long in the tooth.

Perhaps I appeared a little out of touch. Certainly, I had not done enough research on the Brigadier, distracted as I was by my retirement plans and what I thought would be a fairly straight and easy deal. Perhaps I was generally not on form that day but I know that I did not perform at all well. In fact, this is a gross understatement.

Such meetings need a certain type of tact and professionalism, which I had always possessed in abundance. But if positive results are required it follows that both parties should, at least, remain sober.

Fortunately, Brigadier Forsyth had seemed to like whisky as well.

It was he who asked the waiter what types they had, although I could have told him that the choice was likely to be restricted to only one – Johnny Walker Black Label. So, within minutes of meeting, I saw evidence of someone who had not travelled far. His accent was faintly Scottish – Edinburgh – as though he had been born there, or educated at somewhere like Fettes and moved on.

We sat beneath a flimsy thatch shelter in the open-air bar outside the hotel and surrounded by grass and a pleasant urban jungle of banana trees, coconuts and butterflies and the conversation started constructively enough with worldly affairs and international politics, subjects that came easily to myself. And then it had roamed over everything else – except business.

I remember we ordered not glasses of whisky but a bottle and we had a silver bucket filled with chunks of ice.

And how clearly, I remember the black clouds that were gathering on the skyline over the sea and the flashes of lightning that could be seen from our table by the wooden steps leading onto the grass. Now and again I could hear a rumble of distant thunder. A storm was brewing and I watched it approaching. I remember glancing at it from my wicker chair beneath the thatch covering that overlooked the carpet of lawn that lay iridescent in the bright light of late afternoon. The sun was slowly sinking from view behind a row of high coconut palms that stood silhouetted against the darkening sky well beyond the banana trees.

A cooler wind then started to blow and the palms waved and hissed faintly in the air. And, gradually, the breeze coming in from the sea picked up and green coconuts started to fall with a thud. And I watched, through increasingly unfocused eyes, as the distant black clouds bubbled upwards into the pink and orange sky, flashing dire warnings.

If I had seen it as an omen then perhaps I would have ensured that the business side of the discussion was left for another, soberer, time and that the drinking session was merely to lubricate the wheels of friendship and confidence building for the future. That would have been far more in line with my usual tactics. Patience, and a slow build up leading to a successful deal, was my normal style.

I specialized in setting the scene, building a foundation, establishing the feasibility and leaving the final architectural details of the structure to be built as yet undecided. In other words, I preferred keeping my options open at the beginning and judging the time to make a move when it suited me.

Oh yes, it was not that I was inexperienced. I had been a master of the art.

But, for some reason, that afternoon in Accra, I felt impatient.

My private life was becoming far more important to me than anything else. George's absence had not helped my patience and I was also on my way to Cape Town via Nairobi and Johannesburg and managing as best I could without my suitcase and fresh, clean clothes that Sarah had prepared for my trip. Losing luggage was not unusual but, this time, the airline had lost the bloody case somewhere between Frankfurt and Accra and I was not sure if it would turn up before my scheduled flight out.

It was only a mild irritation but it had been getting to me far more than usual because of the other priorities on my mind. Lost luggage was becoming a regular and annoying occurrence and it had happened just a few months before. I had been flying from Jeddah to Addis Ababa on an Ethiopian Airline flight, crammed amongst Haj pilgrims with their carpetbags and their antisocial habits of trying to cook curry on Butane stoves in the passenger aisle of the aircraft whilst flying at thirty-five thousand feet somewhere over Djibouti.

On that occasion, by chance, I had spotted my case amongst a million others stacked in a warehouse at Addis Ababa airport. But as all attempts to retrieve it failed I had had to bribe a customs man. But the bag still failed to reach me before I left so I had flown to Athens, then to Cyprus with the suitcase following behind from place to place until I was finally reunited with it in Cairo.

I related the story to Brigadier Forsyth and the Brigadier had laughed and tried, but failed, to outdo me with a similar tale.

As a result, I had already deduced in the earlier, more sober stages that the man actually hated being thought of as a domesticated family man. And I had also concluded that the Brigadier's own, less interesting tale, of a piece of hand luggage lost between Paris and Lisbon might well have been embellished. In other words, had I been my usual self, I would have noticed the clear signs of a bullshitting amateur and factored it into my own decision making.

But what had also been puzzling me all along but, again, insufficiently as it turned out, was that the name Forsyth was a new one.

As well as the contents of the ABC flight timetable I kept a mental list of the names of British military attachés and the list was, I thought, reasonably up to date. My thoroughness had rarely let me down – until then.

The tickets for my onward flight to South Africa were safe in my briefcase but, unfortunately, it also contained far more brochures on retirement property than technical fact sheets on products of possible interest to a military attaché.

Unlike the slightly younger Brigadier, I was at an age where I wanted to give up the jet setting and the bullshitting and become, at long last, a more domesticated family man. So, my motivation had been misdirected, my objectives, like the horizon, were becoming cloudy and my plans were already badly thought through.

Then there was that other story I had told the Brigadier after the discussion about lost luggage. How we had laughed about flying and travelling in Africa and the Middle East. Laughing and joking, we had played verbal table tennis with bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label and an ice bucket as a net and stories as the ball.

And I had believed I was winning it all – games, sets and hopefully the match. The Brigadier was already pouring more whisky and throwing more blocks of ice into my glass and I remember leaning back having thought of yet another story to tell.

“How do you travel on Nigerian Airlines without an airline ticket, Roy?”

By then, you see, we were on first name terms and shortened versions at that. Roy, the Brigadier had looked deliberately puzzled.

“I’ve no idea, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me, ha ha.” “Well, first you need a good local agent.”

“Yes, go on, ha ha.”

“Well now. Answer me this, Roy. What do you need to board a plane?”

“Uh, uh, ah yes, a boarding pass.”

“That’s it. So, you use your agent to give the fellow at the check-in desk a new, shiny ball pen with a promise that there’s a good chance of the matching fountain pen and the fancy box it all goes in, if he can get you a couple of boarding passes.”

“Ha ha. That’s a good one.”

“Of course, the only problem is getting on the plane when it is already totally overbooked with fifty people having already bribed the same check-in clerk whose desk is already piled high with free gifts.”

“Ha ha. So, what next?”

“Well, when the rumour spreads – and rumour is all you get because, as you know, Roy, there is no PA system – that the plane that’s sitting shimmering in the heat on the tarmac about half a mile away is yours, you run. Oh yes. You run like bloody hell. After all there’s no bus and you wouldn’t want to wait for it even if there was. The temperature is in the upper nineties and the humidity the same but you run. You sprint, you push and you shove and you deliberately trip up as many of your would-be fellow passengers as you can. The half-mile is done in less than two minutes. It’s Olympic standard running I can tell you and you’re carrying your bags as well. Then the first to arrive at the steps is the first to get a seat, ha ha.”

“Ha ha. That’s a good one. You want a top up?” “Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.”

That’s how it had been until the first huge drops of tropical rain had started to fall. Then, with the pretentious chandeliers in the hotel flickering warnings of an imminent power failure, I looked at my watch, decided I needed to relieve myself and went to the Gents toilet.

And now, oh yes – memories of another reflection. But, leaning, because I could hardly stand, at the grubby wash basin, I stared at the image of myself in the mirror.

It was not a pretty sight.

I tried desperately to clear the numbness from my brain and to remember my role as a professional businessman.

I stared at myself, splashed water onto my face in a forlorn attempt to re-direct my thoughts from Sarah and my trip to Cape Town back to the here and now and towards a potentially complex deal on army supplies. I knew I was making a big mistake.

Even in that state of mind, I knew there was a good chance I was going to make a rare error of judgment. But what could I have done? Time was of the essence and I had already decided I needed to get out of the mess I had been embroiled in for too long. It was all very urgent and I felt uncharacteristically impatient.

So, I went back to the bar where the Brigadier was still sitting, legs crossed with the whisky glasses and ice bucket on the table.

In fact, I didn't go directly back to the bar but watched him for a few seconds from the corner of the room. I watched the small, Ghanaian bartender in his red waistcoat, wiping his bar and putting glasses away and I looked at the few other white, hotel guests sitting around the room chatting. Then I looked at my watch and tried in vain to see the position of the hands.

And then the lights went out completely.

An intense flash of lightning outside coincided with a huge crash of thunder and the rain fell in torrents. There were a few cheers and some laughter from the other corner. The bartender went to light a few candles before the dim light of dusk outside had a chance to meet up with the deepening blackness of the clouds overhead. I, meanwhile, groped my way towards my seat and fell into my chair.

But I was met with a surprisingly straight and sober look from the Brigadier and I knew immediately that I had totally misjudged the amount the other man had drunk.

But it seemed that the Brigadier, on his own initiative, now wanted to talk business. It was not supposed to be like that because I was the one who needed to retain the initiative. I felt a sudden horror that spread like a hot flush through my body. The heat that flooded through my blood and spilled over into my brain told me that Brigadier Royston Forsyth had done far more homework on me than I had been able to do on him.

And my instincts later proved to be correct in every respect. Perhaps, indeed, the Brigadier had not had to do any homework at all but just read a file given to him by someone else. It was as though my trip to the lavatory had suddenly relieved me not only of the contents of my bladder but my ability to entertain a client.

Not only that but I could hardly see.

The room was now so dark and my eyes so unfocused that I could barely see the man's face. But I could hear him though and knew that the joking was over. His light, Scottish accent was as clear as the crystal chandelier had been before the power went off.

"So, Ollie. You mentioned earlier on that you would find it quite straightforward to arrange the shipment of certain items which, in principle, are already approved for export."

I can't remember if I had actually said that but the words were not those of someone trying to communicate under the influence of alcohol. I know I delayed my reply for far too long but my condition was not granting me much in the way of common

sense. And yet I knew I needed to retain some control or there might be unforeseen circumstances. I struggled with my own reply.

“Yes. Naturally it depends on the specification, the quantity, the value, how we are to be paid – that sort of thing.”

There was a mental list of other requirements but my brain fizzled out after raising just four of them. But it hadn't been a bad effort.

“Naturally,” replied Forsyth quickly, and then said, “So, when is your scheduled departure?”

I was unnerved. It was a style of spoken English that seemed to have changed radically since the lights went out and I found it hard to remember what I was supposed to be doing or when.

“Uh, tomorrow afternoon. Nairobi.” Forsyth leaned forward.

“Here's the list.”

I was then shocked at how prepared the Brigadier was.

The list had apparently been in the buff folder that had lain, unopened but in full view, on the table since we met. I opened it with fumbling, uncoordinated fingers to reveal a single sheet of paper, clipped to another, which apparently showed the British Embassy, Accra address. Watching me fumble, Forsyth detached the top sheet and pushed the bottom one towards me across the table.

“Not a huge amount as you can see. Tents, camouflage, a few civilian earth-moving vehicles, military camping supplies.

The problem is its destination. The shipping is critical.”

I had experienced these types of situations before. I was not that naïve. I also knew that every situation was different and with its own peculiarities but my mind was not up to its usual clear and instant analysis.

“So where do you want it shipped?” I asked.

“Chad. N'Djamena for transshipment north.”

This was not Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia or any of the other places I had assumed it might be. And my geography was still good despite my condition.

That the Libyan border stretched for five hundred miles or so across the north of Chad was also not lost on me. Neither was the fact that I was probably not expected to ask too many questions at this stage, or the deal might be off. A knowing, perhaps quizzical, look was all that I would normally have given in situations like this so I gave it the best I could.

And then, while my brain went around in circles, I leaned forward to take the paper, trying desperately to focus on its contents. There was no possibility of seeing it for my glasses were back at my hotel, the type was small and all I could see was a grey blur that extended about half way down the page. The candles didn't help either. There were, what appeared to be, figures on the right-hand side although it was hardly possible to decipher them. But I knew I had to try.

Forsyth was looking at me, perhaps trying to make out what sort of trader he was dealing with. I sat back in the chair, holding the paper to my face to hide it and trying

desperately, at the very least, to read some of the figures in the flickering light of a candle twenty feet away.

There were three columns and experience suggested they were lists of items required, some brief specifications, quantities and, probably, estimates of their cost. So, on that assumption, I glanced at the final figure that lay beneath the small line at the bottom. I saw a pound sign and six as yet indecipherable figures that ended in three zeros. So, with at least that much knowledge, I decided to place the sheet back on the table to appear to have finished my first superficial glance.

The Brigadier though was the first to speak again.

Perhaps he realised the difficulty I was having in reading it, for the diplomacy was obvious.

“Two hundred and forty thousand pounds FOB.”

“Yes, I see.”

I couldn't, but it was a faint remnant of my own diplomacy.

A quick mental sum was still possible, though. At twenty percent or so I could net perhaps forty-eight thousand pounds' profit or commission, depending how I handled it. But it was enough to top up the savings and to buy the house in Cape Town.

“We need it delivered before the end of January. Letter of Credit, payable to your company in the UK. Can you do it?”

Forsyth was now pushing me hard and didn't wait for an answer.

“We'll need a Pro-Forma Invoice of course to arrange for the credit. Under its terms, you will have to use a specified shipping company. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“So, when can we get the Pro Forma?”

“You'll have it within a week as soon as I return to UK.”

With very little else after that, we parted company. I was given the address of a shipping company in East London that I had only vaguely heard of and we swapped a few other details. But within half an hour I was back at my own, less prestigious hotel, drenched from walking through the tropical downpour.

The next day my lost suitcase finally caught up with me, but, with still no sign of George and not needing him now anyway as the deal clearly didn't involve Ghana at all, I left for the airport. I took the Ethiopian airline flight across Africa to Nairobi, connected with an overnight flight to Johannesburg and then on to Cape Town. En route, I studied the shopping list.

In Cape Town, in the October sun of southern-hemisphere spring I almost managed to forget about Brigadier Forsyth but, whilst there, made a few telephone calls to a dealer friend in Turkey and one in Hungary to set the ball in motion for when I returned home. It was not going to be easy and I knew I was going to have to speak to the bank to borrow some money to pay the two main suppliers in advance. I had faced this sort of thing before, though, so whilst it was not ideal I felt fairly comfortable with it.

Then I spent the next few days looking at property along roads towards the Cape. By the end of the fourth day, I had collected an armful of brochures, pictures of the local



scenery and property details to take home to Sarah to start on my plan of gentle persuasion.

But that was when my well-intentioned domestic plans clashed with the difficulties with Brigadier Forsyth's arms shipment.

But I need another drink urgently so excuse me.

I am picking up my typing two days later.

This is unfortunate as I was making such good progress.

But all thoughts about Forsyth bring on nightmares and I have had two days of feeling under the weather with Thomas's Disease.

But now I am sitting here by the table strewn with the contents of the box that has lain upstairs and unopened for many years.

Everything in that box brings back a flood of memories and amongst it are the fading papers to do with that Forsyth shipment.

Sorting the contents of that box is far from a calming process because every scrap I pull out I find I am forced to pore over in minute detail. Is it any wonder I dream about its contents?

It is when reading old office papers that I hear the clatter and ring of Beaty's typewriter as she typed them and I see my old desk, my pens and pencil sharpener. The smell of each piece of paper still carries with it the scent of where it had been and what it had done.

On one, I could clearly smell a hotel room in Beirut.

It was that room where I had sat and mended my broken suitcase with string pulled inch by inch from the top of the curtains and then threaded through the shattered corners of the case with a toothpick. The curtain had survived but without the high-quality pleats it had started with. But I had had plenty of time to do the laborious sewing job because a bomb had blown out most of the front of the hotel after I'd finished my dinner in the restaurant and there was no easy way through the rubble to the road outside until it had been cleared next morning.

Many of the papers in the box have grown brown spots, as though they were damp when I put them away. Some had been folded because they had been posted. Some were still in envelopes that carried old postage stamps and one of them looked as though parrot droppings might have been wiped from it. Some were bound with paper clips or staples that had started to rust and left brown marks when I removed them.

And inside one brown envelope were the documents related to the Forsyth shipment.

Last night I removed them one by one and lay them on the table for the first time for a quarter of a century.

On the top was the original shopping list from Brigadier Forsyth.

But Forsyth had not left me the other sheet of paper that had been attached which, I recall, showed the Embassy address. Perhaps it had been used merely to flash before my eyes to give the impression of some sort of official sanction.

So, I only have the shopping list, the quantities and the estimated costs but the typing is now very much easier to read than it had been when I first saw it.

But, behind this and all held together by a large rusty paper clip, were copies of all the other documents to do with that shipment.

There was a copy of my Pro-Forma invoice to the Shipping Company in East India Dock Road, whose name I had been given by Forsyth and, behind that, copies of quotations and invoices from my two, main suppliers and copies of my confirmation orders and dispatch instructions to each of them. It was neat and tidy and professional.

Then there was a faded copy of the Letter of Credit and copies of all the other documents and certificates that I had had to present to the bank in order to get paid.

Then, last of all, came the letter from the bank, itself, after I had presented the documents.

This was not a copy but the original with the blue ink signature of the bank manager and I read it for the first time for more than twenty-five years.

Despite the lapse of time, the letter's contents are still imprinted on my mind.

Even for a professional, dealing with Letters of Credit can be a reason why, even seasoned exporters die prematurely. You live on your nerves at the behest of some bank clerk seated in a darkened office somewhere and equipped only with a pair of spectacles and a quill pen of the sort used by Scrooge as he sat at his desk on Christmas Eve back in Dickens' time.

His job is to find just the smallest error in your own handiwork.

But for the exporter with a Letter of Credit issued by the Central Bank of Fairyland it can be a simple error of a comma being out of place, the failure to dot an I or cross a T. And it's not just your handiwork they judge. It can be a misspelt name or any other problem with the bank draft, the shipping documents or a certificate of origin which fail to read in quite the way that Scrooge believes it should.

And in places like Fairyland, these bespectacled clerks retain their mean images and add to their private wealth by a willingness to be bribed heavily to overlook such tiny errors.

Others are paid to find the errors. Either way it's a good opportunity to top up your salary. Unfortunately, in the case of Brigadier Forsyth's shipment, it was clear that I had come across a Scrooge being paid to find errors.

Last night, I had to refill my glass several times to give myself sufficient courage to re-read the letter for the first time for a quarter of a century. And there it was: "Payment cannot be made due to the following discrepancies . . ." it started.

I had stared at it in disbelief when I first saw it twenty-five years ago, and it had the same effect last night.

This sort of sight is sufficient to trigger nightmares that cause heart failure because what followed in that letter was a long list of irreparable problems. I had omitted this and not complied with that. My invoice was wrongly worded and the certificates of origin unacceptable. The list went on and on and I knew that no amount of bribing was going to make the responsible bank clerk overlook everything.

In effect, all hopes of a wealthy retirement were gone. I was not going to be paid but that was not all. My suppliers, of course, had expected their payments up front and I

had honoured these. I had paid in advance from the short-term bank loan secured on the house.

Oh yes, I lost my deposit good and proper.

And there is no Government Ombudsman to come to the aid of a one-man band small business. Tough, they say. Oh dear, what terribly bad luck.

I was out of pocket by a huge amount. After repaying the bank, my loss was over one hundred thousand pounds of hard-earned funds and my savings were virtually gone. It is fortunate, I suppose, that I had some to lose. Others have been known to put their houses up as security and lose everything.

As I read that bloody letter from the bank yesterday my stomach churned just as it had the first time. It was like looking at a copy of my own death warrant.

But, beneath that letter from the bank, were copies of all of the documents that I had meticulously prepared and sent to the bank and my real anguish was in knowing that what I had signed and prepared for submission to the bank had been perfectly good.

I was no start-up amateur. I was a professional.

I had been expert at my job and I had also taught Beaty to be as good as me so there were always two pairs of eyes to check everything.

I may have been an agent of sorts, voluntarily or otherwise, for British Intelligence, but I had also been a good export agent. I knew my job well. The important thing is that I knew, even at the time, that something had happened to those documents between leaving my office and arriving at the bank.

But then, along came another problem to compound everything else.

Two days before the letter came from the bank, Beaty failed to turn up for work.

A man, whose voice I did not recognize, called to say she was sick.

But Beaty had never gone sick in twenty-five years.

## **Beaty**

**Everything seemed to be collapsing around me** and I resorted to sitting alone in my office for several days. Beaty was the least of my problems during those days because family issues were also giving me a headache.

Robert had now moved with his job to Gloucester.

Sarah had already visited Robert and Anne at their new home and was buzzing with excitement about moving closer to them and so away from Croydon.

“We need to look at some houses, dear. It’ll be such a change. You need it now. It’s time to pack up our bags.”

This was such a change from a few months ago when we had sat eating roast lamb and I proposed moving to South Africa that I couldn’t grasp what was happening. To Sarah, Gloucester seemed like El Dorado. To me it seemed like Croydon but I was too preoccupied to argue so just went with the flow.

Sarah sensed something was bothering me but to raise the financial problems caused by Forsyth with her at this stage seemed inappropriate and I was still trying to find a way to resolve it. I know I should have been more open but domestic bills were always paid and, just before Forsyth, I'd bought the new Jaguar, the one that is still in the garage now.

So, to Sarah, everything looked fine.

But I finally decided it was time to break the pattern of a lifetime and talk about financial problems.

I fretted on the problem for several days before going home one night with a set of well thought through sentences to start a long and constructive conversation.

I planned to start by explaining why I had gone to Ghana and that the order I hoped to win would have been profitable enough to retire on. But it had been slightly more complicated than I anticipated and that this had happened and that had happened and there was a problem here and a last-minute hitch here and then the bloody banks this and the bloody banks that and some people were not to be trusted and that I was still trying to resolve this and that and soon I'd be ...

But I needn't have worried.

I had hardly got to the sentence about Ghana when: "Never mind, dear, that's life. Win some, lose some. We've got to keep on going. It'll be fine you see. Being close to Robert and Anne will be good. We'll be grandparents, yes? You'll be able to take them to school and pick them up. And it's so much nearer the countryside. The Cotswolds are right on our doorstep. It's not like here in Brick Terrace."

I didn't have the heart to remind her that Gloucester wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

Neither did I actually get to admit that the losses were actually over one hundred thousand pounds. But I still don't think it would have mattered to Sarah.

I got as far as, "but I've lost more than expected and, having had to repay the short-term bank loan, it's not looking as good as I . . ."

"Oh, never mind, dear. Beggars can't be choosers. Waste not want not. What you haven't had you never miss."

Sarah's reasons for everything being ship-shape and Bristol fashion, as she also used to say, were endless.

But that, in a nutshell, is why twenty-five years later I am still here in Gloucester and looking at the reflection of a wrinkled, eighty-six-year-old man in the window.

I had only ever argued with Sarah once and had no desire to argue with her again.

Living in Gloucester was what she seemed to want and I felt I now owed her something. The fact that Robert and Anne packed their bags and moved temporarily to Plymouth almost as soon as we moved to Gloucester made no difference. Sarah took that in her stride as well. "Ah well dear, we can visit them in Plymouth."

God knows, I had left her alone for far too long over the years. In effect, I felt I no longer had a leg to stand on – as she would have said.

I'm grateful to Sarah, though, because she never ever complained. She made our home life together easy and good, and that is why I then did as much as I could for her.

But the other woman in my life was, of course, Beaty.

I had never imagined Beaty with a man who cared about her health and wellbeing as much as I did Sarah's. But then, Miss Beatrice Collins, spinster of Brixton, had never taken a day's sick leave in her entire life as far as I knew. She would usually sit sniffing and coughing through any cold she ever caught leaving sodden handkerchiefs everywhere. The only other hindrance when Beaty was sick was the strong smell of menthol throat lozenges.

So, her sudden absence in the middle of all of this added to my problems.

But what does an employer who has just lost a large slice of his personal wealth overnight do when his only staff member goes sick at the same time?

Well, he does what any good employer does.

He forgets his enormous personal difficulties for a moment and decides to send his loyal employee a bunch of flowers by Interflora with a "Get Well Soon" card attached to the address that he has on file.

But still I heard nothing and Beaty failed to turn up for work after more than a fortnight.

Even the strange man who had called on her behalf never called again. By the third week I was getting worried and so, on my way back from London one day, I called at the address in Brixton to check. The house, itself, was exactly where and how I had imagined it.

But the person who opened the door of number 82 was definitely not Beaty.

The lady who came to the door was a dark, nutty brown with long black hair and a red spot on her forehead and clearly not of Beaty's pallid texture or even her ethnic origin. Beaty was as white as freshly fallen snow, a cheese and pickle sandwich and meat and two veg person and very clearly of South London ethnic origin.

This resident was of Indian descent and the waft of curry that followed the resident to her front door was not something I would have associated with Beaty's kitchen.

"Excuse me," I said, "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I am looking for Miss Beaty Collins. I understood she lived here."

'But I am Mrs Riaz, sir. My husband is Doctor Riaz. He is a doctor at St George's Hospital, sir. Very sorry, sir,' she said in her polite Indian way.

"So, do you know Miss Beaty Collins?" I asked, because I thought she lived here.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "But perhaps she is the lady who used to live here with her mother."

"That might be her," I said.

"If that is so, sir, she left several years ago, because we purchased this house about five years ago."

I was very surprised. Beaty had never mentioned anything about moving house but then, as usual, I never discussed personal matters so perhaps it was my fault.

So, I thanked her and was just about to leave when Mrs Riaz said, "But we have a forwarding address here, somewhere."

"Would you like me to find it?"

"Thank you," I said, and she disappeared along the passage. But then she turned and came back.

"Please to step inside, sir. I won't be a minute. By the way, sir, are you the person who recently sent flowers here?"

"Yes," I replied. "Miss Collins was my employee. I thought she was sick because she hadn't come to work. She worked for me for more than twenty-five years."

"Goodness," said Mrs Riaz, "that is a long time. I'm sorry, but naturally we couldn't take delivery of the flowers."

"I fully understand," I said, and she disappeared once more leaving me feeling hungry from the smell of curry.

A few minutes later, however, she returned with a torn off slip of paper.

"This is the forwarding address, sir."

I thanked her and left with an address that turned out to be just a twenty-minute walk from our own house in Croydon.

So, as the situation was becoming more and more mysterious, I decided to stop off at this other address.

Number 36 turned out to be yet another Victorian brick terraced house with a gate and a handkerchief sized patch of weeds and buddleia for a garden and faded net curtains. I rang the bell but heard nothing from inside. I also knocked several times but as there was still no sound I turned to go.

It was then that I saw the black face of a woman in the next house peering from the downstairs window so I waved and beckoned her to come out.

With that, a door scraped open and the woman appeared, wiping her hands on a cloth.

"Police?" she asked before I could say anything.

"No," I said, "Not at all. I was given this address as belonging to someone called Beaty Collins. I'm her boss. Is something wrong?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. Why? What happened?"

"They found her body."

"What body?"

"The woman's body."

"Where, when?" I asked, wondering what had been going on.

"Near the bus stop, late one night."

I didn't stand around much longer but phoned the police and was asked to call in.

But I first phoned Sarah to say I'd be late and why.

Sarah was shocked and far more upset about Beauty than about the loss of money.

I left her in tears on the phone but promised to be home soon. Then I called into the police station where I asked some questions and made a brief statement.

But what could I say?

Loyal employee of mine for twenty-five years – very good worker – she was single – no family I knew of after her old mother died – suddenly went off sick – very unusual. I'd had a phone call from a man who didn't give his name. I'd then tried the Interflora idea – got redirected by the new home owner to the house in Croydon – found out she'd died – phoned police.

And what did the desk sergeant tell me?

That Beauty's body had been found early one morning in an alley way close to the bus stop at the end of her road.

Ambulance was called but pronounced dead at scene. Middle-aged lady, dressed in a pink cardigan, grey skirt and a coat and a purse in the handbag identified her as one Beatrice Collins of the Croydon address. Police had found nothing in the said house except personal things, a drawer full of electricity bills and such like, which confirmed her name, but little else. No bank statements, not even any pay slips or other evidence what she did or where her income came from. Complete mystery. Police thought there were signs of a break-in at the rear because the door handle was broken which was why they came twice. But no signs of anything having been taken so assumed the lock had been broken for some time. Not pursued. TV, clothes, neat piles of women's magazines, a bookshelf laden with romantic novels, a single bed with clothes neatly hung in a wardrobe, a bathroom with a medicine cabinet full of cough mixture and menthol throat lozenges and a black cat, wandering around looking lost with its food dish empty. No evidence of any family except a letter found from someone in Brentwood in Essex who turned out to be a cousin and only known living relative. Cousin identified body but confirmed they hadn't seen each other for several years. Cousin claimed she was a lonely widow who often got depressed. Work for a small export business was her only interest in life. Post mortem, death certificate. No known cause of death so went down as natural causes. Cremation had taken place just two weeks ago.

"No pay slips, officer?"

"Sorry, sir. Nothing. You paid her regularly?"

"Of course, properly, by cheque, national insurance everything."

"Sorry sir, there was nothing. Not even a working telephone in the house. Otherwise we might have contacted you."

"So, who do you think it was who called me, Sergeant?"

Whoever it was said she was sick, not that she'd died."

"No idea sir. Sorry."

And that was that, also.

"Thank you for calling in Mr Thomas and I'm sorry you weren't notified but we had no way of knowing you were her employer. There was just nothing much in the house. Strange but it happens sometimes."

I was about to leave when I thought of something else.

"Is it possible you could give me the address of Beaty's cousin in Brentwood?" I asked. "It's just that she has a few personal belongings in my office which I could return to her." "I don't see why not, sir."

I left the police station scratching my head, but with a piece of paper with the address and telephone number of a Mrs Dorothy Fletcher.

Something wasn't quite right here, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Beaty had sat opposite me in my office for a quarter of a century and had kept it running with undisputed efficiency through all my prolonged and frequent absences. But her private life had been, and still was, a complete mystery. But I had never intruded, you see.

When I got home I updated Sarah on the news and she burst into tears yet again.

"Poor Beaty," she sobbed. "She was always such a worried woman, dear. She was as worried for you as much as for herself. You should have talked to her, you know. She never said much when she phoned here – mostly just to ask if I'd heard from you."

"She phoned? Did she phone often?" I asked, surprised. "Only sometimes," Sarah replied. "She was just checking if I was alright. I think she worried about me when you were away. It's all very sad."

And as Sarah said the last few words she had a look in her eyes that I was to see more and more as we grew older. Sarah knew far more about everything than I thought.

"What else did she say, my love?" I asked with my arm wrapped around Sarah and wiping her tears with my hand.

"Not much. Just that she was worried." "Worried for whom?"

"Me, you, herself." "Herself?"

"Oh yes, she hated the job you know." "Hated me?"

"No not you. She hated the job. In fact, she was always very concerned about you. She just seemed under pressure from somewhere."

"Pressure?"

"Her family, I think."

"What family? She only had her old mother."

"Maybe not her family, but something else or somebody else."

With that Sarah started to cry again and we never discussed it again but I now wish we had.

The following day I telephoned Beaty's cousin, Dorothy Fletcher.

"Oh, yes," she said when I introduced myself, "Beaty mentioned you and her job. Export business, wasn't it? We rarely saw her but it was the only thing she seemed to do. She didn't seem to have much else. She always seemed very lonely. We invited her here for Christmas once but she declined."

We talked for a while about how good Beaty had been. Then I asked my question.



“Did she ever mention a Major Donaldson?”

“Oh yes,” Mrs Fletcher said. “Only once but I will never forget it. It was after my aunt’s, Beaty’s mum’s, funeral and my husband and I briefly went back to Beaty’s house in Brixton because she wanted to give me some things that had belonged to my aunt. She was, of course, already dreadfully upset about her mother but, while we were at the house, she had a phone call. It was that Major. She was even more upset afterwards. We had a terrible time trying to console her.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know what he said but she was telling him to leave her alone. She was terribly upset and trying to say she had just buried her mother. It went on for ten minutes or so.”

“Do you know why he phoned?”

“No but Beaty was a very nervous and lonely woman, Mr Thomas. She didn’t want to talk about it. But she did mention his name and that is why I know it. It sounded to me like he was her boss. In fact, I always thought he was until you just telephoned. That Major Donaldson was not a nice man but she seemed completely under his control.”

“Why do you think Beaty died?” I asked.

“I don’t know. The post mortem was inconclusive. But she was only fifty-five, Mr Thomas. I think she died of loneliness and a broken heart. I think she had just had enough but I don’t think we’ll ever know, for certain.”

It was three weeks after that and two months after the Forsyth shipment problem that I learned more.

I was already feeling increasingly concerned about Beaty’s death and Beaty’s cousin’s words had done nothing to ease my suspicions. But it just didn’t add up to me. Something was wrong.

In particular, who was the person who had phoned me?

Whoever it was had phoned about two days before she was found dead.

So, because I was still feeling genuinely upset about it, one morning I decided to check through the drawers of her desk.

But she had left very little behind. It was as though she knew she was leaving and had cleared everything pens, paper and spare typewriter ribbons.

The copies of the documents for the disastrous Forsyth shipment were still in a folder on her desk. I was tired of reading and re-reading them since the bank refused payment and decided to put them in an empty drawer in Beaty’s desk.

But, as usual, I couldn’t resist one last look.

I had gone through them over and over again to check for accuracy before I submitted them because they were so vital.

They were, I had thought, in perfect good order.

I had decided that they had not been rejected.

I felt that I had been stitched up and my suspicions about Beaty’s involvement started to grow.

I had checked several times with the shipping company who said they knew nothing. They said the documents they had given me to present to the bank had been perfectly correct and I agreed with them. They pleaded ignorance, threw their hands up in regret and shrugged. Naturally, each of my suppliers including the shipping company had been paid so they weren't too bothered. The shipment had gone and presumably arrived at its final destination. They confirmed all that, which was as far as their responsibilities went.

But, somewhere along the route something had happened.

Somewhere between my office and the bank, the documents had been changed.

But not only did Beaty disappear.

Forsyth disappeared as well.

I telephoned the British Embassy in Accra and was told they had no record of a Brigadier Forsyth ever being based there. I really had made one very serious mistake. But as Donaldson was gone my suspicions now centred on Beaty and Forsyth.

I sat in her chair next to her desk with its empty drawers trying to fathom out what might have happened. I picked up one of her hair clips off the floor and stuck it in the drawer as though she might be coming back to reclaim it.

And then I heard her voice, inside my head.

"I'll leave it there, Mr Thomas, for safe keeping. Just in case.

You never know."

We didn't keep a safe in the office as I didn't deal in cash, but Beaty would, on occasion put an order, a letter, a cable or, later, a telex message inside my ABC Flight Timetable. This was a fat book, rather like Yellow Pages and ideal for inserting such things. I was, in fact, a walking, talking version of it. It was my travel agent and was very personal to me.

Beaty knew this.

I went to my own desk and took it out of the drawer for the first time since I'd used it to work out the best flights and times to fly to Accra, Nairobi and on to Cape Town.

And out fell a piece of paper. Printed at the top was the address of the military hospital in Cyprus. I knew the hospital quite well. There was its telephone and telex address in Larnaca.

It was a strange piece of paper to be in there.

But, beneath the printed name and address, someone had scribbled the name Credit Suisse, Zurich and what looked like a bank account number.

But then there was a name as though it was the account holder.

The name was clear – R. B. Forsyth.

I sat back staring at it. It hadn't been there before I went to Ghana.

Someone had put it there during the last two months.

But then I turned the sheet over and found something else.

This was written in Beaty's own handwriting.

“Dear Mr Thomas. I am so sorry. You did not deserve all this. Forgive me but I cannot live this lie any more. I hope you find this and hope it is enough for you to work out that there are things you should know. I have been living under increasing pressure. I have tried to tell you everything but it is very hard. I have now been told I must leave my employment. Yours, Beatrice Collins.”

My mind tumbled over itself trying to understand what she was saying.

Told to leave? Then it dawned on me.

It had been Donaldson who, twenty-five-years before, suggested that I needed some help in my office.

“Need to get a good secretary, old chap. Can’t be distracted by doing everything yourself. You need to concentrate on managing the business.”

“Not yet, Alex,” I’d said, “plenty of time and I can’t afford it yet anyway. Give me a year or so.”

A week later, though, Beaty had written to me as a complete stranger looking for a job.

Two weeks later I’d appointed her and twenty-five years later she was still there.

But it was now very clear.

Beaty had been planted by Donaldson and it looked to me as though somehow, probably through this man Forsyth, Donaldson had had the last laugh from beyond the grave.

## **Sarah**

**I need to skip twenty-five years because, having got so far,** it would be a pity not to live to complete this. But there is little for me to write about those intervening twenty-five years. It has all been very quiet. So, it is time for me to write about Sarah.

I have spent the best part of the last two years taking care of her whilst spending the other part coping with Thomas’s Disease – meaning the nightmares and the almost permanent state of moderate intoxication.

I’ll start with one of my nightmares in which Donaldson, in a fit of red faced rage and with spittle flying everywhere pulled out a gun and shot me. Had this been based on fact, that would have been the end of me but I was actually sat in the chair in front of Sarah’s log effect gas fire. I awoke with such a jolt that the whisky bottle emptied itself all down my front. But I had definitely heard a loud bang. I had a terrible waste of whisky in my mouth but as I could find no blood, I decided it must be something else.

Also, as the sound seemed to have come from upstairs, I swayed my way to the top of the stairs and, because I was holding my head with both hands to stop my head from thumping and to quell the drumming noise in my ears, opened the door with my foot. Then I tried to focus, though still expecting to witness a tragedy.

It was not as bad as I thought.

Sarah had moved in the bed and the arm that had, perhaps, tried in vain to pull herself into a sitting position had, instead, caught a metal tray of tea and toast that I thought I had put out of reach. Cold tea had soaked into the carpet. The cold toast, on the other hand, lay upside down beneath the bed at the head of a messy trail of butter and crumbs.

But my immediate concern was not the mess on the carpet.

Sarah still seemed to be half-asleep. Her arm was hanging outside the bedclothes and the sound coming from her throat was a faint, irregular gasping for air, like sobs, behind closed eyes as though she, too, was having a bad dream.

Trying not to breathe whisky fumes over her I bent over, tucking her arm under the blanket and whispering to her to wake up out of whatever awfulness was going on in her mind. It was as though she, too, had witnessed an assassination or heard a gunshot, perhaps for the first time. She mumbled something, incoherently, and I asked her what she was saying. But, instead, she gasped for air again as though unable to wake. So, I touched her cold cheek and stroked her forehead to bring her back into the land of consciousness. I took her other hand, pressing it as hard as I could without hurting her and then parted the strands of grey hair that covered her ear and I called her name, more loudly this time.

It seemed to work.

The mumbling stopped and her eyes seemed to move behind her closed lids. Her mouth opened, slightly, as though she wanted to speak, but nothing came except another sound like a gurgled, drawing of air. It had been like that just two nights before. It was as though she was awake but did not have the strength to break through a barrier of unconsciousness.

I felt utterly helpless but understood how she might be feeling. Fighting with nightmares is a similar experience.

After the first occasion, it had happened to Sarah, I had mentioned it to Dr Stephenson, during his routine visit. But he had merely listened, nodded his head gravely and continued to concentrate on measuring her blood pressure and holding her wrist.

I have opinions about doctors as well as opticians, dentists and barbers.

They seem to think that as long as they lay a cold stethoscope on your chest, stick a thermometer beneath your tongue and wrap a sphygmomanometer around your arm you'll be impressed, their vast skill and knowledge bound up in a few antique instruments that have been in use for a hundred years.

But I had also mentioned Sarah's situation to the nurse and will never forget how she had looked away. It was as though she hadn't heard me.

I sat there, watching Sarah and listening to her although my heart still pounded in my chest. After a while, her breathing became more regular and the closed eyes stopped their desperate searching. So, I let go of her hand gently and bent down to deal with the mess on the floor.

Then, with my head slowly clearing, I sat on the edge of the bed and watched her, wondering how she could sleep so much when, for the first time in sixty years all I needed to do was talk. I needed a long conversation but an answer to one simple question would have sufficed.

“What can I do, my love?”

But as all I got back was silence, I looked down at her.

Her skin looked grey and pale and her mouth was still slightly open. Her breathing was so shallow with just a gentle noise from her throat. I brushed away the wisps of hair from her forehead and then I kissed her cheek. But Sarah was starting to look different in a way I cannot describe and it worried me constantly. Her cheeks, too, felt cold as if they were reflecting the cooling of her personality and I had not seen her quite like that before. She had become very slow in turning over in bed and constantly complained of pains in her back and side and even her elbows.

I knew she was becoming quite weak and had painful sores.

I always helped her but usually she would wake up if I came into the room. The night I heard the gun in my sleep it was as though she was deeply asleep but unable to wake from whatever she was dreaming about.

I knew Dr Stephenson was concerned about her but she refused to go into hospital.

“She’s stubborn, Doctor,” I said although I knew I was excusing myself to the one person who would have been aware of how serious the situation was becoming. But I had no wish for her to go into hospital as I had made a pact with myself never to leave her at the mercy of others.

Sarah was my responsibility.

So, I pulled the sheet a little higher and, after a last look, went downstairs.

Occasionally, I would join her in, or on, the bed but this was becoming more and more unusual. I rarely felt tired enough to go to bed, preferring the chair downstairs. Despite the greater intimacy, I also hated the thought of lying there with my eyes wide open staring at the ceiling.

I would usually fall asleep in the chair by the log effect gas fire. If I wasn’t drinking, I sometimes switched the television on but, more often than not, I never watched it. A late-night film might be flickering away with the sound turned down so that I could listen for any sound from upstairs. They were visual distractions that I glanced at occasionally between mouthfuls of whisky but I never followed any of them.

More often, I listen to the radio at night – the BBC World Service, switching on in time to hear a few bars of “Sailing By”. The World Service is my lifeline to the world and radio is so much better for the imagination. But, often, the radio is mere background talk – conversation, like the babbling of friends. Sometimes I feel I am actively taking part but at other times I leave them to talk amongst themselves whilst I wander off, aimlessly amongst my own thoughts, memories and dreams.

Sometimes I annoy myself by listening to tripe. Music doesn’t interest me as much as it did Sarah. She liked all sorts of music – light music, classical music and church music, especially Christmas Carols. Sarah loved Christmas and it upsets me deeply now that on more than one occasion I was away.

But when we were younger she would always go out carolling with groups of friends and neighbours armed with candles and song sheets and dressed in coats and scarves.

“Come on,” she used to say. “Come on, come and join us.

We need a good baritone. There will be mince pies for everyone at the end of it all.”

Smiling, laughing as she sang Good King Wenceslas, Away in a Manger, Once in Royal David's City. Those were her favourites and I always envied the simplicity. Bless her.

I never went of course, but I have been known to venture to the door to look out for her if I thought she was a little late. But it would have needed more than mince pies to persuade me to go. I like some church music, but Sarah thought my particular choice far too depressing.

Faure's Requiem would be the record I'd take with me on the Desert Island.

I'd take it to cheer me up and to remind me of life's fragility.

I like the words of the English translation and the deep emotion the music seems to stir. The Libera Me is the best part and I always remember the words. "Music for real men and for those not afraid to die, my love," I used to tell Sarah. And she would look at me and walk away disgusted.

"Don't run away. Faure's Requiem is not music for the faint hearted, my love," I would say, chasing after her. And I would quote from it when I caught her up or thought she was in the mood. Perhaps, she had ticked me off for some petty domestic offence.

"Oh! Full of terror am I, and I fear the trial to come. That day shall be a day of wrath, of calamity and misery. That day shall be a mighty one, and exceeding bitter."

Then we would both laugh and laugh until the tears came. "Oh, get away with you! You are a dreadful tease!"

That was my Sarah talking as she used to.

But once, I awoke at five thirty in a panic because I knew I had not checked Sarah for hours.

Getting up, only served to make my headache and the pain in my full bladder worse. My whisky glass fell from my lap to the floor and toppled over, but knowing that my head was not up to bending to retrieve it and that my bladder was at bursting point, I left it lying there, the last dregs of whisky soaking into the carpet. But I made it to the toilet.

I then went to the kitchen where I filled the kettle and, while it boiled, went upstairs. It was a slow ascent because my head felt detached from my body. But as I pushed open the bedroom door I could see Sarah asleep as usual.

She was lying on her back, her head turned slightly towards the window and her mouth slightly open. Being unable to bend too far I leaned on the bedside table with one hand, the other holding my throbbing head and looked down at her. In the light from the bedside lamp she looked so pale.

She had begun to look so much smaller towards the end and I knew she had become anaemic. Part of Dr Stephenson's daily cocktail of medicine was for this.

She moved slightly and her breathing faltered as though she might have heard me, but her eyes stayed shut.

For several years, I slept poorly beside her. If she moved or made even the faintest sound I would wake up – instantly. I could never manage seven or eight hours at a stretch. Two is often all I need. But lying by her side was the closest to bliss sometimes. The best times of my life have been spent like that. Just lying, wide

awake, watching her, listening to her breathing. I would often wake at five thirty or earlier although I might have only slept for an hour or so. But it was enough and often, after just a few minutes of lying, watching and listening I would get up.

To lie there any more would cause me to panic as though I had an appointment or a job to do. This was nonsense of course, but it is impossible to destroy a lifetime of habit. Sometimes, though, I would fight the urge to get up. Sometimes I would continue to lie there, looking at her, touching her face, pushing the hair from her forehead or stroking her cheek. Sometimes I would feel I wanted more than that because my body felt her closeness. When we were young we would make love in the early morning.

My gentle touching of her cheek and hair would be just the start. I would move my hand along her neck, around her ears, caressing and brushing her hair, perhaps moving closer to touch her ear with my lips. Then I would run my fingers around her neck and down between her breasts. That was when she would move towards me. Her eyes would open then. Or perhaps she would smile, giggle or murmur with her eyes still closed. I always knew when she was ready. We always preferred mornings.

Mornings are fresh, new and unspoiled.

Mornings feel uncluttered like fresh beginnings whereas night times are invariably spoiled by a mind that's full of trouble, tension and guilt.

Night times are endings but mornings are the start.

But my life had become a time of constant nights with the nightmares that went with them.

Towards the end, Sarah would still stir if I touched her.

Her eyes would open as though she was responding as she used to. But, at other times, she seemed totally unaware of what I was doing. She would lie, perfectly still, her eyes firmly closed as though she had also lost her sense of touch.

The sense of intimacy that simple caressing gives is something I missed, dreadfully. I missed her responding, her quiet murmuring, her smile, with her eyes still closed. I missed the look of contentment on her face and I missed her touching and holding me. I missed the sharing and the togetherness and I missed her voice. But, more than anything, I missed her company.

The days had become long and monotonous and the nights dominated by sweating headaches and nightmares.

I still possessed enough energy to walk and even to take the car out occasionally.

Perhaps, at eighty-six, I am too old to be driving on modern, congested roads but the desire is still there. I like to see long and winding roads, from behind a leather steering wheel. I want to watch green fields flash by as Sarah and I drive to nowhere in particular.

I still want to drive over hump backed bridges through country lanes, to picnic in woods, to have a ferry ticket in the glove compartment and to park with a view to a distant horizon. I want to share that view and know that when we arrive, there would be yet another view to share over the next horizon or around the next bend.

Desires still lurked somewhere, deep in my body and soul and they manifest themselves in many ways.

I wanted to abandon the bloody walking stick.

I wanted to explore on foot, even if it was just undiscovered back streets of Gloucester. But more than anything I wanted Sarah to be with me on those walks and drives. I had no real desire to walk alone anymore. I have spent too many years doing that. I wanted to take Sarah on holiday, to the sea, to listen together to the rolling waves and the screaming gulls, to breathe the windy, salty air, to sit on a stone wall eating fish and chips and to poke sticks into slimy, rock pools.

I still wanted to walk with her through woods kicking dry leaves that smelt of autumn.

I needed to have her beside me at the supermarket because she was far better at shopping than I was. And I wanted to hold her hand and to make love again when the dawn was still breaking.

So, that morning, I whispered to her as I bent over her still holding my aching back.

“I want our life to start again, my love.”

I was tired of the daydreaming and the nightmares and fed up with the repeats and the mental videos of my past life. I wanted my life to start again, to make amends, to put right whatever it was I might have done wrong and to spend time with the most important person in my life. In the cold light of dawn, I wanted my life back not because it had been wasted but because most of it had been good. It was just that there were a few things I still did not fully understand and there were some big corrections I still needed to make.

I wasn't finished yet.

But suddenly my legs felt very weak.

I sank slowly to my knees by the bedside and then, leaning on the blanket that covered Sarah, I reached beneath it to hold her hand. I held it and squeezed it, willing her to wake up and talk to me. But still her eyes stayed closed. And then, my own eyes closed and still kneeling, but with my head now resting on the pillow next to hers, I drifted off to sleep.

It was the best sleep I had had for many a long week. I would have been quite happy to die there and then. But death is not allowed to arrive so blissfully at a selected point in time.

And this sleep didn't last long enough because at seven o'clock, on schedule, the radio switched itself on and I was already dreaming when it came on.

It wasn't a nightmare this time but, in my sleep, I had been watching a radar signal. A thin line of rotating light was picking up brighter, slowly moving spots of lights and there was a sense of excitement with someone saying something into my ear.

“Come on Ollie, jump to it old chap. Bandits, three o'clock.”

Then I was hearing the radar as it blipped – short, sharp pips.

At the seven o'clock pips on Radio 4, consciousness dawned and, slowly, I opened my eyes.

And there before me – how wonderful! I will never forget that sight.

Next to mine, was a pair of light blue eyes topped by eyelashes and grey eyebrows. These eyes blinked at me, slowly, and the corners creased just a little. I could feel



my hand beneath the blanket. It was warm and it was holding another and I felt mine being squeezed very gently.

It was enough.

My eyes filled with tears.

I stayed there, unmoving, unembarrassed as a trickle of salty fluid ran down my cheek to the pillow because Sarah's eyes were so close to mine. They were inches from me, but too close for me to see clearly as my glasses had fallen off somewhere. The eyes seemed to watch me as I sniffed back the water that was running inside my nose. They watched and seemed to take on a much softer look. No tears formed in those other eyes but, instead, the hand inside my own moved and squeezed it just a little harder. I felt it.

And then the creases near the blue eyes next to mine grew deeper.

This was enough.

I had no wish for anything else now.

I would have happily stayed like that forever. To die at that moment would have been perfectly acceptable. To have died, perhaps, at that moment would have been best for everyone.

But Sarah spoilt the moment.

"Hello dear," I heard her whisper.

I was unsure if she could see the wetness on my cheeks but her words seemed to stop the hard ache that was growing in my throat. I sniffed again, my wet nose just inches from hers.

"What are you doing?" she said.

But I had no answer ready.

All I knew was that my head still felt light, my eyes were sore and my back, arm, and now my knees, ached. So, I said the only thing that came to me. Nothing else seemed appropriate. I said it because I felt slightly absurd kneeling and half lying there. My knee joints were crumpled, my back bent double and my hand was inside hers. Whether, too, it was a symptom of the hangover, I am not sure, either. Perhaps it was the faint, seven o'clock news headlines that had just started on the radio. But, more than anything it was because, in my mind,

I was still hearing the pips and watching the radar screen. It was the only reply that came to me.

"Bandits my love. Need to scramble," I said.

Sarah's eyes were looking at me, unsure, and the look on her face changed. And then she spoke the three words I had wanted to hear her say for weeks.

"Well I never," she whispered.

And her strength was still enough for her to continue. "Dreaming," she said.

I raised my aching head.

"Oh no, I saw them on the radar," I said.

The greyish blue blur of her eyes stared blankly at me. It was clear she did not understand, so I just looked deep into them as best I could.

I love Sarah's eyes.

I love the questions they ask. I love their scepticism, their doubt and their playful mocking. I love their sincerity, their innocence and their uncertainty. But, most of all I loved their familiarity.

I smiled at her and kissed her cool cheek and then wiped my own wet one with my hand.

"But," I said, "you know the real problem?"

Her eyes still looked at me and I paused, just for a second.

"I can't get up," I said.

And then I wanted to laugh and to cry all at the same time and for Sarah to join in and laugh as well. I looked down at her, willing her to join me, but as so often, her sense of humour, like her sense of touch, seemed to have gone.

I waited just a second or so and tried again.

"I think I've broken both my legs and probably my back," I said.

But as she still didn't laugh, I struggled to stand up, holding my back.

And then she spoke, but no longer was it a whisper.

"Whisky," she said.

How, in God's name, I wondered, did she know that? Could she smell it on my breath? I breathed into my hand and smelt it but, to me, there was nothing except a sour dryness and, anyway, it was several hours since the last glassful.

So, had she heard me, perhaps? But she had been asleep and I thought I had been very quiet. Perhaps, in my dreaming, I had laughed or even cried, or perhaps she had heard the chinking of the bottle against the glass or perhaps she had seen me lose my balance when I tried to stand up. I even wondered if she had crept downstairs and watched me but the notion was absurd.

"Nonsense," I said, "just a tippie before I came to bed."

"Did you come to bed, dear?" she said and I was shocked at that, too. The blue eyes that I could barely see were probably mocking me now but I was still trying to straighten my back, arching it with my hands behind, checking the functioning and bending it back into shape.

But then I knelt down again and whispered with my lips pressed directly to her ear.

"How, on earth, do you know what I do, Mrs Thomas?" I thought I could see her trying to smile, just a little.

"I know everything Mr Thomas. Anyway, you didn't kiss me."

I couldn't help myself. I kissed her again and sat down on the bed, felt for her hand in the warmth of the sheet and held it. But her hand moved as though she wanted to disentangle it and the moment, that I wished would last forever, was over.

So, I went to the window and peered out from behind the curtain.

Daylight was still failing to make any impact on night.

I wiped some condensation from the glass and looked out to where the street light continued to do its dismal best. The road looked wet and our small, overgrown lawn with its scattering of decaying, wet leaves that had fallen a month ago, looked muddy. But the cherry tree was bathed in an unnatural orange glow from the street light. It was swaying in a cold wind that swept down the street. A car drove slowly past, its tyres hissing in the wetness and its headlights reflecting off the road. Then I turned around again to look back at Sarah.

She was looking the other way, to the side where I had been kneeling. Then I watched her move, quite sharply as though something was digging into her back.

She made a sound like a short cry and her head suddenly turned to face me. Her eyes opened and I moved quickly over to the bed. Her face had crumpled as though she was in pain.

“What is it?” I asked her but she only groaned.

“What is it, my love?”

Tiny beads of sweat were forming on her forehead but it was still cold to touch. I had seen it before and thought it might be pain from the one kidney that still worked but I was certain the spasm would disappear as soon as it appeared.

Sarah felt the pain but I felt the powerlessness to help.

But I knew it wasn't just the kidney. There were other problems. She was not eating properly. That was why she was starting to look so small and thin. But still she refused to go into hospital.

“What can they do?” she would say. “How will you manage?”

Those were her reasons and, for some reason, I did not argue.

But, now, in the dim light, I could see she looked frightened and it then started to frighten me. I sat on the bed, my hand resting on her cold, damp forehead. The spasm had gone but her eyes were shut and she was still frowning. I held her hand and squeezed it but she remained with her eyes closed.

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say and to do so much – but what?

“Robert and Anne are coming,” I said, but as soon as I had said it I realized it sounded as though I was admitting openly to her that time might be running out.

“I phoned him,” I said, repeating myself. But her eyes still remained shut and I was not sure if she had heard or was even listening. It was as though she was again cutting herself off from me.

This was one of the worst things.

It was as though she was not interested in seeing or hearing.

At other times, though, she was still quite sharp. Her accusation of just minutes before that I might have been drinking was shrewd. I found it so depressing and it had been like that for months now although I felt the trend seemed to be towards losing interest in what was going on. I tried again.

“Robert said they'd fly over for Christmas.”

There was still no reply and her eyes stayed shut.

“Sarah, my love?” I spoke loudly and then again, even more loudly. It was the frustration.

“Sarah. My love.” I squeezed her hand and moved my face close to hers.

“You want to see Robert – and Anne?” I asked.

I then tried to whisper, but still she did not respond. But I was desperate to find things to keep her interested. And then, something happened that I will never forget.

Another spasm seemed to rack her and she groaned loudly. Then she spoke and it shocked me.

“Help me,” she said.

Still her eyes were shut and her face looked full of fear. I held her hand, firmly, unsure now of what to do or say. I felt totally helpless.

“Help me,” she said again, her voice fainter and coming through almost closed lips. I bent down so close that I was touching her lips with my own. I was desperate to kiss her, talk to her, help her. I was racked with anguish, uncertainty and panic about what to do.

“Sarah, my love. I’m here. Everything’s alright.”

She took a deep breath, coughed weakly and then relaxed into the pillow again.

And all I could do was wait and watch as her head sank onto the pillow and fell to one side.

Then her breathing stopped.

It was only for a few seconds but, just as I was beginning to panic, it started again with a sudden gasp and a fluid sound from her chest. I clung to her hand, desperately looking at her, my other hand gently pushing cold, damp strands of hair from her forehead.

I sat there for what seemed like an eternity, unable to move as I watched the blanket across her chest rise and fall, irregularly and just perceptibly. Occasionally I moved my position just to counter the numbness in my own legs. My mouth was now seriously dry, my head still throbbed and I was desperately in need of a cup of tea but I just could not leave her even to go down to the kitchen.

I thought about telephoning the clinic but that was a constant dilemma because I was concerned that, if I did, decisions about what to do would be taken out of my hands and Sarah had been saying for months that she did not want to leave home – ever.

“It’s safer here,” she would say.

She had made me promise not to leave her or allow her to be moved to hospital. And I had agreed. I agreed because I wanted to do what she wanted, although common sense sometimes suggested that, perhaps, this might not be in her best interests. But, neither did I want her to go into hospital with its lack of privacy and even more depressing undertones. If there was to be some quality of life, better that it should meet both our wishes. But then, at other times, I doubted that wisdom. And so the torment went on.

Finally, as her breathing became deeper and more regular and she seemed more comfortable, I took my hand away and crept downstairs for my tea.

But I knew that she had, once more, said the words that constantly went around and around in my head.

“I know everything, Mr Thomas.”

By midday both the nurse and doctor had called and Sarah had been awake while they were there. To me she seemed better though very tired. After they went I made her another cup of tea.

The nurse had washed her and also took an advanced order for a ‘Meals on Wheels Christmas Lunch Special’.

“It’s very good, Mr Thomas. Nice big dinner of turkey, stuffing, all the trimmings and you get a pudding as well with custard.”

I said to her, “But November has hardly started.”

“Better early than never, Mr Thomas.”

“But how often will they be serving the Special between now and Christmas?” I asked.

“Now don’t start on me, Mr Thomas. After a week, I’m beginning to know you only too well. It’ll be nice, you see. Try to look forward to it.”

I was surely tempted to remind whatever her name was that Marmite on toast with a few glasses of Bell’s as pudding was also nice. I also felt like telling her that after eighty-six Christmas lunches could they perhaps try using some imagination and invent something new instead.

Instead, I said: “Thanks. I’ll look forward to it. If I don’t finish it, you can eat the leftovers.”

Three days later, things changed.

Sarah seemed to be asleep, her mouth, as ever, just slightly open and the wisps of grey hair just falling across her forehead.

As usual, I brushed them to one side and gently kissed her cheek. It was even cooler than normal, but the bedroom, too felt cold as though I might have left the window open. So, I checked, pulled the curtain and briefly looked outside.

The wind had dropped and the cherry tree hung motionless. The road glistened with wetness as usual but whether it was rain or frost I could not tell. But, as expected, the window was shut so I drew the curtains again and returned to the bedside, knelt down, brushed Sarah’s cool cheek with my fingers again and gently pulled back the blanket to search for her hand to wake her.

This was also nothing unusual.

I had been doing exactly that for weeks and always it was the same routine. I would leave the landing light on, creep in, check if she was awake, brush her cheek with my hand, then lightly with my lips, then go to the window. Sometimes I would gently brush her hair back or comb it gently. Sometimes she would stir a little, perhaps murmur something. Then I would kneel, then feel for her hand beneath the blanket, hold it, perhaps squeeze it a little and stay like that for as long as my knees and back held out.

Tonight, was different.

What I felt beneath the blanket shocked me.

I felt the blood drain from my veins because her arm was as cool as her face. My own, warm, hand felt its way down her arm to her hand. Her hand, too, was cold and it seemed to have become bent inwards in an odd way.

My own hand stopped for a moment near her wrist and I moved my left hand to touch her face that was so close to mine.

Then, with the blood still draining from my body I reached for her fingers. They, too, were cold. They felt hard and seemed to open again involuntarily. In a sudden rush of horror, I released my own hand and held her face again, this time with both hands. Then I cupped it in my hands but more firmly than usual. Then I pressed my hand onto her cold forehead and all around her face, around her ears, across her head, around her neck and then across her cheeks again. I moved her hair back and tugged at it very slightly and then bent to kiss her fully on her cold lips.

She did not move or respond.

I kissed her again and held her cheeks, trembling, feeling reluctantly but desperately for a pulse in her neck. But the trembling turned to shaking and I found I was holding all of her small head in my hands. I was shaking it, trembling all the time, pulling, caressing, pulling again and then tried desperately to pull her up from where she lay. I then collapsed and I fell onto the pillow beside her, tears pouring from my eyes.

Twenty-four hours later, I was alone again for the first time since I had discovered Sarah. I had spent the whole time barely knowing where I was or what I was doing. After a full two hours lying in the bedroom alongside Sarah, I had finally managed to telephone the doctor and then sank into a trancelike state of utter devastation, not knowing what I was thinking or doing.

Drained by a grief that I never fully understood was possible, I know I cried like a baby for what must have been hours. A doctor, a nurse, an ambulance and some other people whom I cannot remember ever having met before arrived at various times between midnight and the late morning. The doctor called again in the afternoon offering what help he could, but my body and mind was too numb and weakened by fatigue and utter desolation to understand what was being said to me.

All I remembered was the doctor offering to help if I wanted to go anywhere or if there was anyone else who needed to know urgently. Robert had been the only name I could think of, and the doctor had made the telephone call to Los Angeles for me, handing the phone over for me to speak to Robert for just a few moments.

And all I can remember saying to Robert was how desperately sorry I was that I had been downstairs and not with her at the time she passed away and that this hurt would stay with me for the rest of my life.

## **Robert**

**Robert and Anne arrived a day later**, both of them looking a lot older than I remembered. While Robert and I sat in chairs by the table opposite one another, Anne busied herself tidying the sitting room and in the kitchen preparing the first

proper meal that had been cooked there for months. Mostly, Robert and I sat in silence, passing clutter towards Anne and moving our feet to allow her to clear underneath.

But that day and the evening that followed is only a vague memory and I must have eventually fallen asleep in the chair.

I woke up very early next morning, crying and sobbing like a baby but trying desperately to control myself in case Robert or Anne might hear. My cheeks were wet but my mouth was dry and my bladder felt almost ready to burst. But I sat, unable to move as reality kept washing over me.

Slowly I recovered some sense of order and, as all seemed quiet upstairs where Robert and Anne were, I assumed, still asleep I first went to relieve myself and then to sit in the kitchen for a while. I drank a glass of cold water as I waited for the kettle to boil. Then, before it had boiled, I got up, washed in the kitchen sink, shaved as best as I could manage with a blunt razor on three days of growth and made myself a pot of tea. The shave wasn't at all good as my hands were too shaky, so I stuck a few newspaper patches on my face to absorb the blood. But then, as I carried the tray to the sitting room, I heard the stairs creak.

It was a sound made by another person stepping on a certain part of the top step of the stairs and something I had not heard for a long time. For just a second, my eyes filled with tears again as I realized that, that was how it used to be when Sarah came downstairs in the morning as I sat drinking my tea. But it was Robert's cough that stopped the tears from running too far down my sore face and I wiped them away just before Robert appeared.

We sat at the table and talked.

"Why didn't you tell us, Dad? Anne and I could have come over long ago to help."

"No need, Rob. Your mother didn't want it. No need to fuss was one of her favourite sayings. What will be, will be – that was another. What can they do? I don't want to be a burden.

You must remember what she was like, Robert?"

"But was she up to making a decision, Dad?"

"It was what she wanted, Robert. I tried. I suggested that we invited you to come for Christmas but no, she didn't seem bothered and she hasn't made it anyway. Fact is she has barely known what day, week or month it is for a long time."

"But that's terrible, Dad. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because we agreed to stick it out here, just the two of us, depending on one another and not reliant on others for as long as possible, that's why."

Robert fell silent, sipping tea, as though admonished.

"And you know what, Rob? It was the right thing to do. I have no regrets. What could you have done? Worried? What good is that? Remember her as she was, Rob. It has not been a very good year but at least we've been together and I would not have wanted it any other way. It was our decision, your mother's and mine. But it's not been easy I can tell you. I just wish I had been with her when she passed away."

I stopped, pulled off one of the bloody paper patches on my chin and dropped it on the floor. Tears were not far away and I swallowed hard, forcing myself to keep going.

“But I have other regrets, Rob. In fact, I have too many. I’ve sat here for too many hours over the last year or so pondering on the past. I’ve even been drinking a bit as well.”

Robert interrupted me.

“We noticed. Anne found dozens of empty glasses and bottles. You’re OK just now though aren’t you Dad? There’s nothing wrong with you, is there?”

I sat, staring into my empty tea mug.

“I’m OK I suppose. I dream too much. I think too much. I sit around too much. I go over the past too much. I don’t sleep much. I don’t eat much. I read the foreign sections of the paper too thoroughly. I go to the shop once a day. The bloody nurse comes in to see your mother. I look out of the window a lot. I scribble a lot in a notebook. I watch TV with the sound turned off because it’s absolute shit. I listen to similar shit on the radio.”

I looked up at my son and our eyes met for perhaps the first time in years.

“Thanks for coming, Robert.”

With that, I have to admit I choked on what felt like a hard lump and tears formed once more. They welled up, overflowed and ran down my cheeks.

And then Robert stood up, with his face in a strangely contorted shape. His eyes were bulging and he put an arm around my neck and his head on my shoulder. He seemed to sniff a bit, too.

But, seconds later, the top stair creaked again and we both heard it.

Robert sat down again, wiped his nose with his hand and picked up the two empty teacups ready to go to the kitchen just as Anne walked in wearing a dressing gown.

We both looked up, knowing our eyes were probably a bit red and our faces a little damp. But Anne spoke.

“So, did sleep do you some good?”

I had forgotten Anne’s American accent. Somehow, I hadn’t noticed it the night before.

“Thank you.”

“Could you take a little breakfast? Need to eat you know.

You’ve not been taking care of yourself.”

For some reason, I felt hungry and it surprised me.

“Yes,” I said.

“So, what do we normally have?”

I was going to say I normally have a hangover but thought better of it. Instead, I said, “Normally we have nothing.”

Anne wore glasses and she looked at me over the top just like my mother used to.



“You see, Rob, your father needs looking after.”

Anne was trying to act kindly but Robert sensed something slightly out of order with what she had said and the way that she said it.

“Dad’s OK, Anne. He’s doing fantastic. Why don’t you go back down to the store where you got the groceries last night – buy some eggs or something.”

Robert’s American way with words, too, suddenly became apparent and, as I realised how sensitive I still was to the intonation and the accent, I had a sudden flashback to another accent that I had recently heard in a nightmare.

“Jordanian,” I said aloud, completely forgetting I had live company.

“Pardon me?” Anne said, pouring herself a cup of tea and I looked at her.

“Jordanian,” I repeated. “Shula was Jordanian. Egg on toast would be nice.”

The rest of the day passed.

We talked about funeral arrangements, the house, the garden and what I might do with myself when they returned to California. The doctor and nurse called and sat talking with Anne and Robert while I excused myself to go and sit in the bathroom. The evening passed, another large dinner of steak and mashed potatoes was prepared and eaten, leaving me with an uncomfortable reminder of what indigestion felt like.

I asked Robert if he’d like to share a glass of whisky after the meal but, seeing Anne’s look, I withdrew the suggestion immediately by saying that perhaps it was inappropriate and, anyway, I was feeling unusually bloated.

The following morning, Robert came downstairs to find me again drinking tea at the table. It was six thirty.

“So, what’s with all the paper and notes, Dad?”

Robert was looking at the back of the table nearest the window where Anne had tried to neatly pile the clutter spread across the table.

“I was doing some sorting out – old papers. There’s another box upstairs that I’ve not looked at for thirty years.”

Robert leaned over and picked up a bundle.

“Old newspaper cuttings. Nineteen seventy-two. IRA.

Hijacks. What’s all this, Dad?”

“Old records, cuttings, that sort of thing.”

“You were out there, weren’t you, Dad? Middle East and other places.”

“Yes.”

“Mum never talked about what you did, you know. And you never said anything, either.”

“No.”

“Business wasn’t it, Dad? Export or something.” “Yes.”

Robert was still flipping through a small bundle. “What’s it all about, Dad?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“And this? An old invoice. Thomas Import Export Limited.”

Robert stopped, turning something over in his hand.

“Rifles, ammunition?”

“Put it back, Robert, it gives me nightmares.”

“Is this what you did for a living?”

“Sometimes.”

Robert put the pile down and looked towards me.

“You always were a bit of a mystery, Dad,” and he leaned over to pick up another pile.

“Leave it, son.”

I know Robert almost jumped out of his skin. I was very abrupt. But he then sat up holding another bundle of papers, his eyes almost gleaming.

“But what did you do, Dad? Mum said something once. I asked her where you were because I hadn’t seen you for weeks. It was years ago. I may have been about twelve.”

“What did your mother say?”

Robert seemed to struggle to remember.

“She said you were up to your old tricks again. I thought it sounded funny. You know Mum and her sayings, Dad. She was well known for them, wasn’t she? She had lots of others like that. He’s out, playing with fire again. That was a common expression. We always joked about her way with words, didn’t we? So, I asked her what she meant. She said you’d probably been – what was it? – operating incognito again – that was it.

I remember that exactly, Dad. Incognito she said. I’d never heard the word before. I asked her what she meant. ‘Ssh,’ she said, ‘your father’s work is secret.’ Then she said you were probably running around doing dirty work for others. She seemed cross if I remember. An off day I suppose. I ignored it.

But she went on a bit that night, if I remember.”

Robert stopped, trying to read a small square cut from an old newspaper but I found myself staring at him.

“What do you mean, she went on a bit?”

Robert continued trying to read a scrap of paper but put it down as though it was not as interesting as the last.

“It was many years ago. But it wasn’t the first time. She often grumbled about what you were up to. For God’s sake, Dad, you even missed Christmas once or twice. Mum was really upset. She used to sit by the fire, you remember, the one in the house in Croydon. Reading. Mum read a lot in those days. She regularly took books from the public library. Sometimes she would put her book down and look at the clock. I remember. I might have been doing homework. She worried a lot, Dad. She didn’t always show it. When you were home she was fine. But she worried about where you were, when you were coming home, what you were doing. The office would phone sometimes.”

“The office?”

“Yes – sometimes.”

“What office?” It was a ridiculous comment but I was imagining Donaldson’s Regent Street office.

“The Croydon office of course.”

“Uh, who called?”

“I suppose it was the old woman – the one who ran your office. Miss Collins, was it?”

“You knew about Beauty? She wasn’t that old.”

“We knew her as Miss Collins. She sometimes phoned when you were away. Except once.”

“Except once?”

“Yes, I remember quite clearly. It was one evening when I was doing my homework. It was a man. Typical RAF or Army officer accent or how I used to imagine it as a boy. It was a funny conversation, too. I remember. He asked to speak to Mum – Mrs Thomas he called her. I said Mum was out and could I help. He asked me to give Mum a message. I said OK, no problem. Then he said to tell her that Mr Reynolds was in Libya. I told him to hang on while I wrote it down just like Mum had told me to if someone called. Mr Reynolds. That was it. Mr Reynolds was in Libya.”

I was now sitting up, listening intently, my eyes unable to blink.

“Mr Reynolds? Christ almighty! What else did he say?”

“It was a long time ago, Dad. But it was as though Mum would understand because she knew Mr Reynolds as a friend or a business colleague of yours. Is that right, Dad? Was he? The guy said to tell Mum that Mr Reynolds was in Libya and then, very weird, he said to pass on the message that Libya was a red line. That’s it – a red line.”

Hitherto unconnected chunks of my twenty-five-year-old jigsaw had, suddenly, clicked together.

Even as Robert sat there talking idly and picking up odd pieces of old newspaper from the pile on the table, I could hear Sarah’s voice: “I know everything, Mr Thomas.”

What was also clear was that Sarah was expected to know what a red line was. And there was only one person who used that expression – Donaldson.

Donaldson used it to describe a place where I was likely to be followed or somehow tracked. God, himself, would need to intervene to help me if I ever stepped over the line. The red line was like the one on a pressure gage. Cross it and there would be an almighty explosion.

The red line was Donaldson’s boiling point.

“Don’t fuck up, old chap. You know it’s not in anyone’s interest. Think family, old chap, think pension, think security, think common sense and think bloody straight for once. Let’s not mess up. I know, let’s give this one red line status, shall we? There, that’ll show you why you can’t fuck this one up.”

My mind was in overdrive again.

I already knew that Sarah had known Beaty, at least via the occasional phone call.

But Donaldson?

Sarah, it seemed, had also known something about Reynolds and that I travelled abroad as Reynolds as well as Thomas, which was why she had used the expression incognito to Robert. "I know everything, Mr Thomas."

I pushed myself up from the chair, walked to the cupboard, brought out a fresh bottle of whisky and two glasses and sat down beside Robert again. "Dad, it's not yet seven thirty."

"I know."

I broke the bottle seal and unscrewed the cap.

Robert watched. The process was performed quickly and efficiently. It was followed by a quick inversion of both glasses, first holding them against the ceiling light to check for dregs from previous usage and within seconds both glasses were full of neat whisky. A moment later my glass was empty. "My God, Dad. Down the hatch like a professional. I've never seen that before. I can't do that. Not at seven thirty in the morning, anyway. I hope Anne isn't coming down."

Robert took a small sip, swallowed, then coughed as his throat burned and his eyes ran.

"Bit early for me, Dad."

I, meanwhile, was already pouring myself another.

"Life's a bloody sod, Robert, I said. "I wish I'd talked to your mother more now. God knows we've had enough time over the years. But I'd been trying to forget everything you see. Once I realized your mother had no interest in moving away from here I went into a type of mental limbo. I once tried to persuade her to pack our bags and go abroad but it was pointless. God knows why we stayed in this house, in this place, for so long. But your mother seemed to like it here. She seemed to like the familiarity and the domesticity. I assumed she liked having me around. I know I'd spent too much time away from home – far too much – but we could have been together, somewhere else – anywhere other than here."

"Perhaps she was frightened of strange places, Dad."

"No," I said, reality dawning, "I now think she was frightened of strange people, Rob."

My words tailed off and a silence fell. Robert tried sipping the whisky again and then picked up the conversation.

"You're depressed, Dad. Why don't you come over to the States after the funeral? See a bit of the world again if you miss it so much?"

"Perhaps. We'll see."

"But what else is eating you, Dad? There's something else besides Mum isn't there? What's all the stuff lying around here," Robert waved a hand at the boxes and piles of paper.

"Another mistake, I suppose," I said. "Old and dusty boxes should be left to gather more dust not opened up, peered into and sorted through. It has not exactly been a therapeutic pastime. It's what mainly gives me the nightmares, Rob."

“Then there has been the growing feeling gnawing away at me that your mother knew far more about the past than she ever let on. You’ve just proved it.

“But I’ve never been one to chat endlessly about this and that,” I continued. “I’ve always felt there were things best kept to oneself.

“I’ve also been wondering about my old sense of patriotism and wondering whether it has now worn off. Some things were so complicated, though. So complicated that I never really understood them myself and the misplaced patriotism meant I didn’t ask enough questions.

“But I’ve always struggled to know where to start telling someone. I struggled to know where to start with your mother. I was always waiting for the right time but the right time never came.

“Perhaps I’ve also struggled with a genuine desire to say something. After all, how can you explain willing complicity in doing things that, under different circumstances or on reflection many years later, you might consider wrong? I have, you see, done things which I can barely believe I had in me to do. But feelings of duty and responsibility do strange things to a man. Ask any soldier. Ask a politician.

“But then just as I started to think I might be coming to terms with it and that time was running out, your mother got ill and seemed to disappear into a sort of shell from which she never emerged – although she retained a certain ability to surprise me even until a few days ago.”

I paused to take another drink.

“Am I unique, Robert? Or are other men the same? Why is it that you can live with a woman for more than sixty years, be lost without her and yet be lost for words with her?

“But for me, a pint of beer with a friend always tasted better if we sat saying nothing.

“I don’t think I am alone in this. Men are not emotionally deficient just because they don’t reveal themselves to those they are close to. I can see how pouring your heart out to a friend like some women do is therapeutic but I’ve never been like that.

“I can talk. I can talk and discuss for hours. Talking is what I have done all my life. But I can’t chat. I find chat embarrassing and self-revealing.

“That is particularly true if I am required to chat about my inner thoughts. I clam up. I have to think where to start and how much detail to provide.

“I actually think men are far more emotionally charged than women, although it is never recognized and especially not by women. Women sometimes try to trigger a debate by saying something trite like ‘we need to talk about this’. Sarah used to try that many years ago. But that would be the trigger for me to clam up completely. I would go into a sort of panic and shut down completely.

“I always preferred to deal with facts not with trying to unravel or explain a feeling or a mood. Is it any wonder your mother used to bury her head in a romantic novel whilst I buried mine in the Daily Telegraph?

“I wasn’t deliberately trying to avoid discussing feelings. But because feelings and emotion are so impossible for anyone, man or woman, to fully fathom out I would fall silent. I would go into one of my panics and probably end up wandering to the garage to tinker with the car. I may have been tinkering but all the time, unbeknown

to your mother, I was trying to find the right words to come back in to talk. By that time, your mother had, of course, completely forgotten about it all. And, of course, the right words never came to me, anyway. After three hours of tinkering I would return although, by that time, mainly driven by hunger or thirst.

“I suppose it has taken me eighty-six years to realise some of this and it might explain why I have spent the last year talking to myself and to anyone who happened to wander into my dreams.

“Do you understand, Rob?” “Yes,” said Rob.

## Jim

**The funeral came and went although I can barely remember it.** Then Robert and Anne went home but I decided not to accept the invitation to go with them to Los Angeles. I still had things on my mind.

But let me now tell you about Jim because Jim threw spanners in the works that gave me even more to think about.

I have known Jim longer than I knew Sarah.

It was after New Year and I was sat at the table holding a Christmas card with a robin.

I knew it was from Jim because of the Teesside postmark on the envelope. But I hadn't bothered to open it because when it had arrived the so-called festive season, which commences in early November these days, was destined to last for weeks and drag well past the New Year. Long days and nights of monotony stretched before me.

So, this card with its pathetic depiction of a bird renowned for its association with happiness and the festive spirit of Christmas had sat amongst the clutter on the table for a fortnight or more awaiting the moment when I felt excited enough to want to open it. But with that feeling never having appeared and it being well past New Year I was about to toss it in the bin when I thought that, out of common courtesy, I should at least read it for the first time.

I took a quick look at the sad robin on its sprig of holly on the front and opened it to find a printed message, proof in two words that the art of poetic inspiration is also a thing of the past.

“Season's Greetings”, it said.

This drab card was enhanced by a spidery signature beneath. In years gone by it would have been neater and extended to at least ten words. The spending of just a little time would have been detected in that it would have included the recipient's names, Ollie and Sarah and there would have been a friendly wish with both senders' names, Jim and Flo.

But the only thing scrawled in blue ballpoint pen on this occasion was “Jim”.

That was it.

Normally Flo would write cards and Jim would add a few, scribbled attempts at humour on the back, words supposedly to remind us of our RAF days.

“I scrambled to get this off in time!”

“Sorry for being late. Haven’t been in a Mess like this for years!”

Then there were the occasional postcards from holidays with Jim’s brother, Eddie, and his sister-in-law Hilda.

“Ed and Flo are watching the ebb and flow in Skegness.”

It was childish humour of the bar variety which Sarah and Flo found utterly ridiculous. But there had been no humour this year and neither was there any sign of Flo’s backward-slanting signature. It struck me then that Flo had also passed away and I had a vision of Jim slumped in a chair, wrapped in a tartan blanket covered in dribble and the remains of his breakfast, in his conservatory in Sunderland.

Nevertheless, I have to say a small lump came to my throat.

Poor old Jim, I thought.

On the other hand, I thought, poor old Ollie. But at least I was not wrapped in a tartan blanket. I might have been slightly pissed and so only spilling Bell’s whisky on my trousers but I could still hobble to the off license and back.

I tried phoning Jim but only got his daughter, Mary, who had clearly moved into the house to take care of the one remaining geriatric occupant. And, yes, she confirmed that Flo had passed away a few weeks earlier, co-incidentally almost the same week as Sarah.

I told her to tell Jim that Sarah had also died and she did her courteous bit of offering condolences etcetera and said that Jim was asleep but that she was sure he would like to speak to me some time.

Finally, I said to her: “Would you give Jim another message for me? Tell him it was me who nailed Major Donaldson.”

Mary asked me to repeat it. I did so.

“Will he understand, Uncle Ollie?”

“Uh, I’m not sure. I don’t know, “I said because it was true.

After I put the phone down, I asked myself why I’d asked Mary to tell Jim that. What earthly reason had there been for mentioning the subject?

Then I realized why.

It was not a good reason but a possible explanation.

I was, as I have said, slightly pissed when I spoke to Mary but I decided it reflected my own geriatric affliction, the Thomas’s Disease, and I knew I was starting to believe some of my own dreams.

In a recent nightmare, I had watched Donaldson himself being shot in exactly the same way as that poor man David Reynolds. But in the nightmare, it had been me who had pulled the trigger and I was surrounded by hundreds of my old friends and colleagues going back to the war. William, Farouk, Farid, George Owusu and Moatassim were there. So were long dead friends from the squadron and so were Jack and Beaty and Betty from the Feathers. They were all standing around

watching, but no one was saying a word. There was utter silence until the gun went off at which point they all covered their ears and stood with their mouths open as though shocked by the violence. But still no-one said anything.

And Jim had also been there amongst the crowds, his face covered in blood stained bandages from his fresh burns. Jim was shaking his head as though in disbelief and it was he who then broke the long silence that followed in his Geordie accent.

“Aye, man – that’s something that is.”

It was Jim’s voice that woke me and, in my intoxicated state, my arms were thrashing about and I was shouting.

“Sorry, Jim, but the fucking bastard had it coming.”

Such is Thomas’s Disease.

But two days after I spoke to Mary, the phone rang.

I picked it up and waited for a squeaking and rustling sound to stop before I heard a voice. “Ollie?”

It sounded rough as though its owner might have been recovering from a bout of bronchitis. It was a voice that might well have aged even further over the last few months, but the Geordie accent even though it had only spoken one word was unmistakable.

“Jim?” I asked. “Aye,” Jim said.

There was another rustling sound as though the receiver was being moved from one hand to another and the speaker was still getting comfortable.

The accent brought with it a flood of memories and for just a fleeting moment my mind filled with a vision of Jim’s scarred face. For no apparent reason, I suddenly recalled Jim’s old joke about lady’s underwear made from Utility fabric and then about being with Jim at the cinema, a long ago, during the black out. We were watching “The First of the Few” and Jim had already started courting Flo.

“Aye, I suppose Flo might well be the last of the many,” he had joked and how right he had been.

Only a second or so had passed in time, but snippets of Jim’s companionship of fifty years flashed through my mind. One minute I was in the bar at the Hen and Chicken with more of Jim’s jokes and then it was the clearest vision of sitting in Jim’s conservatory surrounded by Flo’s indoor garden and Jim’s banana tree.

The phone squeaked once more. “Long time, Ollie,” Jim said gruffly.

I was still imagining Jim’s familiar, disfigured face, pock marked with the healed burns from his crash but then it changed to the bandaged face of my dream.

We exchanged a few simpler words and I expressed my sorrow about Flo and he did likewise about Sarah.

“Aye, it all comes to an end,” Jim said, sadly.

How right Jim was. Jim was eighty-nine going on ninety but, with his slow speech and gurgling cough, sounded more like a hundred and ninety and I was shocked.

But the shock was about to increase.



"I got your other message, Ollie," he eventually said. The comment registered only superficially because I was still distracted by how old Jim sounded.

"Message?" I asked.

"Aye, about Donaldson," Jim said.

Donaldson! The name suddenly focused my thoughts on that other matter and I wondered if Jim had really phoned to talk about Donaldson.

"You said it was you who nailed Donaldson, Ollie." "Yes," I said, "but it's not important."

There was a sound of Jim muttering something but it was completely incoherent. Finally, I caught up but then he said something that threw me completely.

"Donaldson's still alive, Ollie."

For a second I thought I had misheard.

"Say that again, Jim," I said.

"Donaldson's still alive."

I could still hardly believe what I was hearing.

For more than twenty-five years I had assumed he was dead. Shot in Beirut and pushing up the daises, as Farouk used to like saying.

For a while, I must have stammered or gone strangely incoherent. But this was quite understandable because everything I had believed for so long was suddenly unravelling. What's more the person unravelling it was my best friend. My entire life seemed to stall.

Slowly I recovered while Jim creaked, groaned and coughed on the other end of the phone.

"What? Donaldson's still alive, you say Jim? I thought the chap had had his chips years ago."

"Aye. There you are man. Life's a bugger."

"So what . . . how . . . where the hell is he then, Jim? And how the hell do you know?"

"I met an old friend at a Remembrance Day service. Flo and I got taken down to the Cenotaph."

"An old friend? Who the hell was that, Jim?"

"Jack Woodward."

"Jack Woodward?" I almost shouted.

"Aye, in a wheelchair. Ninety-two. But he's dead now. He died a month later I heard."

"Jack Woodward?" I shouted again. "I thought he was also long gone."

"Well, he's gone now, Ollie."

I sat there, holding the phone, my head in a whirl.

"But what about Donaldson?" I said. I still couldn't believe what Jim had just told me.

"Aye, still alive."

“So where does the bastard live?”

“Och! Somewhere near Oxford I heard.”

Jim’s vagueness and slow speaking slowly got to me and I said: “For fuck’s sake, Jim. I’ve spent twenty-five years thinking the bastard was lying, pushing up the daisies somewhere in a graveyard in Lebanon or somewhere. Now you tell me the bugger’s still alive. Where? For heaven’s sake, why don’t I know?”

I waited patiently for what seemed an eternity.

“Aye. He was living near Oxford. He sold the place in Edinburgh I understand and moved south. It was many years ago.”

Jim stopped and I waited, hoping for more, but nothing came.

“Oxford, you say. That’s just up the road. That’s too damned close for comfort. Where in Oxford, Jim?”

“Aye, not in Oxford,” said Jim.

I remember taking a deep breath, summoning as much patience as my increasing headache and beating chest allowed.

“So where, Jim? If not in Oxford, where?”

“Aye, near Oxford. He had some big mansion in a village I heard.”

“A bloody mansion?” I heard my voice pick up an octave.

“Aye, as I say he sold up. His kids were grown up.”

The news of offspring was also fresh.

“Kids, Jim? What kids?”

“Och man. His kids.”

“I didn’t know he had kids!” I was almost beside myself with shock.

“Aye, he had them all in public school in Repton or somewhere. It was half way between London and Edinburgh.”

“Bloody Repton? It must have cost a fortune!”

“Aye.”

I was dumfounded.

“How could he afford that then, Jim?”

“Not my business, Ollie. His wife was a lot younger.”

It suddenly struck me that to have kids then there must have been a mother or two around somewhere. But the idea of Donaldson having a wife had also never occurred to me.

“His wife?”

“Aye.”

“What bloody wife?” “The one he divorced.”

This was getting complicated but it was as though I was the only person who didn’t know.

But family life had never cropped up in my conversations with Donaldson. Donaldson's private life was his own business.

I could not stand the man, so why the fuck should I have bothered to ask? I couldn't have cared less about his domestic circumstances. They were totally irrelevant and, in fact, had I raised the subject in a conversation, it would have suggested that I was both interested and concerned about the man. But it partly explained his trips to Edinburgh and the odd mention of Burton-on-Trent and Derby train stations. But it still raised interesting questions about how a jumped up civil servant with only a short military career behind him could afford to buy a mansion in Oxfordshire and send so many kids – born in or out of wedlock – to one of the most expensive private schools in the country.

I asked Jim a few more questions but it was clear that Jim was the one now starting to get annoyed.

"God's sake, Ollie. What's wrong with you? I haven't got a damned clue about his ex-wife or the one before. He was divorced twice. One was called Betty that's all I know."

"Two wives, Jim? What happened to the first one?"

"Who cares, Ollie?"

"I care, Jim."

"Why? What's the problem, Ollie?"

Jim was asking me what the matter was but I was in the middle of a vision of another Betty – the one behind the bar in the Feathers, the one with the big assets and cockney accent.

No, it couldn't be. There were lots of Bettys in those days.

Could it be? No, surely not. She was young, early twenties. She must have been at least twenty years younger than Donaldson. If she was alive now she'd be perhaps seventy. I dismissed it.

"I need to know, that's all," I said.

There was another pause.

"I don't know what happened to his first wife – or the second, Ollie."

Jim's voice was breaking up again. It was getting rough and I could hear another gurgling sound coming from deep down inside. It seemed I may not get any more information before it packed up altogether.

"Then who does, for Christ's sake? You still seem to have cronies scattered around. Do any of them know?"

Jim coughed, productively, and seemed to swallow the accumulated debris.

"Och! What cronies? Not many left, Ollie. Might be one or two left but beats me why you need to know Ollie. Let sleeping dogs lie and all that. You seem very agitated."

Jim's observation was very accurate.

"I need to know, Jim. Something has cropped up and I need to know."

"Aye. I'll check. Someone might know. Did you have a good Christmas, Ollie?"

Suddenly I felt I was going to explode.

“Christmas, Jim? What the bloody hell is getting into you? Are you getting senile or something? Christmas! Sorry, Jim, but Christmas was weeks ago. It’s not exactly on my mind.”

“Then what is, Ollie?”

Then I felt lost for an explanation.

“I’ve just been thinking too much, Jim – thinking and writing notes and looking at old files. And I’ve now started typing it all up – for the record so to speak. But if you can, please check on Donaldson’s whereabouts, Jim. There’s a pal.”

We said cheerio after that but Jim was as good as his word.

Who his remaining cronies were I didn’t ask, but when I phoned about a week later he gave me an address in a village near Oxford and a house called “Chalford Hall”. It sounded large.

“Happy now then, Ollie? Got what you want?”

“Thanks. But I thought Donaldson had been killed, Jim.”

“Yes, you keep saying that. Ollie. But it was all hushed up.”

“By who?”

“Aye man – tha’ knows – upstairs.”

“Upstairs, Jim? What upstairs?”

“Ollie, man – don’t play games. Don’t tell me you didn’t know he was in Intelligence.”

“Well . . .,” I said but a thousand questions were running through my brain. Not least were what Donaldson’s own thoughts might still be on the matter, assuming his brain could still think. My own was working overtime.

What exactly had happened?

Why had the authorities, whoever they were, not followed up the incident? Or had they done just that and decided to leave the matter alone? If so why? And how had I got away with what had happened for so long. Was the matter still being investigated after twenty-five years? Were the terrifying nightmares in which I saw, heard, and even smelled Donaldson, explicable as some sort of final retribution by a living ghost? The questions ran thick and fast and I was sweating profusely. But, during the silence with Jim still hanging on the other end of the phone, I had been rummaging in the clutter on the table to find the Daily Telegraph newspaper cutting.

“But . . .” I said, at last, “I kept the reports, Jim,” I said.

“I have it here. ‘British Army Major Shot’ it says. I bought a copy of The Times to double check and found an identical report.”

Jim interrupted me again.

“Aye I remember it,” he said, “but how long afterwards did the press release come out? And it didn’t say he died. Neither did it actually confirm a name. ‘Thought to be’, I believe it said a scandalous use of words that a solicitor could not have got away with. But you’ve forgotten what sort of people run Intelligence. They are all codes

and secrets. Even I knew him as D. Perhaps he became another letter. J – Just alive, perhaps.

Or R – R for Resurrected.”

Twenty years ago, it would have been cause for a laugh, another swig of beer and perhaps another joke or two tagged on to extend the humour. Now, neither of us seemed to see it as amusing or have the strength to laugh.

“My God,” was all I could think to say.

“Aye, bloody sod,” said Jim with almost another touch of humour.

But instead of a joke, Jim then threw another spanner into the works.

This was a real shock.

It was a spanner guaranteed to jam up my mental machinery altogether. Pistons, valves, timing chains, prop shafts and bearings flew in all directions as though my engine had received a direct hit. I felt as though I should be trying to bail out while there was time. In fact, my hand jumped as though trying to open the roof of the cockpit. It often did when I was suddenly frightened. But I had no parachute this time.

“But you’re right in some respects, Ollie.”

I was barely listening because my mind was still racing and the hangover from the night before was returning with a vengeance.

“Aye. Apparently, the man who was shot in Beirut did die, though – officially that is.”

The confusion was now starting to dull my senses.

I had no idea what Jim was talking about and there was silence as I tried to fathom it out.

Jim meanwhile said, “Aye,” once again, contemplatively, or just for good measure.

“What do you mean, he died – officially.”

Jim didn’t now sound like an old man with either chronic pneumonia or senile dementia.

“Aye, man,” he said again, “officially he died but officially he was not Donaldson. Donaldson is still living. O for official, like.”

“For God’s sake, Jim. Talk sense man. Stop trying to joke.

What are you saying?” I asked, almost desperately.

Jim coughed again, perhaps to prove that his pneumonia still persisted, but the delay while I waited was almost unbearable.

“Well,” he gurgled, “it’s like this – as far as I heard, you understand. The man who got shot in Beirut was, in fact, Donaldson – definitely sure it was. But he survived. Then, for some reason the powers that be decided they needed to say that someone had been shot and had died. But Donaldson actually survived. Got it now, man?”

My mind was now in such a state that there was no chance of me getting it so I decided to admit it.

“No, I bloody well haven’t,” I said.

Jim wheezed a bit more, seemed to take a deep breath as though he was speaking to a dimwit and went on.

“The man in Beirut who got shot was definitely Donaldson but he did not die. He survived. Do you understand? Then they decided it was in the interests of security or officialdom or bureaucracy or whatever, to report the event by suggesting that he had died.”

Jim seemed to wait a moment but then repeated, “Suggested that he had died. Understand, now? Suggested!

As it said in the press release.”

It must have been obvious from my silence that I still did not understand.

Thankfully, Jim seemed to have the patience to try again.

He wheezed, loudly.

“Och! Man. Someone, somewhere, probably Intelligence, decided to issue a press statement that said that a British Army Major working for British Intelligence had been shot. For reasons best known to themselves they then needed to give the impression that he had died. They stated publicly that the man was thought to be Donaldson. Thought to be. Got that?

But Donaldson had, in fact, survived.

“But for the official records, the paperwork and the death certificates and such like it was decided that the man was to be named as someone else – someone called Reynolds, if I remember. Reynolds had also, apparently, been working undercover for British Intelligence. Who Reynolds is or was I don’t know, Ollie. I assume it was Reynolds’ name that was used for death certificates and to keep the books straight. But the press reports were to give an impression that it was Donaldson.”

Jim ground to a final halt but seemed unable to resist a final attempt at humour.

“R for Reynolds, I suppose. Not R for resurrected,” he grunted.

Jim had just spoken for far longer than seemed good for him. He sounded almost completely out of breath but still found a few, last ounces of energy to produce a wheezing gurgle of a laugh at his own humour. But, this news had only compounded my own total confusion.

“Reynolds?” I shouted, “Are you sure, Jim?”

“Aye,” said Jim, “Jack told me that when we met at the Cenotaph two years ago. By the way, he asked about you. He said I should pass on his best wishes. Sorry, I forgot. But Flo got sick.”

It was as though I was having one of my worst nightmares except I knew full well that I was wide awake.

“But I was Reynolds, Jim,” he said.

It was Jim’s turn to go quiet. The phone merely creaked and I let it creak for a while.

“You still there, Jim? “I asked.

Jim coughed again.

“You, Ollie? You were Reynolds? You worked for Intelligence?”

“Yes,” I said. “I did years of assignments for Donaldson as Reynolds. I was there when the real Reynolds got shot in Amman years before. The man was assassinated in front of me. For years, I carried his passport. I was David Reynolds. It’s still here – the passport. It’s upstairs in my box, it’s . . .”

I stopped talking suddenly feeling as though I had been trapped by clever interrogation.

I checked myself, remembering other events that might now start to click into place. I briefly began to compare my life since the war to Jim’s as a solicitor. Mine was definitely the more complicated.

It was true that assignments in the name of Reynolds stopped after Donaldson had been shot but that was what I had wanted to happen.

But then my mind went into a spin again because it had been my own decision to continue to use the Reynolds name for a short while afterwards for my business.

Jim was still on the other end of the phone but memories of other events then rose up before my eyes like ghosts from the past.

A few days before I met with Farouk in Paris when he told me what had happened to Donaldson, I had, by chance spent a night in Cyprus on my way to Beirut. I was in Larnaca with the Reynolds passport hidden in its usual place in the lining of my case when I had heard a single gunshot very close by and a group of people not six yards from me panicked and ran. At the same time, a puff of stone dust erupted from the side of a building not ten yards away. Gunfire was not uncommon to me and I had been the last one to move. But I did not hang around to investigate. I had never understood who the shot was aimed at and subsequently forgot about it. But I know it was very close.

Then there had been another situation just two days later in Beirut. It was ridiculous for me to be there at all, I suppose, but that’s the way I behaved. I had only been there a day and was coming home and already at the airport check-in when I was stopped by a Lebanese messenger apparently from the British Embassy.

I was asked to delay my flight to return to the Embassy. Something urgent had cropped up which they thought might interest me – a sudden business opportunity. I was in two minds, of course, but all I had wanted to do was to go home. And I had not liked the way the messenger kept looking back towards the airport entrance. So, I had refused the offer.

But the man had become agitated when I said I had no interest in returning and he grabbed my arm. Fortunately, there had been other people around, I shook him off and he walked away.

That was also, perhaps fortunately, the last time I ever set foot in Beirut and I stopped using the Reynolds passport soon after.

But Jim’s comments now suggested to me that, perhaps, they had been looking for a real body of a real person with a passport in the name of David Reynolds to bury. How simple it would have been for them. I was finally expendable and of no further use.

My blood ran cold. Had I been that close?

Jim’s rough voice came down the phone line.

“Aye, Ollie, man,” he said, “well, well. That’s news that is – that’s something. I gave up trying to understand it all many years ago. Pity you didn’t tell me before. A few stories there over a pint.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” I said. “But Donaldson was a bloody crook, Jim. A big-time crook into arms trading and money laundering and . . .” I stopped myself again.

Perhaps fortunately, Jim seemed to be losing the will to carry on because I don’t think he heard me.

“Aye, a few stories there over a pint, Ollie,” I heard him say again and then I heard the phone click. I supposed he’d got fed up and put it down.

I stood there holding the dead phone line for a moment but then replaced it and shuffled through the pile of old notes and newspaper cuttings still lying in a pile on the table to find the note that Beaty had slipped inside the ABC Flight Timetable.

And more of the jigsaw fell into place.

For at the time of the Forsyth deal I believed Donaldson was dead so had blamed others, and mostly Forsyth, for what had happened.

But if, as Jim had said, Donaldson had not died but was recuperating somewhere or was already fully recovered, then it seemed more than likely that it had been he who was behind Forsyth. So, who was Forsyth?

I re-read Beaty’s note: “Dear Mr Thomas. I am so sorry. You did not deserve all this. Forgive me but I cannot live this lie any more. I hope you find this and hope it is enough for you to work out that there are things you should know. I have been living under increasing pressure. I have tried to tell you very thing but it is very hard. I have now been told I must leave my employment.

Yours, Beatrice Collins.”

Then I turned it over to the front, printed side showing the address of the military hospital in Cyprus.

Then I looked once more at the handwriting beneath, the bank address, the account number and the name R. Forsyth and I stared at it with fresh eyes that now knew that Donaldson had still been alive at the time. The handwriting was faint but unmistakable.

Donaldson’s handwriting had always been terrible.

It looked as if a spider had walking through an ink blob and what little he ever put on paper was usually scrawled on scraps torn from pads or hotel notepaper. His maps of where to find something were often drawn on the plain insides of old cigarette packets. He would talk as he drew them.

“The road from the mosque apparently goes like this, old chap,” he would say, scribbling a wavy line. “The souk is about there and, apparently, the place you need is about a hundred yards up there, on the left.” And he would put an X.

But rarely was there anything left of the scraps of paper he used.

Even in the Regent Street office he would openly remove the printed tops or bottoms by using a ruler to tear across in a straight line removing any evidence of an address.



Donaldson specialized in covering his tracks well. But, on this occasion, he seemed to have forgotten.

Donaldson's brief scribble on the front page was faint, but it was clear enough.

Beneath the printed address of the Cyprus Military Hospital in Cyprus were the telex address and the POB number in Larnaca and the bank details and the name of Forsyth.

Was Beaty trying to tell me that Donaldson was alive and in hospital in Cyprus and that he and Forsyth were working together to destroy me financially?

Or even kill me?

Was Beaty well aware that she was at the end of her usefulness to Donaldson?

Was Donaldson afraid Beaty might spill some beans?

If so, how had Beaty really died? Natural causes had always seemed unlikely.

"I have tried to tell you everything but it is very hard. I have now been told I must leave my employment. Yours, Beatrice Collins."

A few days later, poor Beaty was dead.

Why had I not noticed?

The signs that something was wrong had been there for years.

Was I so blind to the feelings and fears of others?

Beaty's? Sarah's even?

"I hope this is enough for you to understand, Mr Thomas. I have tried to make it quite clear."

What had she been trying to explain?

Then, another day and another time: "I have been trying to bring myself to tell you something, Mr Thomas but it's all very difficult, you see."

Was I so insensitive? So naïve?

"Don't worry, Beat. Nothing to worry yourself about. Don't fret. Got to catch the train."

And off I would go again without giving it a second thought.

Then, once, long ago, after I had just got back from somewhere. Perhaps I was too tired. Maybe I had been a little harsh on her. But I could now hear her voice so clearly.

"I'm so sorry, Mr Thomas. You see it can be quite stressful here when you are abroad. We really need to talk sometime, Mr Thomas, privately."

I could now remember her eyes looking at me almost pleading with me to pry into her concerns. But again, I would lose the chance, believing she was feeling overworked.

"Never mind, Beat. Don't let the system get you down. Life's for living, Beat. Take it easy."

But what was it that was making her so stressed? Her voice echoed back again.

“There was a phone call for you, Mr Thomas. Beirut again. You . . . you . . . you need to be so careful, Mr Thomas. It’s such a – such a dangerous place, these days.”

And another time.

“Does Mrs Thomas know about this, Mr Thomas?”

Had it been a question or a statement?

Did she really say, “Mrs Thomas needs to know, Mr Thomas.”?

There had been the briefest, pause looking down then looking up at me again, the poise or confidence returning.

Perhaps, more likely, it was her diplomacy returning. She had been sat opposite me in the office.

“She really should, Mr Thomas. She must know . . . where you are . . . always . . . just in case. I can always inform her . . . if . . . if something goes wrong.”

Beaty’s eyes again, peering at me from behind her spectacles. The eyes had looked worried, caring, guilty, perhaps wet even.

And I knew now from Robert that Beaty had spoken to Sarah more often than I ever thought.

What about was still a mystery and was likely to remain so but Sarah had known far more than I ever thought.

“Oh, I know everything, Mr Thomas.”

The familiar cold sweat broke out again because I had told Sarah nothing – ever.

In fact, I had kept everything a total secret because I had decided that it was unnecessary for her to know. Rightly or wrongly, I had been trying to protect her.

I took a deep breath and leaned back.

But then I got up and went to get a fresh bottle and poured myself a large glassful.

Part of me wanted to disappear into an alcoholic fog.

Another side wanted me to remain cool and calm because I knew my thoughts would become confused. I could see a mental abyss before me and knew that if I wasn’t careful it was likely to be filled with a terrifying tangle of unfathomable intrigue into which my mind would spiral, uncontrollably.

But it was at that point that I changed. It was at that moment that I began to hate the introverted depression that had dominated me since I retired. I put the untouched full glass of whisky and the bottle onto the floor and sat there, alone, feeling colder by the minute. So, I turned up the gas fire, pulled my chair closer and held my hands towards it.

For the first time, ever Sarah’s log effect gas fire seemed comforting.

But my mind still felt like a knotted ball of string.

The more I tried to unravel it, the tighter the knots seemed to become.

I got up, went to the kitchen and then came back and looked at myself in the mirror over the shelf by Sarah’s crockery cabinet.

I moved the little wicker basket dish which still contained her comb, brush and hair clips and I smelled them. Tears came to my eyes, overflowed and rolled down my cheeks.

I had found a similar basket in Beaty's desk drawer.

Then I tried to look at myself in the mirror and felt sure I heard Sarah come up behind me.

"What a sight for sore eyes," I heard her say. "You need to pull yourself together, Mr Thomas."

I went to sit down again, held my cold hands towards the fire and made a decision. If Donaldson really was still alive, then I needed to act. I still owed it to Sarah. I owed it to Beaty. I owed it now to myself.

So, I now have something new to do and am working on an audacious plan.

But first I need a good sleep.

## PART THREE: THE INTERVIEW

### Andy Wilson

**Police Inspector Clive Peterson wandered into the office,** removed his wet raincoat and hung it on a hook.

“You still, here, Andy? I thought you were on an early shift.” “I was.” Andy Wilson yawned, put down Oliver Thomas’s pile of typewritten notes and looked at his watch. It was ten thirty and dark outside.

“God,” he said, “what a tale. I don’t know how much to believe but it sort of rings true. It turns out that the old guy has had quite a chequered past but I still don’t know what he got up to in Malaga.”

“You mean Mr Thomas, the guy we detained earlier?”

“Yes. Here – have a look,” Andy pushed the notes towards him.

“The other old guy is still in intensive care I understand,”

said Clive. “Where is our friend now?”

“I stuck him in the hotel. I can’t charge him with anything and he can’t go far. I’ve got all his belongings, his envelope with the wad of euros and his passport and we’ve impounded his old Jaguar. It was in the car park but untaxed and uninsured although he claims the papers are in the post.”

“Ha!” said Clive. “I’ve heard that before. So, what’s that?”

He sat down, picked up the pile of typewritten notes and flipped through it. “Christ,” he said. “You’ve been reading this? How old was the typewriter?”

“Old,” said Andy. “But the more I read, the less inclined I was to put it down. It reads like an old spy story. In fact, our eighty-six-year-old Mr Oliver Thomas seems to have once worked for British Intelligence. But that’s not all. He’s claiming the old guy in Malaga was a crook with links to the Mafia and all sorts. There’s a lot of private stuff in there as well, though. It’s as if he wrote it to down to get a few other things off his chest as well.

“There’s even a bit of sex in it, Clive! It’s worth a read. He’s also got some sort of plan brewing towards the end. But unfortunately, it stops just as it starts to get interesting.” Andy Wilson laughed. “I actually like the old guy,” he added.

“Like your little old grandad, is he?”

“Yeh, but my old grandad only worked for British Rail. This guy’s been around.”

“What’s the plan?” Clive asked.

“I’ll get him in here tomorrow morning for an early start.”

“So, Mr Thomas, are you feeling better? Can we start again where we left off yesterday?”

Oliver Thomas sat, his legs crossed, with his stick resting against the coffee table. He looked bright and alert. He had also shaved.

“Did you read my notes, Inspector?”

“Yes,” said Andy, “it only took me the best part of six hours here plus two more last night in bed but I suppose it made a good read. Is there any truth in any of it?”

Oliver Thomas shook his head, removed his glasses and wiped with the hem of his jumper.

“How far did you get?” he asked.

“To the end.”

“Really? Well done. Cliff hanger, was it?”

“So where did you meet Betty?”

“In Nice – Cannes to be precise.”

“So, you’ve been travelling, Mr Thomas? Not just Malaga and Frankfurt.”

“Flying brought back memories.”

“Yes, I can understand that. You seem to have done a bit in your time, Mr Thomas. Can I now ask you a few more questions?”

“Can I ask you one first?” Oliver Thomas said.

Andy Wilson winced. “One,” he said.

“Is he dead now Inspector?”

“If you mean Major Alex Donaldson, I can confirm he is still in intensive care. You don’t seem to like him, Mr Thomas.”

Oliver Thomas started at the policeman across the top of his glasses.

“I thought you said you’d read my notes, Inspector. In which case, you should understand.”

“Yes, but you can’t go around shooting people, Mr Thomas.”

“Who said I shot him? And, anyway, why not? Donaldson did, although he was always very clever in the way he subcontracted jobs.”

Andy Wilson got up and walked around the room.

“Mr Thomas. I’ve read your notes. It all makes interesting reading but your detailed notes, which have noticeable gaps anyway, end at the point you decided to do something about Major Donaldson. So, would you be so kind as to fill me on the big gap that now exists between when the notes finished and you arrived back here at Gatwick Airport?”

Oliver Thomas looked down at the coffee table where his notes lay on Andy Wilson’s side. It was open at the very last page.

“I haven’t touched a drop since that moment,” he said pointing at the last page with the tip of his stick.

“Congratulations. Now can you please start from the bit that says, and I quote, ‘I am working on an audacious plan.’ What audacious plan? Did you fulfil it?”

“I’ll tell you what I did next and about my trip to Nice and Malaga. How long have we got?”

“I’m easy, Mr Thomas. Take your time but I warn you I will be butting in at regular intervals to keep you on track so to speak and will not hesitate to jump in to cut out

the slightest bit of crap that you might feel inclined to offer. Is that good enough for you?"

"Thank you, Inspector. By the way, you can call me Ollie."

"Mmm. I'm Andy. Proceed."

"Well," he said, "I blame the audacious plan on Marmite, Andy."

"Marmite?"

"Did you not read about Thomas's Disease?"

"Yes. I hope I don't catch it."

"Well, Marmite is the cure."

"I hate the stuff."

"Well, pray you never suffer from TD because I believe that within Marmite's dark and sticky heart there are mysterious ingredients that include a cure for TD. It's also a brain stimulant."

"Can we come back to the audacious plan?"

"I'm getting to it. But it involves Marmite. Having decided the need for a plan I resolved never to touch another drop of Bell's whisky. Instead, I made myself some tea, toast and Marmite. It was then that I decided to take the car for a spin as I've always found driving conducive to constructive thought."

"Was it taxed and insured, Mr Thomas? Ollie."

Oliver Thomas scratched his head. "Probably not on reflection."

"Where did you head for? The south of France?"

"The Forest of Dean."

"When will we get to the Malaga part, Ollie?"

"Soon. The Forest wasn't where I'd planned to go, especially as it was after midnight, but it's where I ended up as I needed to drive somewhere to think. I'd turned the rest of the loaf of Mother's Pride sliced bread into a pile of toast ready to eat when I got back. Then I reversed the car out of the garage."

"So, you reversed the uninsured and untaxed car out onto the public road, Ollie."

"It was a dark night, cold and damp but, by two o'clock, and having got as far as Coleford and with no traffic on the road except a few large trucks and one police car I turned around and came back. It was nearly three o'clock by the time I was home. I parked the car in the garage again, shut the door, cleaned the dirt from her headlights, told her I'd give her a proper wash tomorrow, gave her bonnet a good pat and went inside. But my point in telling you this is that by then my mind was as clear as a bell and the plan was crystallizing."

"Go on. What was the plan, Ollie?"

"It formed while I sat down to finish off my pile of cold toast and Marmite."

"At three o'clock in the morning."

"Yes, but I then slept in the chair. It was next morning when I set off."

"You set off where, Ollie?"

“Oxfordshire.”

### Little Ollie

**The weather had changed from cold, cloudy and damp to dry and frosty** on the morning that Oliver Thomas opened the garage doors, threw his stick into the foot well of the car passenger seat and eased himself onto the cold leather of the driver’s seat. As expected the Jaguar engine fired immediately.

He slipped the car into reverse gear and moved quietly out onto the road. Then he stopped, got out and glanced over to the Carrington’s house to see if Fred was watching. It was still dark and there wasn’t even a light on in the house so he closed the garage door as quietly as possible, got back into the car and was soon out on the road that led to Cheltenham and Oxford.

Later, with the road getting busy, he pulled in at a fuel station, parked and went in to buy a local map.

“As I returned to my car, Andy, I noticed I wasn’t using my stick. I stood there with my map in my hand and walked around the car to check the lights and any signs of mud or grime as I hate a dirty car. It was as I came full circle to the front windscreen that I saw that my tax had expired.”

“Ah,” said Andy Wilson, “so it wasn’t when in the Forest of Dean that you first noticed this? Tell me, Ollie. With all your claimed attention to detail, how do you explain this?”

Oliver Thomas held his hands up.

“Sorry, but I did get back in the car to think about what to do. But with no easy and quick solution coming to mind I decided to carry on. It was a question of priorities, Andy.”

“Mmm. Go on.”

By eight o’clock and by navigating along country lanes he found the village mentioned by Jim as Donaldson’s last known address.

It was marked by a simple sign that said, “Little Avening welcomes careful drivers”.

By now it was a clear, spring-like morning with the low sun already clearing an early frost. The neat village consisted of old houses and cottages hidden behind high hedges and wooden gates and at the end of long driveways. But almost as soon as he realized he had arrived he found he was in open countryside again. The village was, indeed, small.

So he found the first entrance to a field with an open gate, pulled in, reversed and drove back again. At what seemed to be the centre of the hamlet, there was a red pillar box beside an almost invisible junction leading into an even smaller country lane. So he parked the car and sat looking at his map. Little Avening was just a dot.

But as he sat there, a knock on his windscreen made him jump. A middle-aged woman with an annoyed look on her face was glaring through the glass at him. So he put his map on the passenger seat and wound the window down.

"You can't park here, you know. No one can walk by," she said in a most angry tone and then stuck her head through the window to within six inches of his face. A surprisingly strong smell resembling smoked kippers wafted in with the cold air. "We can't get by, do you hear?"

Oliver Thomas backed away a little and took his glasses off but the short time it took him to do that seemed far too long for her.

"My dog. I'm trying to walk my dog. Can't you see?"

She then withdrew a little, bent down and lifted a tiny animal that resembled a large white rat on a string apparently to give the creature a better view of the interior of his car. The dog yapped and bared a pink tongue and a set of teeth so small and perfect that he felt he was looking at an advert for private dentistry. A puff of doggy steam came out with the yap.

"Quiet, Ollie," she said.

Now this shocked him as he had no idea how she knew his name and, anyway, he hadn't even opened his mouth to introduce himself.

He was about to say something when she bent down to place the dog back on the ground. For a few minutes, he lost sight of them so he leaned out of the window only to see a rotund rear covered in tweed. The other end was patting the dog, which was staring up at her and still panting little puffs of steam.

"There, Ollie, it's only an old man. I know. There's a good boy." She then suddenly stood upright and clearly caught him watching her rear so he rapidly withdrew his own head and looked for his glasses.

"I do apologise, madam," he said. "But I was trying to locate a house."

"I see. Well along as you don't sit there for too long I suppose."

"May I introduce myself, madam?" he asked.

"I see, well, yes."

"It seems I may share my name with your dog, Madam. You see, my name is Oliver Thomas. Friends call me Ollie. I'm looking for a house called Chalford Hall."

The woman stared and then burst out laughing in a way he had always associated with middle-aged ladies from Oxfordshire who wore tweed.

"Oh, I say, how amusing. Ollie meet Ollie. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, I said, "it is rather a coincidence. But do you, by any chance, know Chalford Hall?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I live there."

He was shocked, not least because he had been half expecting to meet one of Donaldson's wives at Chalford Hall. This woman didn't, in the least, fit the picture in his mind.

"Oh yes," she said, "it's just up the lane," and she pointed to the smaller lane opposite.

Then, as he tried to catch up, she continued.



“Are you delivering something? You don’t look like a courier to me and the car is a bit fancy. Things usually arrive in white vans, these days. Also, you don’t quite look the sort, if I may say so. How old are you?”

Oliver Thomas had been taken aback at her impertinence but held his tongue.

“I’m eighty-six madam,” he said although wondering what business it was of hers and sorely tempted to ask how old she was.

“What is it you require?” she asked.

“I am looking for someone I used to know and I understood he lives there.”

“I see, well it might be my husband I suppose but he’s abroad at present.”

This was starting to look promising but he still couldn’t imagine her with a ninety years old husband of Donaldson’s type. So, he decided to probe, still sitting in his car and looking out at the woman who was now peering directly into the car with her face inches from his own. The fishy smell increased. “My friend is getting on in years. He would be about ninety now. His name is Donaldson.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “We bought the Hall from someone called Donaldson, not that we ever met him.”

“Really?” he said, feeling he was getting somewhere. “So, do you know where he is now?”

“Oh, I’ve really no idea. Is he still alive? He wasn’t living in England when we bought the place, which must be twenty-five years ago.”

Jim’s information about where Donaldson was living was clearly many years out of date. For a moment Oliver Thomas had felt let down as though his mission to track him down was already hitting the buffers.

The woman backed away again and bent down to the other Ollie and picked the creature up again. It bared his teeth at him again but this time stayed silent and almost seemed to be smiling.

“So how far have you come?” the woman said.

“From Gloucester,” he replied.

“That’s a jolly, nice car,” she said. “My husband had a Jaguar once. He keeps a Maserati in the garage for weekends but now he usually runs around in the Bentley. I use the Porsche for shopping. Would you like a cup of tea?”

As she was suddenly showing an unexpectedly friendly side, Oliver Thomas was mildly taken aback but was in dire need of a drink of some description. “That’s very kind,” he said.

“Then would you mind awfully given Ollie and me a lift up the lane. He’s getting on a bit now and gets very tired paws these days, don’t you, Ollie.”

With that he opened the passenger door and she and Ollie got in, the dog wiping its muddy feet all over her tweed skirt.

“I don’t normally get into cars with strange gentlemen,” she said and gave her Oxfordshire laugh, “But you look harmless enough to me and I like the car.”

A few minutes later she was directing him through an impressive gateway with stone pillars and up a tree-lined drive to a large Cotswold stone house worthy of the title of Chalford Hall.

"It's far too big, actually," she said as he drove onto a semi-circular gravel driveway with wide stone steps leading up to a large front door, "but my husband likes it. He says it's a wonderful place to get away from the City."

"What does your husband do?" he asked, surprising himself by the rapid way their relationship was developing after only fifteen minutes.

They walked up the steps and she turned the large door knob. It clearly wasn't locked.

"Come in, come in," she said as little Ollie bounded away. "Oh, George is the founding partner of Griffith-Pace Securities. Worth a fortune even before I married him. Mother was so pleased. Ha. Come in, do. Wipe your feet, Ollie. Sorry, Mr Thomas, I mean my little Ollie here."

"And so, the conversation with Priscilla Griffith-Pace continued, Andy," Oliver Thomas said.

Andy Wilson got up, walked to a coffee machine and came back with some plastic cups and put them on the table.

"Go on, Ollie," he said, sliding one of the cups towards him.

"Thank you. Well, we sat in a room with large bay windows hung with red velvet curtains that overlooked acres of rolling fields with mature horse chestnut trees just coming into leaf and a shimmering lake and it was all very pleasant compared to what I had just left behind in Gloucester. A huge log fire gave out so much heat that I could feel it warming my face from thirty yards away."

"So, what light was she able to throw on Donaldson, Ollie?"

"Not a great deal as it turned out, but her gardener, Nigel, was a mine of information."

"Carry on, Ollie."

They had bought Chalford Hall through an agent about twenty-five years ago. The vendor was Donaldson. It was empty and looked un-lived in when they had first viewed it and she understood from locals in the village that he was rarely ever seen there.

"Apparently, they didn't like him, my dear. Oh, dear me no," she continued but then put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I am so sorry if he's a friend of yours."

Oliver Thomas put her right on that without going into the reasons.

"That's a relief. But his face just didn't fit, you see. It can be like that in the countryside. He wasn't landed gentry or similar and he also came from Edinburgh."

A woman with a couple of teenage boys had also lived there, but that they were hardly ever around. She had heard that the children had been boarded at Repton.

"Plenty of money, you see. But I only know that from the local post office," she said. "The village pub is also closed now of course, as they all are, but the old landlord, now sadly dead, knew him. He also knew the man's wife I understand. She used to drink a lot I believe. Being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous is not the sort of

person the residents of Little Avening were used to. Cockney as well, so her accent just didn't go down well."

Oliver Thomas's ears cocked up just as the other Ollie's did. "What was her name, Mrs Griffith-Pace?" he asked.

"Oh, call me Cilla, please. Oh, her name was also a bit common for the likes of Little Avening. They hadn't had a Betty here before either but I suppose it matched her accent."

Then she had put her hand to her mouth once again. "Oh dear me, Mr Thomas, I do hope I'm not offending you but I'm sometimes a bit frank with my words."

"Don't worry," he said, "your description fits perfectly."

Ollie, the dog, padded over to the corner of the room as though disgusted by the rumours about Betty. Then Ollie Thomas saw him pull a smoked kipper from a dish marked 'Dog' and drag it to a clear part of the polished oak floor where he sat down, exposed his immaculate teeth again, smiled at the new visitor and chomped noisily on the fish.

He continued to watch the dog because he didn't want Cilla to see his own reaction, for it was looking as though his flippant thought that Donaldson might have got hitched to Betty from "The Feathers" might have been true.

"So, what did Betty do before she came here?" he asked. "Oh, rumour had it she had been a barmaid all her life. It

just added to the list of horror stories about her and Mr Donaldson himself."

"He wasn't just plain Mister Donaldson, he was an army Major," Oliver Thomas replied.

"Really?" she said, "I am surprised. That doesn't fit the impression one gets but it was a long time ago so perhaps reputations become a little exaggerated."

"I don't think so," he said.

"So how long is it since you met your friend, Mr Thomas?"

"Oh, he wasn't a friend, Cilla. Far from it."

"I see. Oh dear, you seem to be suggesting that his local reputation was not so far-fetched after all."

"I suspect, Cilla, that his local reputation was grossly underestimated. I am aware that his capacity to exploit others in order to make a vast fortune by running a Mafia-like organisation was probably second to none at the time and it has never been fully appreciated."

Cilla put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, my goodness. Just to think that such a disgraceful man used to live here. Did you here that, Ollie?"

Little Ollie glanced up, but then returned to his kipper.

Oliver Thomas felt he was sounding like a barrister summing up the case for the prosecution. But the room where he was sitting was so overwhelming compared to the sitting room in Gloucester that he felt he had to match his words to fit the quality of the place where he was now sipping Earl Grey tea from a bone china cup.

“By the way,” he said, “call me Ollie”.

And with that, Ollie the canine padded over to him, wagged his tail, poked his tongue out, licked his lips and smiled. Their conversation continued until late into the morning.

“Cilla was delightful company, Andy, and gave me a conducted tour of the Hall and introduced me to Milly the cook and Nigel, the gardener.

“And all the time, Andy, my stick was on the back seat of the car. I forgot about it because I didn’t seem to need it. But it was Nigel the gardener who came up trumps.”

“So how long had Nigel worked for Mrs Grffith-Pace, Ollie?” asked Andy.

“Cilla had inherited him from Donaldson. And Nigel turned out to be a mine of information. Far from being a monosyllabic Oxfordshire gardener, Nigel, a man probably in his early sixties, was a master of conversation. We sat on wooden stools in his huge, up market potting shed, surrounded by shelves full of books with titles like *The World’s Greatest Gardens* and *The History of Arboretums*.”

Oliver Thomas stopped as though remembering the stacked shelves.

“Knowing your interest in exotic trees, Ollie, you must have found that very interesting.”

“Yes, but there wasn’t time.”

“I know the feeling, Ollie. What happened next?”

Nigel had been at Chalford Hall for forty years.

He had first arrived there when the house had been in the Jarman family but when Sir Walter Jarman died the family couldn’t afford to keep it going so they had put it up for sale and Nigel had temporarily lost his job.

“But then the Donaldson’s arrived,” said Nigel, “Betty and two boys. The boys were boarded at school and poor Betty was mostly left by herself. But, luckily, I got the job of gardener back again. Donaldson used to stay here for a few days then go back to Scotland or London.”

Nigel thought he also had another house in Edinburgh.

“Tell Ollie about Betty’s drinking, Nigel,” egged on Cilla Griffith-Price.

Nigel then confirmed that Betty was an alcoholic or as near as possible to one. Apparently, she spent nearly all her time sat in the kitchen drinking gin and red wine. Nigel had felt sorry for her. She had seemed lonely and very depressed and she and Donaldson used to argue a lot. There was some talk of physical abuse and, apparently, it had so frightened the cleaner that she left. The house had become very untidy and dirty.

“But then Nigel’s revelation became very, very interesting, Andy.”

“Go on.” Andy Wilson was sipping his coffee.

“He said that another man, a friend of Major Donaldson from Edinburgh, arrived on the scene. He stayed at Chalford Hall more and more regularly and it soon became clear that he and Betty were having an affair. But Donaldson seemed unconcerned

as though it was part of an arrangement between the three of them. So, I asked Nigel the name of the new arrival.”

“And what was his name, Ollie?”

“Royston Forsyth.”

“Brigadier Forsyth himself, Ollie?” said Andy.

“Oh yes. If there was ever a need to find a piece of missing jigsaw this was it.”

“And then what?”

Oliver Thomas had asked Nigel if Mr Forsyth was, by any chance, a Brigadier in the army.

“Oh, no, certainly not as far as I know,” he replied, “Donaldson and Forsyth used to sit around drinking and talking business most of the time. Mr Forsyth worked for a Swiss bank in London, I believe, so it was mostly about money and I only know that because in the summer they used to sit outside by the greenhouse drinking beer and I couldn’t help but overhear.”

“So, what happened to make them sell up and leave?” Oliver Thomas asked.

“I don’t know,” Nigel said. “But Betty had already disappeared. Suddenly she was not there. We supposed she had just got fed up and walked out, but we never heard anything more. I also understand the two boys at Repton were then expelled for some reason. Like many public schools, it was all hushed up. Where they all went, I don’t know.”

Cilla had been listening whilst nursing little Ollie on her lap.

“Well, I hadn’t heard that bit,” said Cilla.

“You never asked me,” said Nigel.

“Well I never,” said Cilla.

Oliver Thomas looked at Cilla and smiled. “My wife used to say that,” he said and Cilla looked at him. “So is your wife, uh . . .”

“Yes,” he said, “she died a few months ago. Since then I’ve been trying to piece one or two things together and Donaldson’s name keeps cropping up.”

They talked a few more generalities but then he asked Nigel: “So do you know where Donaldson went after he sold Chalford Hall?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “he went to live in Cannes in the south of France but I know he also had a place in Malaga because I found some papers in a sack that I used to start a bonfire.”

“Do you have any of those addresses?”

“Oh yes,” said Nigel, “I kept some of the papers because Major Donaldson left owing staff wages going back several weeks and I have always thought that one day I’d go out there and track him down.”

Nigel then went to a drawer beneath his neat bookshelf, pulled out a heavy pile of old Gardeners World diaries and laid them on the table.

“Here we are. This is the 1986 version. That was the last year we ever saw him or Mr Forsyth.”

Like an expert filing clerk Nigel went straight to the inside back cover and took out two folded pieces of paper.

“There,” he said. He handed them to Oliver Thomas who took his glasses from his inside pocket and put them on.

“Hm,” he said, “these are the first abbreviated statements from Credit Suisse in Zurich that I’ve seen since my days in Libya.”

It was clear that Donaldson had made a big mistake in not destroying them. But, Nigel was right. There were also two addresses – one in Cannes and one in Malaga.

“This is the second time I’ve seen something of Donaldson’s in the space of a few days. The bastard rarely kept written records of anything. But he wasn’t short of money, was he?” Oliver Thomas said.

“Exactly,” said Nigel, “so why didn’t he have the decency to pay our wages before he left. Mrs Griffith-Pace is always very punctual.”

Cilla then looked at the papers. “Mmm,” she murmured, looking at the figures, “Nearly as much as George earns in a week but I suppose it was worth far more in 1986.”

Ollie the canine then jumped off of Cilla’s lap and stood looking up at her smiling with his teeth.

“Time for din dins, Ollie. Come on, let’s go and find you something. How about you, big Ollie? Would you care to join little Ollie and me for some lunch? I’ll get Milly to cook some nice smoked haddock.”

## Betty

**Inspector Andy Wilson yawned and stretched his arms and legs** from his side of the table. “You’re making me feel hungry, Ollie. More coffee?”

“What about some fish for lunch, Andy? I’ve developed a taste for fish since I was at Chalford Hall and have hardly eaten since the day before yesterday. Don’t the police offer food for detainees?”

“I’ll see what I can rustle up.” Andy Wilson got up and wandered outside leaving Oliver Thomas alone at the coffee table. The phone was lying on the coffee table. It rang. Oliver Thomas looked around and picked it up.

“Yes?”

“Andy,” the voice on the other end said clearly mistaking the voice. “Malaga phoned. The old guy is still in intensive care with the gunshot wound and associated heart problems. The Spanish police are now searching the property but they confirm your man was seen leaving and pointing the gun at staff.”

“Thanks,” said Oliver Thomas and pressed the red button.

Andy Wilson returned. “I’ve ordered fish and chips. OK?”

“Thank you,” replied Oliver Thomas, “That’s better than nothing. My appetite found a new lease after that lunch at Chalford Hall.”

“Please continue, Ollie.”

Oliver Thomas’s Jaguar had run like a sewing machine all the way back to Gloucester and it was dusk when he arrived home. But, as he fumbled with the door key, he heard a familiar voice behind him. It was Fred Carrington.

“Evening, Mr Thomas.”

“Ah, evening Fred. Nice weather for the time of year.”

“Been out today?” Fred had learned the art of being nosey from his wife.

“Yes, I popped over to Oxfordshire for lunch.”

“Friends?” Fred asked.

“Yes,” Oliver Thomas said, “the wife of a friend of mine. He runs a Merchant bank in the City. I got invited to their country residence for lunch.”

“That’s nice,” said Fred.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” he said. “I’m off to Nice at the weekend then I’ll probably fly down to Malaga for a short while and then I might pop over to Malta.”

“Not seen you in the supermarket recently,” said Fred.

“No, I’ve been far too busy. I’ve got work to do and I’m likely to be away a while.”

“I see.”

“I must go, Fred. I’ve got some papers to work on. By the way, you need to get a man in to chop that monkey-puzzle down. It’s looking increasingly sad and it might be kind to put it out of its misery.”

He went inside, sat down and then remembered that he’d left his stick in the car. But he decided to leave it there until morning as he felt very tired and knew he’d sleep like a log, as Sarah used to say.

But he was up again at six thirty and sat down to re-read the pieces of paper that Nigel had saved from the 1981 bonfire.

Both letters were from Credit Suisse, Zurich, one of them to Mr R Forsyth and the other to Major A. Donaldson, both showing the Chalford Hall, Little Avening address. The letter to Forsyth confirmed the transfer of the sum of US Dollars 750,000 to a Santander Bank account in Barcelona. The letter to Donaldson stated that the balance of his account with Credit Suisse stood at US Dollars 4,535,868 as at 4th October 1981 and confirmed that an amount of US Dollars 1,500,000 had been transferred on 3rd September 1981 to a Santander Bank account in Malaga.

They were sums of money that any honest, nine to five, civil servant was unlikely ever to have accumulated. And who knew how many other accounts existed?

But the letters also showed changes of address for future correspondence – an address in Cannes for Forsyth and one in Malaga for Donaldson.

So, as soon as he knew the local travel agent was open for business, he phoned, booked a ticket to Nice, made an appointment to call in later on another matter,

made some other arrangements and sat back, feeling like a new man with a reason to live.

With an air ticket, a plan of action and a job to do, it was as though he had picked up where he had left off thirty years ago.

He drank tea, not whisky, ate toast and Marmite for breakfast and had a tin of sardines on toast for lunch.

He gathered up all the old papers and newspaper cuttings and, after removing the one remaining item that still lay wrapped in its original oily cloth at the bottom of the old box of papers and files, he put everything back.

He carefully re-packed the item in the oily rag inside an old shoe box and then took the bus into the city, visited the travel agent and then called at another company to drop off the shoe box.

Then he returned home, found his Oliver Thomas passport that he had always renewed whenever it became due in case Sarah ever wanted to go abroad on holiday, found an old map of the south of France and put everything into his old black case. And by dinnertime he felt so hungry again that he opened a tin of soup, finished off the bread and then ate a tin of peaches.

Finally, he went up to the spare room, slept like a log and woke up at the sensible hour of seven with no sign of a hangover.

He washed, shaved, sorted out a few clothes, tidied the sitting room and, by ten o'clock he was ready to go with the black case on the back seat of the car.

He passed Fred Carrington on the road and wound down his window.

"Just off to France and Spain on business, Fred," he said and then watched in his mirror as his neighbour trudged home with his plastic bags.

"Then I drove to Gatwick Airport, Andy. I parked the car in the long-term car park. But it has changed a lot since the last time I flew out on British Caledonian.

"It's a pity you parked your car almost blocking the bus stop, Ollie. If you hadn't, perhaps no one would have spotted the lack of a tax disc."

"Yes, but I couldn't find a decent space. As it was, I found I hardly needed my bloody stick anyway. That visit to Oxfordshire was like a miracle trip to Lourdes for me."

"Ah, here's the fish and chips," said Andy as a man in an apron and white cap knocked and came in. "Tuck in."

"But you didn't go to Lourdes but flew to Nice, then Ollie?" Andy went on, sticking a potato chip in his mouth and sucking his fingers.

"Yes," replied Oliver Thomas, pulling off a slice of battered fish, "I arrived in Nice just after dark. The warm night air was so much more invigorating than arriving outside Gloucester station."

"Yes, I imagine it was," said Andy Wilson. "So, what happened next?"

"I took a taxi to the Negresco Hotel. Do you know it?" "Only that it's likely to be way beyond my salary to be able to afford to stay there, Ollie."



“Yes, so I found out. But I once met Farouk there for lunch, you see. It was many years ago, at a time when Farouk was still thinking of moving to France. I suggested to him that the south of France had a far nicer climate than Paris.”

“Were you just planning on having dinner there?”

“Oh no,” Oliver Thomas replied, “I planned to stay and felt sure I would get a room, after all I had been used to traveling without a need for advanced bookings for fifty years. But I was surprised to be told it was full and I should have booked.”

“Serves you right, Ollie,” Andy laughed, munching on his fish and chips.

“Oh no, I soon got in,” Oliver Thomas replied. “As I stood at reception wondering what to do, one of the staff took a phone call that was clearly a last-minute cancellation and within ten minutes a bellboy in fancy dress was carrying my bag up to an ornate front room overlooking the Promenade.”

“Luxury then, Ollie. How did you afford it? I thought you were penniless.”

“Well, it was a far cry from the Airport Hotel in Lagos, Andy, I can tell you. Ha! But after watching a ridiculous pornographic French film on a TV the size of a cinema screen, I spent a comfortable night in the bed which was wide enough to sleep six others without anyone noticing each other. The room also had a large, well-stocked bar but I only took the peanuts.”

“Phew,” said Andy Wilson, “I’m stuffed, Ollie. Can you manage some of these chips?”

“Sure, tip them on here. Thanks.”

“Did you eat breakfast next morning, Ollie?”

“Oh yes, but I only had a croissant and coffee. The bloody breakfast room looked like a replica of one I once visited at Chatsworth House.”

“You like good food in opulent surroundings then, Ollie.”

“You mean like eating fish and chips out of a plastic box, Andy?”

“Ha,” laughed Andy Wilson. “So, then what happened?”

“By nine o’clock, having booked myself to stay for at least another three nights, another man wearing a strange hat, red and blue fancy dress, white gloves and Wellington boots found me a nice Mercedes taxi and I set off for Cannes. It was a delightful early spring morning and it brought back memories of my travelling days, especially as we passed a sign for Grasse. I had known an export agent once who mostly specialized in Francophone Africa. He dealt in canned, tropical fruit. I know Michel lived in Grasse but we never met there. We used to meet by accident in hotels in places like Accra, Freetown and Douala.

“But the taxi passed on, into Cannes and eventually dropped me outside a big, iron, gate by a high stone wall overhung with trees covered in white flowers. I asked the taxi driver to wait saying I had no idea how long I would be but that I’d pay him for his time.

“I pressed a large black bell on the gate and put my ear against a metal grill. Seconds later I heard the rough voice of an elderly woman.

“In rather poor French I said that my name was Christopher Stanton from England and that I was trying to make contact with an old friend of mine, Royston Forsyth. But I then apologized for my French in English.

“The voice said, ‘Oh, really?’ in an English voice that rang of east London and then told me to wait. A few minutes later the same voice came from the metal grill. ‘What name was it again?’

“‘Christopher Stanton,’ I said, ‘I’m sorry to call without an appointment.’

“The woman seemed to sniff but said, ‘OK, wait. The gate will open. Come in.’

“With that, the gates clicked and slowly opened inwards and I walked inside.

“The driveway was far longer and steeper than I expected but the lawns and gardens made the walk a pleasant enough one and I eventually arrived at the house, an ornate brick and stone villa with orange roof tiles, a high chimney and a thick covering of ivy and other foliage. I walked up five wide steps towards a shiny black door feeling for the first time that my stick, which was back at the Negresco, would have been useful. “Then I rang another bell and the door opened almost immediately.

“An elderly lady stood there wearing the sort of outfit I understand some people wear to the gym these days – baggy trousers and a half-zipped up jacket. The entire outfit was in powder blue and, despite her age, which looked seventy, she wore a pair of white plimsolls, or trainers as I think they are now called.

“Her hair was not grey, which would have been the most likely colour for a woman of her years, but a shade of yellow with streaks of auburn. Her face was full and red as though she spent lengthy periods sitting in a deck chair somewhere sunny and she wore two large earrings that dangled almost down to her shoulders.

“I took all this in as I stood there gathering my breath.

“‘Yes?’ she said, in perfect Whitechapel English and, even though it was only one word she used, I instantly recognized the voice.

“My mind was racing. This was Betty from the Feathers and we were face to face for the first time for more than forty years.

“‘Good morning,’ I said, touching my forelock. ‘I’m sorry for disturbing you but my name is Christopher Stanton and I was hoping to catch up with an old friend of mine, Roy Forsyth as I heard he was living here.’

“‘I see,’ she said, looking me up and down, ‘and why would you want to see him?’

“The London accent was getting better all the time.

“‘Old time’s sake, really,’ I said, biding for time while deciding the best way forward. I was also looking down towards the floor and her plimsolls, not because I liked them but to reduce the chance of her recognizing my face.

“‘Well you’re too bleedin’ late, mate,’ she exploded. ‘The fucking bastard pegged out fifteen years ago.’

“I now looked up at her face. It looked angry and I felt sure I could smell gin but perhaps it was my imagination based on what Nigel the gardener had told me.

“‘Oh dear,’ I said, ‘that’s sad.’

“No, it fucking well ain’t. Fucking bastards – all of them.

Friends of them, are you?’

“‘Oh dear,’ I repeated, ‘I didn’t know him too well you understand, in fact I think I only ever met him once.’

“‘So how is he a bleedin’ friend, then?’

“Her voice really was quite rough, Andy, even for a woman of her age. But it was a good question.

“‘Well, maybe I should call myself an acquaintance,’ I said, backtracking a little.

“‘So, what the bleedin’ ’ell do you want?’ she said, putting both hands on her powder blue hips.

“‘I just wanted to catch up with him, I suppose,’ I said, ‘I was visiting Nice. But it looks like I’m fifteen years too late.

What happened to him? How old was he when he died?’

“I knew I was asking too many questions and she wisely ignored them. She was still standing with her hands on her hips and looked very cross and she avoided my question.

“‘How the fuck did you know he used to live here?’ she asked, instead.

“‘Another old acquaintance,’ I said.

“My mind was still running at break neck speed behind the small talk.

“Part of my mind was still hearing the loud and bawdy banter in the Feathers where she used to pull pints of Bass bitter and empty little jars of whelks and cockles into small white dishes before sprinkling vinegar over them.

“I could remember her words. ‘Bloody jars. Can’t ever friggin’ open them without breaking your bloody nails. Wanna go, Ollie? Your hands are so much bigger. Big hands, big cock, eh? You open my little jar and I’ll warm your cockles, eh? Ha ha. Want another pint while you’re trying?’

“But as I was imagining the scene of fifty years ago, an idea was forming.

“‘Actually,’ I said, ‘he still owes my other old acquaintance some money.’

“‘Fucking bastard. Does he? How bleedin’ much?’ “I knew then I’d hit a nerve.

“‘Oh, it’s not a lot,’ I said.

“‘So, who’s your other bloody acquaintance?’ she asked, changing her adjectives slightly.

“‘Oh, he was the gardener at a place where Roy used to live. It’s not important really.’

“‘You mean Nigel?’ she asked.

“I was surprised, Andy, that she’d not said fucking Nigel. But, ‘Yes, that’s him,’ I said, acting innocently, ‘He’s still working at the old place. Do you know him? He’s been there donkey’s years now. Hands as rough as sandpaper. Nice chap, though. I bumped into him in a pub in Oxford recently and he told me he was still waiting to be paid. We laughed about it. He said he had found out, somehow, that Roy had moved to live in Cannes. He said it wasn’t really worth bothering about after so long but he

clearly hadn't forgotten and seemed a bit annoyed. So, I said to him that as I was visiting Nice, shortly, I'd see if I could sort it out for him. Debts are debts I always say. You must never give up trying to get money that you are legitimately owed. It's only fair and just.'

"'Fucking bastard.' Betty scowled.

"'Nigel or Roy?'" I asked for clarification.

"'Fucking Roy Forsyth. That's who.'

"'You don't seem to have liked Roy, madam,'" I said, politely.

"'Liked? Liked? He and that fucking business partner of his, Donaldson, should have been shot years ago. I tried fucking strangling both of them at various times. Police were called once or twice.'

"'So, were they up to no good?'" I asked with my head on one side as though finding it difficult to understand how bad anyone could be.

"'Fucking Scottish Mafia, that's what I used to call them. I married that sod Major fucking Alex Donaldson so I got to know a few things that would make your bloody hair curl.'

"'Really?'" I said. This was proving very enlightening, as you can see, Andy.

"'Oh yes,'" she said, 'but if I dared to say anything . . .'" she stopped and drew a flat hand across her neck. 'Kkkuk!' she said, apparently imitating the sound of a throat being cut.

"It was then that I saw her cleavage, Andy. It was the very same one from the Feathers fifty years ago, and the subject of my recent dreams. It sagged more than I recalled and was lined with wrinkles and very much more freckled and red. But, mottled and sun tanned though it was, it was definitely the same cleavage that always reminded me of a large and speckled peach. But the give-away was the gold chain with the cross that hung down and mostly disappeared inside her powder blue top. Her voice had dropped an octave from how I remembered it and she now sounded husky as though she had spent the fifty years smoking and drinking.

"But this was, without question, Betty from the Feathers and, suddenly, I felt sorry for her as it looked as though she, too, had been drawn into Donaldson's life and suffered.

"'Oh yes,'" she said. 'I threatened to report everything I knew to the police and even said I would speak to the local MP. It was all tied up with Government stuff and politics, you know. Fucking bastard worked in the Government or somewhere or other though I never really understood what it was all about or how he got away with it. Fucking criminal more like.'

"'How dreadful,'" I said, 'so why didn't you do something?'

"'Ha!' she laughed falsely, 'Do something? Kkkuk! Say something? Kkkuk! Try to run away? Kkkuk! But threaten to kill myself? OK, no problem, feel free, go ahead. Here's the knife. Nice man.'

"'Oh, dear,'" I said.

"'Huh! I was stupid. I then got involved with his bloody mate, your fucking acquaintance Roy Forsyth. Thought he might be better and it would eventually turn

out OK, but like hell it did. He was tarred with the same brush. I found out later they were in cahoots and up to their necks in the same shit. I find out later that fucking Roy Forsyth had done time for embezzlement. Ex banker, nice way with words, smart suit and tie. Smooth as a rattlesnake. He'd even been a local Councillor at some time but got caught for taking a bribe. Educated bloody criminals I called 'em. They were partners in crime and both from some public school in Edinburgh. They made a bloody fortune, but search me how. I never understood. The only saving grace was that my twin boys got paid to board at Repton. But then they got expelled for bringing drugs in. And I know exactly where they came from – their own fucking father, that's who. He thought it was funny. He'd planted heroin in their suitcase when they went back to school after Easter one time. The poor lads were frightened to death of him. But it was to get at me, to have something else to hold over me like a noose. That was how he operated. He always found something to hang over you like a threat. '

“‘Oh dear,’ I said, ‘So what happened to your boys?’

“‘They got taken to Spain to help their father's business. I never saw them again. God knows what they're up to. They're probably tarred with the same bloody brush by now but they were too young to know any better.’

“‘Good gracious,’ I said, ‘So, don't you ever see your sons?’

“‘No,’ she said and although I expected the answer I detected some definite sadness, eroded though it may have been over time. ‘They probably think I'm dead,’ she added even more sadly and I saw a genuine look of sadness in her eyes. She sniffed.

“‘And when did you last see them?’

“‘Twenty-five years this month. They will both be forty-five now.’

“‘So why don't you go to see them?’ I asked.

“‘And bump into fucking Alex Donaldson? No thanks.

Anyway, if I as much as put a foot in Spain I am likely to find myself upside down in a ditch somewhere. Nice fucking bloke is Alex Donaldson.’

“‘So, is Mr Donaldson still alive?’ I asked.

“‘Oh yes. The sod bought a fancy, bloody place, the size of a Texan ranch, near Malaga. Like bloody Dallas it was. He moved there with another floozy. He'd be too bloody old to service the wench nowadays but I guarantee he's found a way to keep her quiet.’

“‘I stood there, Andy, trying hard not to look at Betty's cleavage but feeling desperately sorry for her. But she seemed to be getting impatient now. Or was it nerves? Did she just want to talk to someone who might listen? Perhaps she needed another gin. Her mouth twisted sideways and she looked at her watch. So, I said:

“‘Well, I'm sorry to hear all that. I'd better be on my way.’ It sounded pathetic but there was not a lot more to say without coming out with my own list of grievances and that would have taken months.

“‘How much did they owe Nigel?’ Betty suddenly asked. “‘Six hundred pounds,’ I said.

“‘Just a minute,’ she said and disappeared.

“A minute later I heard the plimsolls squeaking on the wooden floor and Betty handed me an envelope with a large bundle of notes hanging out.

“‘Here,’ Betty said. ‘It’s five thousand euros. That should cover what Nigel was owed, with some interest. I don’t need it. Wish him well for me. He was a good gardener. You can’t get them for love nor money around here.’

“Betty, despite her bad experiences, did not seem short of cash. Perhaps, though, this was a portion of Donaldson’s silence money.

“I thanked her, apologized for arriving out of the blue without an appointment and started back down the steps.

Betty watched me go.

“But at the bottom I couldn’t resist one last look at her and so I stopped and turned.

“‘Are you sure we haven’t met before?’ she said, clearly puzzled.

“‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said and then turned and made my way down the driveway to the gate where I turned around yet again and waved. Betty was still watching me.

“But that explains the cash you found in my bag, Andy. Am I now cleared of any suspicions of theft?”

“Yes, Ollie. I think we can probably strike that one off,” said Andy. “But what happened next?”

## **Malaga**

“**I spent a further two days and nights at the Negresco, Andy.** The place was too ornate for my liking although the croissants were nice. I became very friendly with the man in the fancy uniform on the front door and he pointed me towards a café where I ate lunch each day. In the evening, he pointed me towards another one where I ate dinner but by the third morning I no longer needed any breakfast.”

“What about your fish and chips, Ollie? Have you finished?”

“Yes, thanks. Do you want me to continue now? I ask because we are rapidly reaching the particular event which concerns you.”

“Please. Go ahead. Feel free, Ollie. At your own pace. It’s another three months before my summer holidays.”

“Sorry it’s taking a while, Andy but you can see why I warned you. Will you be visiting Spain on holiday, Andy? If so, I can offer some tips on where to stay and where not to stay.”

“I’m not sure yet, Ollie. Please proceed.”

“Well, I checked out of the Negresco on the third morning, said cheerio to my friend, Claude on the front door and took a taxi to the airport again.”

“I see you make friends easily, Ollie.”

“I like to think it comes naturally, Andy, although I’ve not had much practice over the last twenty years. But while I was away I noticed how much I’ve missed it.”

“So how did you put up with life in Gloucester for so long?”

Andy Wilson saw Oliver Thomas look away as though his question had hit a nerve and decided to add to his question to give more time for a reply. “I mean, I thought you said the drinking and the so-called Thomas’s Disease was a reaction to boredom.”

Oliver Thomas scratched his head and sighed.

“Perhaps I have gone a little over the top in saying I was depressed, Andy. Perhaps it is only in the last few years, and since Sarah became ill, that I have found life depressing. I think that that had a lot to do with Sarah slowly disappearing into her illness and leaving me with no one to talk to. It was as though she had left me and I missed her company. But for most of the time since we went to live in Gloucester, I cannot say I felt totally unfulfilled. We would go for drives in the car.

We would go on short holidays to Wales and to Cornwall and we would spend hours in the back garden. We never went abroad of course, but Sarah loved her flowers and her vegetable patch. It is a fact I find hard to admit, but so did I.

“I think it is a left over from the years of culture shock when I would return home for just a few days between longer trips abroad. Domesticity seemed, at that time, dreadfully mundane and I suspect I grew to believe that nothing was as good as travelling and mixing with so many other nationalities. I had always thought I needed to earn money to provide for my family and, if that meant spending long weeks of the year travelling abroad, then so be it. But I discovered after moving to Gloucester that that was not the case. I slowly found that a quiet life of living within means was just as satisfying. Sarah had a whole list of sayings about that. Waste not, want not. Make ends meet. Make do and mend. That was her philosophy. What’s more, Andy, I know Sarah liked me being around the house. We were making up for lost time and, even more surprisingly, I liked being there. In fact, it was the best time of my life.”

Oliver Thomas looked down at the floor between his feet and Andy Wilson saw that his eyes were watering.

“Mm,” Oliver Thomas went on, wiping his cheek, “I miss my Sarah.”

Andy Wilson coughed and leaned forward to move the phone an inch.

“Mm,” he heard Oliver Thomas repeat. “So, I said goodbye to Claude, joked with him in poor French that he should smarten himself up a little, polish his ridiculous boots and straighten his hat. Claude told me to buy a new pair of shoes.

Then he shook my hand, opened the taxi door and I got in.

Then I looked back to see him waving at me.”

Andy Wilson heard him sniff back something watery and wipe his face again.

“So, you went to the airport, Ollie?”

“Yes,” he looked up, his eyes clearly red around the edges.

Then he sniffed once again. “I took an Air France flight to Malaga.”

Oliver Thomas coughed, clearly trying to bring himself together.

He took a deep breath. “Do you know Malaga, Andy?”

“Ah, no – unfortunately. I did venture to Majorca once with some mates. When I was single.”

“Don’t go there, Andy. I have never liked Malaga. It has a certain tone about it, which does not appeal to my sense of order. Perhaps it’s Picasso’s influence. I was unsure whether to stay in the city or outside. But I had already thought about this before I left Gloucester and had decided to stay somewhere in the centre near the Cathedral in case I needed to lose myself among crowds.”

“So where did you stay, Ollie?”

“I booked a room at a small hotel in the centre, in a busy street called Ataranzanas, close to the Picasso Museum and port. It’s an area I knew quite well and it hasn’t changed much. But, checking in, I asked the reception clerk if a small parcel had been delivered to await my arrival. Miraculously, it was there waiting for me and it, and my bag, was carried up to the first floor where I found myself in a rather dim but adequate room overlooking a small courtyard.”

“Sounds cosy, Ollie. What was in the package?”

“We’ll come to that, Andy. But, yes, this hotel was much more to my liking and I decided to go immediately out into the street, have a look around to get my bearings, buy a local map and a small haversack and find a café.

“Later, with the evening drawing on I returned to my room and opened my parcel. Inside, wrapped in several layers of foil to confuse any x-ray machines, was the item that had sat in an oily cloth at the bottom of the old box in the bedroom at home for twenty years.”

“You sent something by courier in advance, Ollie? Why not take it with you?”

“It was my gun, Andy.”

“Your what?”

“My hand gun, Andy. The one you referred to earlier when I was arrested.”

“You weren’t arrested. You were detained for questioning.”

“Anyway, I took the gun out, checked it, placed it on the bed, wrapped it up in its old cloth again, put it into my new haversack along with an envelope containing some other papers I’d brought with me and I turned in for the night.”

“You must have slept soundly with your gun lying next to you, Ollie.”

“Yes, indeed. I slept very well and when I awoke I was hungry.”

“Naturally.”

“But I took a quick look at what amounted to the breakfast room downstairs by the bar, decided it was not for me and wandered out into the street again. By nine thirty I was back again having drunk a nice cup of coffee with a couple of churros. Nourished sufficiently to last a full day and raring to go, I recovered my haversack from my room and went to find a taxi.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just drive the Jaguar down to Malaga, Ollie. It would have been a nice ride. But then what happened?”

The address on the paper that Nigel had given Oliver Thomas was, like Little Avening, a dot on his newly purchased and detailed map of the Malaga area.



San Licata was marked as near Antequera but Oliver Thomas decided it could only be a tiny hamlet, if that.

His Spanish was not as good as his Arabic or French but he soon found a taxi driver who spoke reasonable English and was willing to sit around and wait for him, paid by the time.

Then, under a clear blue sky, they drove out of Malaga through rocky terrain strewn with conifer trees and a carpet of yellow wild flowers. They drove through Antequera, headed for Cordoba and, after passing through another village turned right off the main road and followed a small river that trickled over stones and boulders until they reached a small lake surrounded by conifers. The taxi driver stopped, looked around and scratched his head.

"I never go this way before, señor but I think this is the place," he said and pointed to a rough track between more trees and rocks. "But no cars ever come this way."

"Let's try anyway," suggested Oliver Thomas.

"OK, señor, you pay," and he laughed, clearly enjoying the drive. He and Oliver Thomas were getting on very well.

They bumped their way for another mile or so, the track getting steep and higher until they reached a summit where the rough, stony track suddenly dropped steeply down again onto the other side.

"I think this road only good for donkeys, señor."

Before them was a panoramic view of a valley and way down, shimmering in the heat of late morning, a large house or villa with a red roof and groups of other buildings, all surrounded by a white wall in an, almost, perfect oval shape.

A better, narrow but tarmacked road led away from what looked like a pillared gate in one side of the wall and disappeared behind another hillside.

"I think that is the place, señor. But we come on wrong road, I think. Much better if we come from Cordoba side on that road," the taxi driver said, pointing.

Oliver Thomas agreed and they turned and went back.

After a further half hour of driving, the taxi driver and Oliver Thomas were on first name terms.

"How you know about this place, Ollie?"

"It is probably the headquarters of the Spanish Mafia, Rafael! I need to speak to them about some unfinished business."

"No! I think you joke, señor. You don't look like the Mafia to me, Ollie."

"Why is that, Rafael?"

"Mafia, they are rich and wear the gold rings and smoke the cigarra. You look more like the man who ride on Spanish donkey, if you don't mind me saying, Ollie."

"I don't mind at all, Rafael. But I think I am more like the donkey himself."

Rafael laughed and laughed until tears ran down his face and when he had recovered he said, "I think you are a very funny man, Ollie. I think you are a good one for joking."

“Well, I’m a bit out of practice,” Oliver Thomas replied and then sat thinking.

“I think I need to start practicing everything again, Rafael.” “You mean the joking?”

“No. I need to practice how to live again.”

Rafael glanced at him from staring at the road ahead.

“But joking is a good start to living, Ollie. You know any Spanish jokes?”

Oliver Thomas sat thinking.

“Yes, one,” he said smiling, “but English jokes must always include Irish people. You know about that, Rafael?”

Rafael looked at him again, laughed and carried on driving.

“Yes, I heard. But the Irish jokes are very good. You want to tell me?”

“Well,” said Oliver Thomas, “you know Julio Iglesias, the Spanish singer, Rafael?”

“Of course.”

“An Irishman once asked him why the Spanish used the word *manyana* so much. Julio Iglesias said that it was because the Spanish were very relaxed people. Maybe a job will be done tomorrow, maybe the next day or maybe next week, next month or next year.”

“Yes, that is Spain, Ollie.”

“Then Julio Iglesias asked the Irishman if the Irish had a word similar to *manyana*. No, said the Irishman. We don’t have a word to describe that amount of urgency.”

Rafael laughed.

“That is a good one, Ollie. Do you know any more?”

Oliver Thomas sat for a moment.

“I have one more, Rafael. You want to hear it?”

“Of course!”

Oliver Thomas sat without speaking for a moment but then said, “I say, Rafael, do you want to hear it?”

“Of course. I already say.”

“So, you can hear OK, Rafael?”

“Of course, my ear is very good.”

“OK. Because do you know about the Spanish man, Fabio, who was deaf? Fabio told his friend, ‘Hey, Felipe, I have just bought myself an aid for deafness that is a wonderful. When I put it in my ear nobody knows I am wearing it.’ And Felipe says, ‘That is fantastic. What will they invent next? It must be very expensive. How much did it cost?’ And you know what Fabio says, Rafael?”

“No, Ollie. What?”

“The time is a quarter past two.”

Rafael laughed and laughed so much he had to stop the car for a moment to wipe his eyes. Then, as they got moving once again, he asked: “So you have business with these Mafia, Ollie?”

"It's unfinished business, Rafael. But my real business was export."

"Ah, export. My sister, she has a very good business. She is making fine table cloths," Rafael said. "You want me to speak to her about business, Ollie?"

"Yes, why not," Oliver Thomas replied, "I'm always on the lookout for opportunities. Here's my card."

He pulled an old Thomas Import Export card from his pocket - one that he'd found during his recent clearing up.

Still driving, Rafael looked at it then stuck it into the top pocket of his shirt. "But how old you are, señor? Excuse me for my asking."

"Eighty-six. But today I feel like thirty-six."

"It's the good life, señor, I see. You must keep active, not stop. Keep the joking. Keep going until drop dead like all donkeys. Best way to die I think."

"Yes," Oliver Thomas agreed. "You never know if death is just around the corner, do you Rafael?"

And with that, they rounded a corner in the road. "Please stop here, Rafael."

"You ready to die so soon, Ollie?" Rafael asked, laughing.

"Perhaps," he said and Rafael stopped laughing.

Oliver Thomas stopped his explanation to Andy Wilson. First, he scratched his head. Then he rubbed his grey, facial stubble with his hand and then stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it as though something might be blocking it.

"What do you think of Rafael, Andy?" he asked.

Andy Wilson was sitting on the edge of his seat. "I like him," he said.

"Yes, me too. He is just the sort of man I get on with. Not only friendly but a few business contacts as well. An opportunist. I'd like a longer chat with him sometime."

"You want to carry on, Ollie?"

"Yes. We were approaching the white wall we had seen from the other side of the mountain when I told Rafael to stop. The pillared gateway hadn't looked big from the other side but from this approach it was big and impressive.

"An arch in U.S. cattle ranch style showed that this was, indeed, 'San Licata'. The name stretched in large black letters right across the arch.

"And it was then that I suddenly realized where I had heard the name before. Licata was the small town in Sicily. Do you remember that, Andy?"

"Yes, and also the name of the boat in Malta, the one that carried the IRA shipment. That was called Licata."

"That's it. Bingo, I thought. Beneath the arch was what looked like a gate-keepers lodge, but the gates were wide open. A driveway led through a bright green lawn bordered with short conifer trees. A man was spraying water onto the grass with a hose."

"We go in?" Rafael asked as though offering to lead a cavalry charge.

"Wait a moment, Rafael. I need to think."

“This place makes me nervous, Ollie. It looks like Spanish Mafia,” Rafael said. “How long you want to think, Ollie?”

“Sssh!” Oliver Thomas said. “I’m thinking.”

The thinking didn’t take long.

Oliver Thomas told Rafael to drive up to the gate but wait for him outside.

Two minutes later he checked the contents of his haversack which he had placed on the back seat of the taxi and then, taking his stick this time because he wanted to appear old and infirm, he got out of Rafael’s taxi.

“Please wait, Rafael. OK?”

He tottered towards the gate.

As he approached, the main villa came into view.

It was deceptively large and built on a split-level, the land to the rear lower than the front and the high, surrounding wall disappeared down the hillside beyond the villa, reappearing further along near some other smaller houses. The view beyond the villa looked out across miles of open Spanish countryside. The gardens themselves were mostly grass and the only trees were the few that bordered the driveway.

The concrete driveway led towards the red-tiled villa and some wide, semi-circular steps. At the top of the steps was a high and wide wooden door that opened into a darker interior. The driveway itself then forked and led away to the other houses and buildings that looked like low roofed warehouses.

Several cars – new BMWs and a Mercedes – were parked along the driveway and a pick-up truck and three other cars sat, in dark shadow under a corrugated shelter beyond the main house. It had all the characteristics of a big home-based family business and reminded Oliver Thomas of one he had once known that perched on the side of Mount Vesuvius.

“Do you want to know about that place at Somme Vesuviano near Naples, Andy?”

“Another time, Ollie, just keep going.”

“But this Spanish place was so similar. It needs investigating, Andy. Because I know that the Naples business was run by a family called Perillo. Do you remember the Perillo name, Andy?”

“The lawyer in Malta?”

“That’s it. I want to go there again sometime, after this is finished.”

“Later, Ollie. What happened next?”

There was no one in the lodge office so Oliver Thomas walked straight through the gate, using his stick as a prop until the man watering the grass spotted him.

He then dropped his hose with the water still running from it and ran over, shouting in Spanish.

Oliver Thomas waved his stick in what he thought might be interpreted as a friendly manner and the man stopped some distance from him, but continued to shout in strongly accented Spanish.

“I’m very sorry but do you speak English?” Oliver Thomas asked.

The man looked at the stick and then at Oliver Thomas. "OK, watta ya want? Watta your name?" and he came a little closer.

"I'm sorry but I haven't got long," he replied. "My taxi is waiting. I just wanted to speak to Mr Donaldson."

"Which Mr Donaldson? We have a many here."

"Oh, I see," he said. "It's Major Donaldson I wanted to speak to."

"Major Donaldson, he very olda man now, no see visitatori."

"What about the other Donaldsons?"

"Which wanna you want? We have a many here."

"His son, perhaps?"

"He havva two son. Which wanna you wanna?"

"I don't really mind. I just wanted to leave a message or something."

"We donna do that 'ere."

"Excuse me?"

"We dunna see visitatori 'ere."

"Then is it possible to leave a message?"

"Watta your message?"

"I have it here. It's written down."

"OK. I givva to Peter."

"Peter?" Oliver Thomas asked, checking.

"Yah. He wanna olda brother."

"Would that be Major Donaldson's son?"

"Yah. Peter, he twinna brother Simon."

"Oh, yes, I remember," Oliver Thomas said. "I lost contact with the family some years ago. Very nice family. How is the Major? He must be quite old now."

"Yah. He very olda now. Have sedia a rotelli. He not do so mucha now. How you knowa family?"

"Oh," Oliver Thomas laughed, perhaps wrongly. He was trying to think what a sedia a rotelli might be and then decided it might be a wheelchair. "Oh, it's a very long story – we worked together for many years. Partners in crime you might say, ha ha."

"Is my accent, good, Andy? Do you recognise it?" Oliver Thomas asked Andy Wilson.

"Ah, I don't think so. Is it Spanish?" said Andy Wilson.

"Tut," Oliver Thomas replied. "The man was Italian. My Naples accent is very clear."

"Sorry Ollie. Go on."

The Italian was watching Oliver Thomas from a distance.

“Yes, partners in crime,” he repeated and winked at him although he knew he may have been too far away for him to see. “Same camorra, you know?”

“Camorra?” the Italian said and his Naples pronunciation of the Italian word for gang was spot on.

“Si, Major Donaldson was my boss. The big capo.”

“OK,” the Italian said and Oliver Thomas sensed him loosening up. “Your boss, uh? He still the big capo. Watta your message?”

“Major Donaldson would love to see me,” he said. “We knew each other for a very long time. Maybe forty years he was my amico. E impresa familiare, you know?”

He knew his Italian was rusty but a few words thrown in about Donaldson being a friend and a family business had looked sensible.

“We donna have visitatori here. Only visitatori importanti.”

“I am visitatori importanti,” Oliver Thomas replied and held out his arms and hands, palms upwards, like a true Italian, except that his stick hung from his right arm.

“Watta your name?”

“Mi chiamo, David,” Oliver Thomas said, holding back the surname Reynolds but hoping that the hosepipe Italian might even think David was his family name.

“Watta your message?”

“Can I not meet him to give it?” he asked.

“Ees not possible.”

“OK, never mind,” he said. “Can you give this to either Peter or Simon?”

Oliver Thomas sighed, deliberately and heavily and put his haversack on the ground. The hosepipe Italian came a little closer.

Oliver Thomas took out a single piece of paper and held it out.

The hosepipe took it and said, “Ees Arabic?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Some of the words are. The rest is English but I’m sure the Major will understand.”

“OK, I givva to Peter first, maybe the capo he wanna see you, I dunna know.”

“Grazie mille,” Oliver Thomas said, “I’ll be back tomorrow at the same time and hope to meet him.”

“With that, Andy, I raised my stick as a sort of salute, turned and started to walk back to the gate and Rafael in the waiting taxi. But I had already caught sight of someone watching from the doorway of the villa and, because I was purposely walking slowly with my stick, I had only gone a few steps when I heard another voice behind me.

“I turned and, shading my eyes from the sun, saw another man in jeans and tee shirt coming down the villa steps and walking quickly towards the hosepipe man.

“‘Che cos’e, Umberto?’

“Umberto, the hosepipe man, said, ‘I dunno, boss. He come inna ’ere and wanna speak to Maggiore.’

“Then the tee shirted one appeared to grab my piece of paper from Umberto. But I turned once more and continued to hobble my way towards the gate and Rafael’s taxi. Rafael clambered out of his taxi and walked towards me as if to help someone old enough to be his grandfather struggling in the heat with only a stick to help him. But before he had reached me I heard the English voice again, clearly shouting towards me, ‘Hey, old man. What do you want?’

“You must have felt insulted, Ollie?” Andy Wilson said, laughing.

“No, Andy. I wanted to appear old and frail and I pretended not to hear. I continued plodding towards the taxi but Rafael was now right next to me and he grabbed my arm. I leaned on him, looked straight into his face and said: ‘I’m OK, Rafael, but, I’m going back in there. If I’m not out again in one hour, please phone the police on your mobile and get them to come out here.’

“Rafael looked a little shocked. ‘La policia?’ “ ‘Yes,’ I said and then added, ‘por favor. And if they ask, say you think an old man has just died.’

“‘Madre de Dios. You wanna die like the donkey now, Señor? So soon?’

“‘No, I don’t want to die,’ I said, ‘But there’s another old man in there and he’s older than me. Si gracias.’

“Then what, Ollie?” asked Andy Wilson.

The tee shirted English man was walking rapidly towards them.

“What’s going on?” he asked from some distance away.

Oliver Thomas could now see he was still holding the paperwork in his hand. He looked at Rafael.

“OK, give me half an hour,” he said to the taxi driver, “and then – you know what to do.”

Rafael looked at him and then at the English man approaching.

“One minute you say one hour, Ollie, then you say half an hour. OK, si señor, te cuida,’ he said.

“OK, up to you, Rafael. If you hear trouble, phone the police.”

“What sort of trouble, Ollie?”

“Pistola, excopata, gun. You’ll know it’s trouble when you hear it.”

“Madre de Dios!”

Rafael then went back to his taxi to reverse it a few yards further away under the shade of a tree.

Oliver Thomas turned to look at the English man.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I just wanted to catch up with Alex Donaldson.”

Donaldson’s son was now stood right in front of him. “What about?”

“Licata,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“The paper,” he said, pointing at what the son was holding in his hand. “It’s a Bill of Lading for a shipment that went out of Libya many years ago, on an Italian vessel called Licata.”

“So?” he said, looking at it.

“That’s what I want to speak to Alex Donaldson about.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“My name is David Reynolds,” he said and started to rummage inside his rucksack. “Here – my passport.” The man took it and opened it.

“It’s old, fucking expired,” he said.

“I know,” he replied, “I must get around to renewing it.”

“How do you know my father?”

“You must be one of his twin sons,” Oliver Thomas said as a reply. “Which one are you?”

“Never mind. How do you know my father?”

“Oh, we go back sixty years or more – back to the war.”

Oliver Thomas tried to smile. “He was my boss once.”

“So, what’s this Licata shit?”

“Alex would know,” he said. “How is he? Must be getting on a bit now. I’m eighty-six, he must be ninety. But, oh yes, your father and I go back many, many years. It’s such a long time. I just wanted to catch up, that’s all.”

“How did you know he was here?”

“Ah,” Oliver Thomas said, his lingering smile turning into a short laugh, “Alex always said he would know where to find me. But I found him, instead. So how is the old bugger? Still smoking Craven A or has he given up because they don’t make them any longer? We used to meet in the Feathers in Mayfair. We had some real laughs there. I worked for him for nearly forty years. Is he in? I’m sorry to call unannounced but we always had that sort of arrangement. Your father often used to call me when I was busy and I was always expected to drop everything and run.”

Oliver Thomas dropped his stick down onto the dusty ground and held his back as though it was about to break. Then he bent down to the haversack again.

“Phew, it’s hot for the time of year. It feels nearly as hot as Kufra and I’m not as used to it as I once was. But I’ve got something else here that Alex might like to see – for old time’s sake.”

He walked nearer and handed him an envelope though whether he was giving it to Peter or Simon he still wasn’t sure. Whichever twin it was, tore the envelope open and withdrew two sheets of paper Oliver Thomas had typed on his old type- writer back in Gloucester.

“What the fuck is this?” the twin said, and he turned it over to read the second page.

“It’s an invoice,” Oliver Thomas said, “for just over six million pounds.”

“Are you fucking crazy?”



“Oh, no,” he said. “It’s an invoice from my business, Thomas Import Export Limited and you’ll see it’s neatly broken down into various items.”

He waited just a moment for the twin to read it and then said: “As you see, the items on the front page include back pay, unpaid travel expenses and consultancy work. On the second page, you will see a further, much longer list.”

He waited for him to scan the second page.

“You will note that these include such items as losses I incurred on a shipment of military supplies destined for Chad, which, by the way, will be the subject of a criminal investigation unless my invoice is paid in full. I’m sorry to put it so bluntly. There is also a breakdown of costs I incurred in trying to stop the shipment of several forty-foot containers containing stolen Mercedes cars instead of medical equipment. These, incidentally, were paid for partly by charitable donations that included a sum of £535 raised at a garden party I once attended in Walton-on-Thames.

“There is a small, separate item, number 37, which are my company’s charges, previously unclaimed, for train fares to visit the Scottish office of your dear father.

“Item number 46 on my invoice is a much bigger sum and covers danger money for having helped to organize a meeting for a Member of the House of Lords in the West African bush. My charges in this case are for not saying anything about this to anyone unless asked by a Judge in the High Court, in which case I will reduce the amount shown.”

The Donaldson twin looked straight at Oliver Thomas.

“You’re bloody crazy.”

“Oh no,” he said, “not in the least. But unless I get paid for it, I will go straight to the Police, the Inland Revenue and Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise once I get back to England with a file a foot thick about Alex Donaldson’s business activities over the last sixty years.”

“You are fucking mad.”

“Please stop saying that,” Oliver Thomas said, politely. “What’s more, a copy of the invoice and its accompanying files is lodged with a solicitor back in England and if I fail to return to England for any reason he is under strict instructions to release the contents to the powers that be.”

Oliver Thomas stared at the man wondering if it was starting to sink in.

And, in case it wasn’t, he added: “And as I’m so old now and couldn’t care a fuck whether I get away from here dead, alive or embedded in a block of concrete ready to be shipped to Naples or Sicily to be dropped with a splash into the Mediterranean it’s entirely up to you. I’d always fancied being fed to the fish somewhere near Amalfi if that’s convenient. But the question is, do you want the whole of your fucking Scottish, Italian and Spanish arms dealing, drugs smuggling and money laundering operation cracked wide open?”

The Donaldson twin stood, his mouth open and with an unexpected twitch in his cheek.

“So, can I see him or no?” Oliver Thomas concluded.

“Fucking hell,” the twin said as the hosepipe Italian sidled up alongside and peered around his shoulder.

The twin stood shaking his head and said, "Fuck," again and Oliver Thomas saw one of his father's features on his face a bubble of white spittle had appeared on his upper lip.

"Umberto, go tell padre, he has a visitor," he said over his shoulder.

"You sure, boss?"

"Go!"

Umberto scurried away along the driveway towards a large puddle of water that had formed from his hosepipe. Donaldson's twin son then returned to the paperwork in his hand. He had not yet looked at the Bill of Lading with the Arabic lettering.

"And what the fuck is this?"

Umberto stopped in his tracks as though expecting that his instructions might be about to change.

"Your father knows," Oliver Thomas replied.

"Tell me."

"It covers a shipment of arms that was sent from Libya to Northern Ireland during the IRA troubles," Oliver Thomas said. "The boat was called the Licata and the file on that is particularly thick."

"I know nothing."

"Why would you?" Oliver Thomas said, "It was long before your time. And, by the way," he said pointing with his stick to the pretentious arch over the main entrance, "As far as I know there is no Saint Licata. Licata is just a small place in southern Sicily. But I assume your dear father always held ambitions of sainthood for himself, although I would venture to suggest that any sainthood is more likely to be granted by the chap who lives beneath our feet rather than the one living in the clouds above."

"Come with me," he growled and walked off with Oliver Thomas's expired passport and the papers.

Umberto moved but stopped just past the puddle still with a look of uncertainty on his face. Then he followed like a nervous dog.

Oliver Thomas bent down to pick up his haversack and then followed the two men, slowly, back along the driveway, through the pool of water and towards the steps of the villa.

By the time, he had arrived at the bottom step, Umberto and the son had already disappeared into the cooler, darker interior so he stood for a moment for a different view of San Licata.

At the end of the driveway was what looked like a warehouse, its doors wide open. Two men were putting loaded pallets into the back of a small truck with a forklift. They stopped to watch but Oliver Thomas waved his stick and they carried on. Strange old men with walking sticks, it appeared, were of no concern.

"You really must speak to the Italian authorities, Andy. This place was a carbon copy of the one in Naples. There is a connection somewhere and the common theme is the name Perillo. I could take you right to the main gate of the one in Vesuviano right

now. The Italians think they've got rid of old style mafia. They may well have but sophisticated, organized crime is everywhere."

"Yes, Ollie. We know," Andy Wilson replied. "The problem is usually gathering the evidence that'll stand up in Court and finding the ring leaders. And many of them have insurance policies in the form of politicians and others lying low or in their pockets."

"I know, Andy, but no excuses. When you want to move, just call me."

"Will do, Ollie. So, what happened next?"

Oliver Thomas stood at the bottom of the wide steps waiting.

A few minutes later Umberto appeared again, looking flushed and worried.

"You left your water on," Oliver Thomas said, pointing to the expanding puddle on the driveway.

"Si, signore, I know issa wet. Please to follow."

Oliver Thomas followed Umberto up the marble steps onto more marble – a wide, brown tiled hallway with closed doors off to the right and left and then another wide, semicircular stairway this time leading down.

Umberto waited at the bottom of the second stairway as Oliver Thomas hobbled down, holding onto a brass banister with his left hand and to his stick in the other. His haversack was still hanging over one shoulder.

"Please to follow."

He then followed Umberto along a darker, cool corridor with an ornate red ceiling lit by a single, shiny, brass and crystal chandelier and watched Umberto knock on the door at the far end and wait.

As he caught up, the door was opened and the son stood there.

"OK 'berto. Wait outside the house."

Umberto almost bowed and then scuttled back along the corridor.

## **Donaldson**

**"I have to admit, Andy, my stomach, which had only seen two churros and a small cup of coffee all day, was churning, though it was not with hunger. It is not every day one gets a chance to renew your acquaintance with a murderous, international, crook especially one who you once thought was dead."**

"I've never been in the position myself, Ollie. So, I wouldn't know. I don't suppose you even got a cup of coffee."

"Patience, Andy, I'm coming to it."

"You got a cup, Ollie?"

"No."

The son, whichever one it was, backed into the room and nodded his head for Oliver Thomas to follow. There was a lot to take in.

This was not like the Negresco in Nice but just as ornate. The floor was the same marble as elsewhere but a vast, Chinese carpet started from near the door and extended into the far distance.

A large, four-poster bed with cream drapes and gold sashes stood on one side with several shining, wooden tables and chairs on both sides.

A large desk covered in marquetry and a green leather writing area stood on Oliver Thomas's right. A telephone in shiny brass and a table lamp with a green shade were the only items on it.

At the far end was a wide, open patio door leading onto a white, tiled, veranda with a low wall of short pillars and a red awning over a white table and chairs. Two wide windows on either side of the patio door were also open giving a view over a huge expanse of open Spanish countryside beyond.

A faint breeze moved a red velvet curtain that hung from close to the ceiling.

For a moment, the bright sunlight from outside made everything inside except the green lamp on the desk look dark but Oliver Thomas saw the son walk across the carpet towards one of the windows and then sit on a sofa made of shiny, gold fabric with gilt arms.

It was then that he saw the silhouette.

The dark figure was still forty feet away and was sat in what looked like a wheelchair against one of the open windows. The head was bent slightly to one side and something small, like an ornate ring, flashed on a hand resting on the arm of the wheelchair and rose to the head. The silhouette coughed and gurgled and for a second Oliver Thomas thought it was Jim.

Then it spoke. "Fucking Ollie Thomas."

It was only three, slowly spoken words but the voice was rough and deep. It trembled slightly and there was the faintest hint of Scottish accent that seemed to have increased over the years.

"Mr fucking Reynolds, back from the dead."

Oliver Thomas tried moving closer in the hope of seeing some detail but was stopped by his stick which embedded itself into the deep pile of the Chinese carpet. He almost toppled forward but just managed to regain his position and dignity and stood with the stick still embedded in the carpet, his two hands clenched over the curved handle.

He stared at the black figure in the wheelchair.

"Oliver, fucking, Thomas."

Oliver Thomas said nothing but was determined not to look directly towards the windows. He had not come all this way to see a silhouette again and his eyes needed to grow accustomed to the light. He wanted a detailed look of the ninety-year old Donaldson to see what living in this style for forty years may have done to his features.

"Bless my fucking soul. I hoped you were dead," Donaldson growled.

“No such luck,” Oliver Thomas said.

“But I heard your dear wife is gone.”

The fact that Donaldson already knew shocked him but he held his ground and didn't flinch.

“We all have to go sometime,” he said and was proud of the sound of his own voice. To him, it sounded thirty years younger than Donaldson's.

“Enjoying your retirement, Ollie?”

“The time passes.”

“Didn't get to retire anywhere nice then?”

“Gloucester is fine.”

“Matter of opinion I suppose.” He chose not to respond.

“Did Sarah tell you that if you moved a fucking inch we'd get you?”

“Not in as many words. But I guessed.”

“Good as gold Sarah. Just like Beaty Collins.”

“Yes,” he said, “The two most important women in my life.”

The silhouette manoeuvred itself up in the chair and coughed like Jim again.

“So – going globetrotting again then, Ollie.”

“Only recently.”

“Been anywhere beside Spain?”

“Only as far as Little Avening.”

“Become a detective as well as a fucking salesman, have you?”

He heard the spittle emerge and settle somewhere.

“Not really,” he said, “I've been catching up on my invoices.”

“So, I see. It's a big bill, Ollie. Six million quid is a lot.”

“I left off a lot because I wasn't sure if you could afford it.”

Out of the corner of my eye he saw the son stir on his golden sofa.

“You're a joker, Ollie, and a stupid, fucking sucker.”

“Perhaps, but I tried to run an honest business. And being blackmailed isn't nice.”

“But you worked for the Government, Ollie. Governments aren't nice.”

“I was patriotic.”

“An admirable quality, Ollie, but very naïve.”

“I didn't do it for the money.”

“I can see that, Ollie. It shows.”

“You, on the other hand, worked only for yourself.”

“But look what I've got, Ollie.” Donaldson raised his hands as though pointing to the opulence. “What have you got?”

“A clear conscience.”

“Ha,” Donaldson was clearly trying to laugh but failed. “So, what the fuck do you want, Ollie? Money? What for? To go abroad at last? What have you got left, Ollie? Your good looks?”

The son settled into his sofa again.

Oliver Thomas unclenched his hands from the stick and scratched his nose.

“Any chance I can see your own handsome features then?” he asked. “Why don’t you stand up and get away from the window and let me check. All you’ve ever been in your life is a black shadow. You’ve cast it far and wide. At least I can stand. For all I know I could be speaking to an impostor.”

“Why don’t you just fuck off back to the suburbs where you came from, dear boy.”

“I aim to,” he said, “but I thought I’d pay one last visit to your office before you die. It’s a nice view. Nice carpet and nice golden bed, too. Got a golden piss pot underneath it, have you?”

Oliver Thomas knew he was winding him up but it was something he’d waited to do for too long. He had even dreamed of suitable phrases to use. But Donaldson’s reaction was to cough productively and swallow whatever came up.

“The climate doesn’t suit you, Major. You should move somewhere more temperate. Somewhere like Alaska. The cold would match your sensitive nature.”

Donaldson was growling but whether it was his temper boiling or more thick mucus gathering in his throat it was impossible to tell.

“You always had a nice turn of phrase, Ollie. But what the fuck do you want?”

“What did you want, Ollie?” asked Andy Wilson. “Why did you go there?”

Andy Wilson was trying to establish a motive for whatever had happened.

“I wanted to see the bastard. I wanted to ask a few questions. I wanted to put him right on a few things and to correct any misapprehensions he might still have. I wanted to see what he’d done with his accumulated and ill-gotten gains, to prove to myself that money doesn’t bring happiness and to be able to add the final chapter.”

Andy Wilson yawned, stood up and stretched.

“Mm,” he said and then came back to the table that separated them. Then he leaned on it, his face just a few inches from Oliver Thomas. “So why take a gun?”

“Just in case, Andy, and you haven’t heard me out yet.”

At that moment, the phone on the table rang. Andy picked it up and took it to the corner of the room away from Oliver Thomas.

“Yes?... I see.... What time? Do they know what happened? I’m still trying to get to the bottom of it.... He’s still here. Oh yes, he’s very co-operative, it’s just the time it’s taking to get anywhere. Sixty years crammed into less than twenty-four hours. Yes. Thanks.”

Oliver Thomas had been listening.

“Spain?” he asked.

“No, not Spain, Ollie. That was Clive. We have some bad news. Major Donaldson died about an hour ago.” Andy Wilson sat down once more. “You’d better hurry up and tell me what happened, Ollie,” he said, gravely.

Oliver Thomas sat with no expression. “Mm,” he said, “the bastard wasn’t well even before I arrived.”

“But that’s no excuse for what happened. You can’t go around shooting people just for the sake of settling old scores.”

“Who said it was settling old scores?” replied Oliver Thomas. “But neither was I paying homage to the bastard. I was there to close the book and to see for myself how it all turned out. I’d already documented everything. Now it’s up to you.

“Look!” Oliver Thomas said impatiently but realising he wasn’t making himself understood.

“I know I’m not completely innocent. I have done some questionable things over the years, but who hasn’t and what you’ve read are abstracts, a flavour. But I’ve admitted to certain things in writing, including a few days of being unfaithful to my wife. How many do that these days? So, go ahead and arrest me.

“But for what? For being complicit? For being an innocent victim? For being naïve? For being threatened and black-mailed?”

“Yes, Andy, I admit to all that. Stick the handcuffs on. Feel free. What you still don’t seem to understand is that when you live a certain style of life and put every ounce of energy into it, sometimes life itself comes up behind and bites you in the bloody arse.

“Anyway, you still haven’t heard me out. I told you it would take a while. And the sixty bloody years crammed into just twenty-four hours takes twenty-four hours not twenty-three. Can’t you bloody wait?”

For the first time, Andy Wilson saw some anger directed at himself. “So, it wasn’t revenge, Ollie?”

Oliver Thomas stared back.

“No,” he replied and shook his head as though he wasn’t getting his message across. “I admit I insulted him but I’ve done that many times before and it was always tit for tat. And insults aren’t a crime.”

“Did you expect Donaldson to write out a cheque for several million pounds while you pointed your gun at him?”

“Tut,” sounded Oliver Thomas and Andy Wilson saw a hesitation, something he hadn’t seen in Oliver Thomas before. Until now he had seemed clear, precise and factual with no hint of uncertainty.

“If not that, then what was it you wanted?” Andy pursued.

“It was a well-planned confrontation.”

Andy Wilson got up and clapped his hand to his forehead. “A well-planned confrontation? What the bloody hell is a well-planned confrontation, Ollie? From this side of the table it looks like you went in there carrying a gun to kill Donaldson. That’s premeditated murder for Christ’s sake.”

Oliver Thomas sat back and sighed.

“What have I just said, Andy?”

“That it was a well-planned bloody confrontation, whatever that is.”

“Yes,” said Oliver Thomas leaning forward again. “But I also said, can’t you bloody well wait? I haven’t finished yet!”

“OK, Ollie,” Andy sighed, “please carry on. Where were we?”

“You always had a nice turn of phrase, Ollie,” Donaldson growled. “But what the fuck do you want?”

It was a good question but Oliver Thomas had worked out what he wanted two weeks before, on the drive back from Chalford Hall.

He shifted the haversack on his shoulder to a more comfortable position. Then he checked his foothold and took one of his hands off the walking stick and rubbed his cheek.

Forty years ago, Donaldson would have already sprung at his throat or reminded him of his or his family’s vulnerability.

But he was now looking frail and vulnerable himself, even with a middle-aged son sitting next to him. The son himself looked uncomfortable, fidgeting as he was on his gilt sofa.

He kept looking nervously towards his father as though he had been brought up to know his place and that his place was to listen, keep quiet and await instructions. This was Donaldson’s style. It had been honed over ninety years. Donaldson needed to get his own way – always.

If he felt remotely undermined, he threatened.

If he felt remotely at risk from others, he blackmailed.

If he felt afraid of losing something he wanted, he bribed.

If a scrap of paper was finished with he screwed it up and threw it into the bin or the flames of the nearest coal fire and if a scrap of human life was finished with he was willing to do the same thing.

If it meant keeping people apart from one another in case they learned too much, he kept them apart.

So, Donaldson would not immediately seek help from his son because that would have been a sign of weakness. He would try something else first.

Oliver Thomas took a deep breath. “What do I want, Major? I wanted to pay you a visit. I wanted to see how you were living. I wanted to judge for myself whether being naïve by trusting people and having a sense of duty and patriotism was best in the long run.”

Donaldson stirred in his wheelchair but seemed to have very little energy.

Oliver Thomas pulled his stick out of the thick carpet and prodded it into another spot. With his eyesight improving fast, he could see Donaldson clenching and unclenching his fist and was starting to make out more of his features.



This was Donaldson all right but looking thinner and more wrinkled than when he last saw him. His red skull showed through hair that was now much greyer and sparser and his hands were brown and covered in deep veins and mottled with brown spots from too much sitting in deck chairs.

“Why don’t you just fuck off back to Gloucester?”

“I intend to. But you, too, should try a cooler climate, Major. I’ve got a nice Cherry tree in the garden you could sunbathe under.”

“Fuck off. Why are you here?”

“Hasn’t your son told you? I’ve already given him my invoice and one copy of the whole file on you is in this bag. But there’s another copy back in England with my solicitor. So, you can bloody well shoot me now if you want because frankly, Major, I just don’t bloody care anymore.”

Oliver Thomas stared at him but, out of the corner of his eye, watched the son put his hands on the arms of the sofa as though about to get up.

“Do you want to pay up? If so I’ll open a Santander Bank account in the same branch as you in Malaga and you can transfer it later today. Then I’ll give all the proceeds to charity. How about that?”

“Fuck you.”

“You sound tired, Major. You used to argue your side a lot better than that. Losing your powers? Running out of fresh ideas for blackmail? Is there something wrong with you? Perhaps you should go back to bed.”

The son got up and went to the back of the wheelchair and whispered something in his father’s ear. But Oliver Thomas was in no mood for distractions yet.

“If your son thinks money might get rid of me, let me say this.” He paused and pointed his stick at the invoice on the tiled floor next to Donaldson’s wheelchair. “That invoice is a rough calculation of how much you and your Scottish friend Forsyth cost me over the years but, frankly, I don’t need money. If there’s one thing I learned from Sarah over the years and especially during the time I took care of her when she was sick, money is totally irrelevant. Whatever threats you made against Sarah, were like water off a duck’s back to her. Sarah took it in her stride. She stuck by me without saying a word. And I stuck by her without saying a word either. You had no effect on us, Major. Yes, I might have liked living somewhere else, but what the hell. I have no more regrets and it looks as though I’ll far outlive you.”

Donaldson was emitting a sound like, “Fff . . .” as he blew air. His hands were moving as though he was desperate to stand up. Then he coughed and the effort made his face redden and his eyes stare.

“And another thing Major. The thought of taking money from you fills me with a sense of utter disgust and I wouldn’t even give it to charity. They’d probably want to know where it came from and as I wouldn’t be able to give them assurances that it was not the proceeds of crime I’m sure they’d hand it back.

“So, what do I want, Major? Nothing other than to see with my own eyes what all this has got you and perhaps to write a final chapter to the report I’m filing.

“But I’m not too bothered about the final chapter. As I’ve already told your son I couldn’t care a fuck whether I get away from here dead, alive or embedded in a

block of concrete. So perhaps your son would like to march me off the premises and you can give the orders to others to pour the cement. That would be your usual method, Major. Subcontracting dirty jobs was always your preferred method.”

Oliver Thomas hesitated before adding, “Alternatively, I’m happy to be found lying dead by a bus shelter.”

Donaldson’s son moved from behind the wheelchair. “What do you mean?” he asked and looked surprisingly shocked.

“Oh, come on. Surely you know what happens to innocent people like Beatrice Collins and others. Your father uses people for as long as they are useful and then issues a disposal contract? Am I right Major?”

Donaldson gurgled incoherently.

“Disposal was, of course, the last resort but your father had all sorts of other ways to exert pressure. He’s tried them all – threats, blackmail, bribery.”

“Get out of here,” Donaldson’s gurgling became understandable and he waved a weak hand.

“Please,” said Oliver Thomas, “What’s happened to your powers of persuasion? Have they run out? It’s too late to threaten my family now, Major.”

Oliver Thomas then looked at, and spoke to, the son standing alongside his father. “Are you surprised? How much more has he kept from you over the years?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. I suggest you just get out. Can’t you see my father isn’t well?”

Donaldson’s face was showing signs of turning puce. In the past, it would have been the precursor to an explosion but he now seemed barely able to breathe.

Oliver Thomas pointed his stick at Donaldson’s son. “Do you know your mother is still alive?”

Donaldson trembled and his son’s mouth opened.

“Oh yes. Betty lives in a very nice house, paid for by your father,” said Oliver Thomas and he flicked his stick towards the window. Donaldson’s face reddened more deeply. “She’s in the south of France. But she can’t come here because she’s too scared.”

“My mother?” the son asked and looked at his father.

“Are you Peter?”

“Yes.”

“Then go and see her before it’s too late. She’s OK. But she’s far too scared to come here.”

“Fuck off,” growled Donaldson, “Why don’t you just fuck off. Get out.”

He coughed, almost choked on something in his throat and his right hand disappeared behind his back as though something was making him uncomfortable.

Peter moved to the back of the wheelchair and Oliver Thomas saw that his lips were trembling. “You’re lying. How do you know about my mother? Where is she?”

“She lives in Cannes. I met her.”

“Christ!” muttered Peter. “And what happened to Beaty?”

Oliver Thomas’s instincts were proving reliable. Suffering from Thomas’s Disease was, for the first time, showing it had some advantages.

“One day someone phoned me to say she was sick and wouldn’t be coming to work,” he said. “A few days later she was dead. But then I found a note from her which proved she had been living in fear of your father for twenty-five years. I’ve still got the note. What’s more it has your father’s handwriting on it.”

“Christ!” said Peter again.

“Were you the one who was told to phone me, Peter? I ask because it’s the way you said Beaty. I only mentioned Beatrice. What was wrong with her? Why did she die?”

“Fucking hell!” Peter said in reply and looked at his father who seemed to be trying to turn his head around to see where his son was standing. To Oliver Thomas it looked as though he had thrown a few hand grenades into the room. Peter’s eyes were now scanning the ornate room as if skeletons might be hiding in cupboards.

“Yes, fucking hell is a very good description,” he said and eased the haversack off his shoulder and put it on the carpet.

“But do you really know what you’re involved in here, Peter? Do you realise the amount of evidence I’ve got of fraud and corruption and links with organisations like the old IRA? By the way, is Umberto’s family name Perillo by any chance? Because I’m sure I met him once before in Naples. How much control have you got here? Are you just another yes man? An errand boy? A wheelchair pusher? Are you actually afraid of your own father? Do you want to appear in a court with your father in handcuffs as well as a wheelchair?”

Donaldson was blowing air. His face was getting redder and redder by the second but the knuckles of one hand were white as he gripped the arm of the wheelchair. The other hand was still behind his back. He started to hiss. Oliver Thomas looked at him and Peter came around to the side of the wheelchair.

“I think I’d better be on my way,” Oliver Thomas said, “You don’t look at all well, Major.”

Then he bent down to the haversack and opened it. “Here,” he said, standing up. “Do you want to see a copy of the whole file, Peter, or shall I give it to your father?”

“Fuck you. Get out of here.” Donaldson was leaning too far forward in the wheelchair trying to get out. His face was puce. His eyes were round and staring at Oliver Thomas.

“I’ll leave it here.” Oliver Thomas placed the fat brown envelope onto the carpet next to his stick. Then he lifted his haversack back on to his shoulder. “I’ll be on my way. Nice to meet you once again, Major.”

He turned and walked two steps. Behind him he heard the wheelchair move. It squeaked and something rattled. Then he heard Donaldson growl something and Peter’s voice shout, “No, Dad.”

Oliver Thomas was on his third step when he turned to see what was happening. The wheelchair was toppling forward. Donaldson was staring at him but still gripping one arm of the chair with his hand.

Peter was hanging onto the other chair arm with one hand and trying to pull Donaldson back by his shoulders. Donaldson was almost purple, his eyes staring and blobs of spit dribbled from his lips.

“Fuck you, Ollie, you bastard.”

Oliver Thomas watched as Donaldson still seemed desperate to get out of the wheelchair while Peter was wrestling him back.

It was then that the hand which had been behind Donaldson’s back forced its way out. He was holding a gun.

“No, Dad, no.”

Donaldson pointed the gun directly at Oliver Thomas’s head but then the wheelchair toppled further forward and the gun pointed downwards. Peter pulled on his father’s shoulders and tried to move around to the arm holding the gun. “No, Dad, no. For Christ’s sake.”

It was then that the gun went off with a loud crack.

Donaldson seemed to relax. His body fell out of the wheelchair like a bundle of rags and settled on the edge of the Chinese carpet with the wheelchair partly on top of him.

Oliver Thomas stood for a second, transfixed. But then he turned. In doing so, his stick caught in the pile of the carpet and he stumbled. The haversack slipped off his shoulder and the only remaining item inside fell out.

He picked it up, still wrapped in its oily cloth and, without putting it back in the haversack, carried it, stumbling towards the door. He turned the handle.

Behind him, Peter was kneeling over his father and, at the same time, kicking the fallen wheelchair out of the way. He went out of the door and walked as fast as he could along the corridor to the stairs where Umberto was standing with a horrified look on his face. Clearly, he had heard something but was too scared to investigate.

“Berto, go quick. Correre. Ammalarsi. Padre sick,” Oliver Thomas said, trying to recall a few relevant Italian words. Then he pointed towards the door behind which Donaldson lay in a pool of blood that was already spoiling the Chinese carpet.

“That’s what happened, Andy.”

“You didn’t shoot him?”

“He tried to shoot me but accidentally shot himself.”

“That’s your story?”

“Go check the bullet inside his vest.”

“So, where’s your gun?”

“In Spain.”

“Where?”

“Hidden.”

Andy Wilson lay back in his chair and stretched his legs out before him beneath the coffee table. Oliver Thomas was still sitting forward in his seat. He adjusted the glasses on his nose and looked at his watch.

“Got any more questions, Andy? The twenty-four hours are up in five minutes.”

“Yes,” said Andy. “Do you want a cup of tea and a sandwich?”

“Thanks. Tuna mayonnaise.”

“I’ll be back.”

Andy Wilson got up and strolled out of the room. Oliver Thomas lay back in his seat but then glanced at his black bag. He got up, went over, rummaged through his dirty clothes, pulled out the envelope containing six thousand Euros, put it on the table and was staring at it when Andy Wilson returned.

“They don’t have tuna so I’ve ordered you smoked salmon,” he said and then pointed at the envelope. “Betty’s money?”

“Yes. I took a flyer about Betty and I still feel sorry for her.”

“What do you mean – a flyer?”

“I just guessed that Peter thought his mother was dead. I didn’t really know. But I think that’s what finally tipped Donaldson. One of his many secrets was out.”

“OK,” said Andy, “Tell me what happened after you practiced your Italian on Umberto and walked out of the villa because we have reports that you pointed the gun at staff.”

“Pointed it?” said Oliver Thomas. “No. I may have been waving it.”

“How do you mean?”

“I came out into the bright sun. I could hardly see a damn thing. People were running towards the house shouting. I nearly fell down the main steps. The gun fell out of the cloth. It bounced on the steps. The running people stopped running. I picked it up and waved it at the people and then kept on walking as fast as I could towards the main gate. The people who were running and had now stopped running were now staring.”

“That’s it? You waved it?”

“Of course – I couldn’t use the damn thing, anyway!”

“Are you afraid of shooting people, Ollie?”

“No, of course not.”

“So why couldn’t you use it if you had to?”

“The bloody thing is broken, that’s why. I removed the trigger mechanism many years ago. I hate damned guns. I hate the noise they make and they make me nervous.”

Andy laughed.

“So why did you take it?”

“Well, you never know, Andy.”

“And where is it now?”

“In Spain.”

“Yes, you said. But where? We might need to recover it for evidence etcetera.”

“I left it outside the main gate of the villa.”

“On the ground?”

“No, I deliberately dropped my haversack over a large stone. I bent down to pick it up and, at the same time, pushed the gun under the stone. It’s a well-known practice in my business, Andy. It’s on the right-hand side of the roadway, under the fifth stone back from the big round boulder.”

“And your taxi?”

“Rafael was still waiting for me. He hadn’t phoned the police but he had a Spanish joke ready instead.”

“What was the joke, Ollie?”

Oliver Thomas started to laugh. Tears started before he could begin.

“Come on, Ollie. Share it!”

“Sorry, Andy, but it is very funny.”

“Come on, man, I’m laughing myself and I haven’t heard it yet.”

“OK, wait until I stop laughing.

“OK – it’s about a man called Pedro.

“Pedro was picking olives in the field and suddenly felt the need for a shit so he asks his boss if it’s OK. Boss says yes, no problem and Pedro goes off to the shed.

“But twenty minutes later and he still hasn’t come back so the boss knocks on the shed door and calls out, ‘Hey Pedro, Que pasa? Why you take so long?’

“Pedro opens the door and says, ‘Sorry boss.’ But then he goes back inside to the hole in the ground and stirs it with a stick.

“The boss says, ‘Hey Pedro, Que haces? What are you doing?’

“And Pedro says, ‘Señor, it’s my coat. He has fallen down the hole.’

“The boss says, ‘Pedro. Your coat, he will be no good when you find him.’

“And Pedro says, ‘Si Señor, I know, but he has my lunch in the pocket!’”

When he had stopped, both of them were laughing with tears running down their cheeks.

But then someone knocked on the door. “I think that’s our lunch,” said Andy.

## **Fred Carrington**

**Fred Carrington was in his garden snipping dead heads off his few daffodils** when Oliver Thomas’s taxi pulled up outside the house. He tried desperately to avoid him but Fred called across the road.

"You're back then Mr Thomas?"

"Yes," he said, fumbling to find the door key in his black bag and, at the same time, trying hard not to look at his neighbour. He put the bag down to see if the key had dropped to the bottom but kept his back to Fred in the hope he would go away.

But Fred came over.

"Where's the car?" he asked.

"I left it at Gatwick," he said. "It needs a tax disc."

"Oh, dear. The police were looking for you," Fred said. "I happened to see them when I returned from shopping. They rang your doorbell. They then returned to their car and I saw them on their mobile phones."

"Oh?" Oliver said, wondering when this was but still searching for his key.

Fred had all the answers.

"Yes, it was three days ago," he said. "I spoke to them and I told them you were abroad."

"That's kind of you, Fred."

"I told them you had said you were going away on business."

Fred smirked as though he really hadn't believed what Oliver had told him.

"That would have been useful for them, Fred."

"Yes, they seemed interested. They asked me how old you were because they seemed to know you were well past retirement."

"It's positive age discrimination, Fred. They need to ensure they meet their equality targets."

"They asked me if I knew where you were. Of course, I told them you had said you were going to France and Spain. They then got back into their car and I watched them make some more phone calls."

"Was it a blue and yellow BMW with blue flashing lights or a proper British car, Fred?"

"It was a Ford Focus."

"It must have been important to send the top brass around, then Fred," he replied.

"Yes, but then they got out again and asked me if I knew when you were expected back. I said you hadn't told me but that you had once said you had spent many years travelling in foreign parts and often mixed with some pretty seedy individuals."

"That was very helpful, Fred."

"Yes, they then asked me if I knew whether you possessed a fire arms certificate but, naturally, I said I didn't expect so but that I couldn't be certain."

"Sorry, Fred, I should have told you I was taking the gun with me."

"Oh dear, is there a problem?"

"None at all, Fred, I've found it now," Oliver Thomas said, and he held up his front door key and let himself in.

## THE END

### Reviews & Comments:

*".....a masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about..."*

*"....I loved this plot.....international trade, bribery, corruption and the murky workings of British Intelligence. The depiction of the may fixers and middle men ring so true, as do the dubious business practices. Gritty descriptions of far flung cities and their low budget hotels....easy reading."*

*"..A wonderful and moving love story from an elderly man's perspective is beautifully woven into it and the ending is masterful..."*

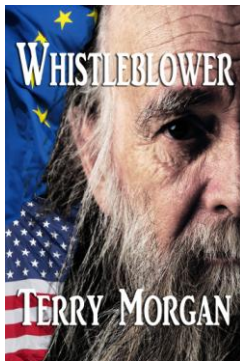
*"...I enjoyed it, exciting, endlessly beguiling and fun...."*

*"..thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. A remarkable book from a new writer who has clearly been there and done it - easy reading."*

### Other books by Terry Morgan

Website: [www.tjmbooks.com](http://www.tjmbooks.com)

### Whistleblower



Huge amounts of international aid money are being stolen by those at the heart of the political establishment. Ex politician, Jim Smith, threatened and harassed into fleeing abroad for accusations of fraud secretly returns to renew his campaign. A realistic thriller covering events in the USA, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia and a sensitive study of a stubborn and talented man who steadfastly refuses to fit into the stereotype of a successful businessman and a modern politician.

*"Highly convincing.....This could all be happening right now. Another realistic and highly entertaining story...."*



*"This book has the sort of political intrigue that captivates viewers of shows like "House of Cards," but the main man is actually a decent person in "Whistle blower." As someone who prefers protagonists on the correct moral side of the spectrum, it made the book that much more enjoyable. (AMAZON)*

*."Whistleblower", by Terry Morgan, is an international thriller that stretches from England to Thailand with many stops in between.*

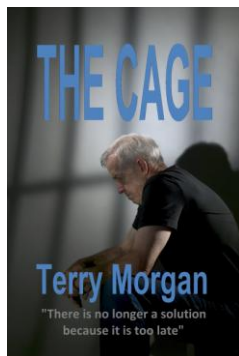
*"The plot centers around the timely topic of international aid money and the criminals who feed on it. The hero, the story's whistleblower, is British ex-politician Jim Smith, and the story follows him around the globe as he seeks to put a stop to the corruption.*

*"Morgan, a world traveller who now resides in Thailand, knows his locations well. Cities in Italy and Africa come alive, and Jim Smith's home in off-the-beaten-path Thailand is wonderfully described, allowing readers to feel like they're there--this is no easy thing to do, and the authenticity of the various settings is a real strength of the book.*

*"Another strength includes the protagonist. Smith is not a typical hero. He's older and lacks the suaveness and action-hero credentials of a James Bond or Jason Bourne, but he more than makes up for it with his intelligence and depth--a big pleasure in the book is being invited into this man's life as he tries to pick up the pieces after an underhanded campaign aimed at ruining him.*

*"The plot moves along briskly, and the technology, players (politicians, intelligence agencies, criminals), and small details about the finance industry all add up to a novel that's rich in credibility and intrigue. Anyone interested in seeing the world from the comfort of a good armchair should read Morgan's book." (AMAZON)*

## The Cage

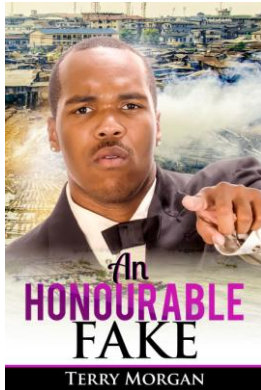


Set around the year 2050 when overpopulation is causing food and energy shortages, mass unemployment, social tension and civil conflict. An ex politician and professor of biology talks to a grandson no longer able to cope with life in an overcrowded city. A follow-up to the author's previous thriller, 'The Malthus

Pandemic', this hard-hitting short novel contains facts and forecasts supported by original papers.

*"Not for the faint hearted."*

### **An Honourable Fake**



At age fourteen, Femi Akindele, an orphaned street boy from the Makoko slum in Lagos, Nigeria, decided to call himself Pastor Gabriel Joshua. Unqualified and self-taught and now in his mid-forties, Gabriel has become a flamboyant, popular and highly acclaimed international speaker on African affairs, economics, terrorism, corruption and the widespread poverty and economic migration that results.

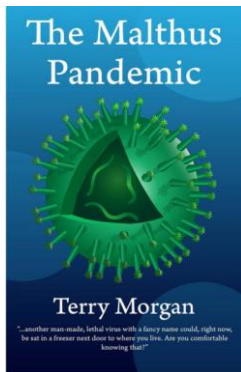
Gabriel wants changes but, in his way, lie big corporations, international politics and a group of wealthy but corrupt Nigerians financing a terrorist organisation, the COK, with one purpose in mind – the overthrow of the democratically elected Nigerian President and the establishment of a vast new West African state.

On Gabriel's side, though, are his loyal boyhood friend Solomon, a private investigator of international corporate fraud and the newly appointed head of the Nigerian State Security Service Colonel Martin Abisola.

*"A rare sort of political thriller – a black African hero."*

*"Accomplished and knowledgeable – a class follow up to Whistleblower."*

### **The Malthus Pandemic**



Daniel Capelli is a private investigator of international commercial crime.

Armed with an unusually vague remit from a new client, an American biotechnology company, to investigate the theft of valuable research material but motivated largely by a private desire to see a Thai girlfriend, Anna, he travels to Bangkok for an infectious diseases conference. Here, he discovers that several virologists have also disappeared. One of them, David Solomon, is known for extreme views on the need for direct action to reduce the world's population.

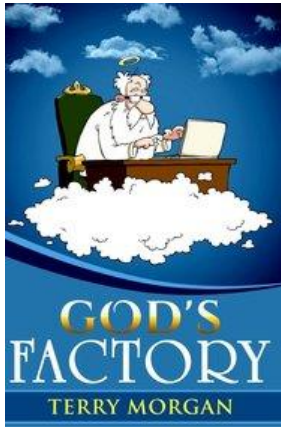
As the investigation deepens, he rapidly uncovers a sinister plot to deliberately spread a deadly new virus, the Malthus A virus, specifically created by Solomon. But Solomon needs funds and help to spread it. With sporadic outbreaks of the disease already in Thailand, Nigeria and Kenya, Capelli finds two other characters - Doctor Larry Brown, an American doctor working at the USA Embassy in Nigeria, and Kevin Parker, an academic and expert on the history and economics of population control - have also arrived at similar conclusions but from different angles.

Calling on help from another close friend, Colin Asher - a London based private investigator - it soon becomes clear that Solomon is being supported by a rich American with a history of fraud, embezzlement and murder and a secretive Arab healthcare company with a ready-made international distribution network. Their plan: To help spread the Malthus A virus and make huge profits by marketing ineffective or counterfeit drugs.

But with his cover blown by the murder of another colleague, the charismatic Kenyan detective Jimmy Banda, and with increasing fears that the virus is about to be released Capelli, Anna and his colleagues face another problem - persuading UK and USA politicians and the international agencies responsible for bioterrorism and commercial crime, to believe them and respond in time.

*"Anchored firmly in the present, no high-tech Bond style gadgets, just good old-fashioned detective work. Gritty descriptions of the international locations, compelling plot and poignant rants about the inadequacy of democratic institutions and persuasive insight on the inner workings of the global establishment. Easy reading and difficult to put down once started. Enjoyable read."*

**God's Factory**



Terry Morgan writes mainly serious novels with a strong international background but intersperses it with less serious satire and humour like '**God's Factory**'.