

Prologue

The sonar operator's hunched shoulders stiffened suddenly.

'I've got somethin'.' He studied the display screen in front of him. 'Yeah. Faint, but definitely somethin'.'

His laconic Tennessee drawl belied the surge of adrenaline he felt; this was not a man to break sweat easily.

The tactical action officer moved through the air-conditioned red twilight of the combat information centre, deep in the bowels of the anti-submarine frigate USS *Knox* and peered at the console display. 'You sure, Crosby?'

'Only that it's *somethin'*, sir.'

Crosby was good. Crosby had bat's ears, they all knew that. But even Crosby could be wrong. They were running on USS *Knox's* ED passive towed-array sonar because the target was one hell of a mother. Her state-of-the-art stealth hull would simply absorb active sonar signals pinging out of the bow-mounted Western General Electric rig and give away nothing. So they were reduced to passive listening. Because, however dampened, you could never fully eliminate engine noise and however slick the design, you could never stop water rushing over a submarine's bow.

USS *Knox* had only a bearing. You needed at least three bearings from separate sources to get a fix. And so far, they had only one.

The tactical action officer made his decision, silently vowing to give Crosby a bad time he'd never forget if he'd screwed up on this one. 'Bearing?' he snapped.

'Zero-eight-five degrees, sir,' Crosby snapped back.

'Get the wax out your ears – track and report.'

'Sir.'

The officer turned to the communications suite. Time to stick his neck out and pray he wouldn't be left with more

egg on his face than on his cap. 'Signal OPREP 7th Fleet. Include current position. Unconfirmed contact. Bearing zero-eight-five.'

Forty-five seconds later Vice Admiral Ross Harding was handed the message aboard the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*. Wearing tropical whites, he sat in a bridge high chair which gave him a perfect view of the carrier's floodlit flight deck below.

His was the appearance and build of a man who had not been born in the normal way, but hewn fully grown out of limestone. Flinty eyes scrutinised the piece of paper in his huge fist.

After reading the signal, Harding took time to relight the well-chewed cigar butt before acknowledging the anxious faces of the small group of VIP visitors to the exercise. A bunch of grey suits. Politicians and spooks, he wasn't sure which he detested most. And he had them all here on the carrier's bridge in equal measure. In Harding's strictly private view, each was as overconfident in his abilities and as untrustworthy as the next.

Hal Katz, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations was one and Frank Aspen, CIA, Assistant Deputy Director of Operations, another. Both, he knew of old, had the smooth charm and all the backbone of a rattlesnake. Katz wouldn't agree to anything that he might have to explain away in bodybags, while Frank Aspen didn't mind any number of them as long as no one could pin the blame on him directly.

Obviously the vice admiral wasn't familiar with his British visitors from across the pond, but he doubted they were much better. Their spook was Piers Lansdowne, a thirtysomething high-flyer with a schoolboy's face and a pronounced Adam's apple. The trendy foppish cut of his blond hair and round-rimmed swot's spectacles were anathema to Harding. But he had to admit the boy's mind seemed as sharp as the broken shards of his cut-glass accent. That told Harding everything: privileged

background, English public school and now Far East Desk of the Foreign Office.

At least that was the fiction that the British junior defence minister insisted on maintaining.

But then Jim Hudd was new to the high echelons of his government, the Armed Forces in general, and ships in particular. Even as Harding had received the signal from USS *Knox*, Jim Hudd was throwing up his guts into a plastic bucket out on the flying bridge. The sea was mill-pond calm.

Harding didn't bother hiding his irritation as he addressed Piers Lansdowne. 'You wanna see if your Minister is well enough to join us yet? I don't wanna go over all this again.'

Lansdowne had the grace to blush. 'I'll check on him, Admiral.'

The American grey suits and Harding shared expressions of silent exasperation: the entire US war machine held up for a bucket of British puke.

Moments later Lansdowne reappeared, helping Jim Hudd as he stumbled through the hatchway, wiping his mouth with a stained handkerchief.

'Feeling better?' Hal Katz asked brusquely.

Hudd's watering eyes, set in a meaty bloodhound face, couldn't disguise the embarrassment he felt for displaying such feebleness before these men of iron. He smiled weakly. 'Thanks. Better out than in, eh?'

That drew no response, so he tried to look businesslike, straightening his back and hiking up the trousers of his crumpled off-the-peg suit to cover his beer belly. 'Piers says something's happened?'

Vice Admiral Harding nodded. 'One of our destroyers picked up an unconfirmed passive sonar contact two minutes ago.' He strode across to the wall chart that showed the small island off Saipan. The surrounding area of the Pacific was ringed by ships of the Carrier Task Force. Harding jabbed a finger at one of these. '*Knox* puts

the contact bearing at zero-eight-five. That's a bearing but no fix. Any number of miles along that trajectory. So it could still be outside *or* inside our protective ring.'

Jim Hudd looked concerned. 'Surely that couldn't be *Manta*. All this stealth technology stuff, it's supposed to be foolproof.'

'That's what we're here to find out, Frank,' Hal Katz reminded patiently. 'To separate the shit from the shinola.'

Vice Admiral Harding cut in: 'We're ordering up three Sea Kings – they're anti-submarine helicopters with dunking sonars. We'll attempt to get a confirmation and triangulated fix on the contact.' Behind him, through the bridge windscreen, the three sea-grey shapes could be seen lifting off into the clear night sky. 'Now we're finally all together, let me bring you up to speed.'

He tapped again on the map of the island. 'Tim-Wan is an island some two miles in diameter. It is deserted except for a small detachment of electronics engineers and US Marines who maintain and guard a small listening station. The destruction of its antennae is the ultimate objective of the intrusion force.'

'The exercise is to evaluate the technical abilities of an experimental submarine and the efficiency of the crew and on-board assault team which combine to make up Project Deadwater.'

'As you will be aware, the sub began development in Britain as a joint private and Royal Navy venture in the last few years of the Cold War. Under the designation SCUBA – Secure Clandestine Underwater Basing Apparatus – the sub employs state-of-the-art stealth technology to allow it to operate close to shore in enemy waters and remain undetected. Its function is to provide an operational base for clandestine activity – from the launch of commando raids to supporting agent networks – for up to a month's duration.'

Jim Hudd still felt queasy but forced his mind to concentrate. 'Er, Admiral, since Project Deadwater became a

joint British–American development after our Options for Change cutbacks at the end of the Cold War, we’ve had little detail of progress. What we have had, I’m afraid, is pretty incomprehensible.’

Hal Katz frowned. ‘You have a Royal Navy liaison officer assigned?’

Hudd smiled sheepishly. ‘Oh, yes. I’m afraid it’s me who’s the problem. I used to be a coal miner. Don’t know one end of a gun from the other.’

‘Old Labour,’ Piers explained kindly.

‘All that technical jargon is gobbledegook to me,’ the British Defence Minister added. ‘And I’ve had no sight of naval architects’ plans, or even a snap.’

‘Snap?’ Vice Admiral Harding queried.

‘Snapshot, photograph. I’ve begun to wonder if Britain *really* still owns the half it pays for.’

The CIA man, Frank Aspen, spoke in his usual flat and deadly serious tone. ‘That’s down to my department, Minister; we tend to be a little overzealous on the secrecy front. Especially where new technology’s concerned.’

‘But we do have an artist’s impression here,’ Katz added. ‘Don’t we, Admiral?’

‘Sure do.’ Harding moved to the flip chart next to the map and threw back the cover.

‘This is *Manta*,’ Frank Aspen said. ‘And I hope this is something no one outside naval operations will *ever* see.’

Hudd fumbled for his spectacles and as he focused on the drawing his mouth dropped. It was like no submarine he had ever seen before. His first impression was of a sort of black underwater flying saucer. But rather than being perfectly symmetrical, it was a teardrop-shape which tapered towards the stern. And he could see now where the name had come from. The wide stabilising ‘wings’ running the full length of each side of the craft gave it an uncanny resemblance to a manta ray. There was no obvious conning-tower, or ‘fin’, as Lansdowne had taught him to

call it, just a four-foot smooth hump amidships from which twin masts protruded.

‘The hull shape’s been streamlined considerably since the original conception,’ Aspen explained. ‘She may look like something out of *Star Wars*, but inside she’s still a one sixty-tonne cigar tube carrying a four-man crew and sixteen combat swimmers.’ He grinned. ‘Maybe a few more if they all breathe in. As you can see, the outer is covered with sonar-absorbent panels. In layman’s terms, they prevent any hostile sonar signals pinging back to give away the sub’s location.’ He pointed to the X-configured rudder and hydroplane control fins at the stern. ‘Each arm operates independently under computer control for high manoeuvrability. More like an aircraft than a conventional sub. Plus port and starboard thrusters, so she can turn in her own length. GPS navigation and communications via satellite.’

The British Junior defence minister was lost. ‘Of course.’ ‘Silicon Valley’s best,’ Aspen continued proudly. ‘But when it comes to putting an assault team ashore, we embrace *appropriate* technology. High-tech stealth sub, but the men go ashore by good old tried-and-tested means as required.’

‘Quite incredible,’ Hudd murmured.

‘It will need to be,’ Piers Lansdowne observed, ‘if the project is to fulfil the role we have in mind.’

Vice Admiral Harding’s face remained inscrutable, only the fractional narrowing of his eyes indicating that his analytical mind was humming like a computer. Piecing together fragments of knowledge, linking them with threads of logic. Specialist submarine, Special Forces, intelligence experts on China, joint American–British interests. . .

But when he spoke there was no curiosity in his voice. It was typically matter-of-fact. ‘Whatever you have in mind, gentlemen, this exercise should tell you whether the sub and the Project Deadwater team are up to it.’

‘We have the island of Tim-Wan surrounded by a ring of ships from the 7th Fleet, deploying the most efficient anti-submarine technology in the world, including ASW aircraft from our Rota base. *Manta* will have to penetrate that ring undetected, their assault team destroy the dummy aerial, return to the mother ship and escape the ring of ships again.’

Hudd was enthralled, not conscious that he was chewing his thumbnail. ‘And do *you* think they can do it, Admiral?’

Harding’s back stiffened. ‘A personal view, Minister?’

‘Of course.’

‘Not a snowball’s.’ He ignored Frank Aspen’s withering glare. ‘Looks like *Knox* is already on to them.’

The signals officer approached the vice admiral. ‘Sorry, sir. *Knox* reports it’s lost the contact.’

‘Thank you.’ Harding did not bother hiding his annoyance. Fleet reputation was on the line here. ‘When are our AS helos due on station?’ he checked with the carrier’s captain.

‘A couple of minutes, Admiral.’

‘Then it won’t have gone far. I’ve every confidence.’

But Harding’s confidence was apparently misplaced. After fifteen minutes of hovering while they lowered their sonar buoys into the water, the flight commander reported negative to contact.

Hudd felt a small rush of pride. After all, the initial concept of the SCUBA had been British, even if the Yanks had tinkered with it. ‘If it’s slipped through the net, Admiral, when might we expect them to reach the target?’

‘At least another hour.’ Harding indicated the CCTV monitor installed above the control console. It showed a hazy green monochrome picture of a patch of land and the base of the dummy radio mast on Tim-Wan. ‘That’s being relayed direct from the target. Low-level light camera, so we’ll be able to see when the assault team gets there.’

‘*If*,’ reminded Hal Katz. ‘And there are a dozen Marines on patrol.’

‘Maybe it’s time to take a break instead of hangin’ round waiting for nothing to happen,’ Frank Aspen suggested.

‘The wardroom’s at your disposal,’ Harding said.

Hudd looked relieved. ‘I could do with a stiff drink. Might settle the old tum.’

Harding gave the British minister a curious look as he showed the way.

Piers Lansdowne explained quietly. ‘Sorry, Jim. It’s a dry navy.’

‘Oh, God, I was forgetting.’

‘No problem.’ He held something concealed in his hand. ‘Take this.’

‘What is it?’

‘My hip flask.’

Coke, Fanta and coffee were on offer in the wardroom and a range of snacks was spread on the gleaming table. The plates bore little flags describing the contents, most of which were unfamiliar to Jim Hudd and awfully American. Almond pretzels, bagels with blue cheese, pastrami on rye, pecan pie slices. . .

‘A pot of tea would be nice.’

The steward smiled stiffly, sure he would find an old box of teabags hidden *somewhere* in the galley.

They had barely settled in their seats when the officer of the watch put his head round the door. ‘Admiral Harding, sir, message from the captain. Thought you’d want to know that that Chinese naval vessel the Hawkeyes have been monitoring is now a hundred and ten miles north of the fleet. Identified as destroyer *Luhu*.’

Harding’s left eyebrow lifted a fraction. ‘Makin’ this way?’

‘No, sir,’ the officer replied. ‘*Luhu*’s remaining on station, but she’s put up two helos to see what’s going on. Otherwise her stance is non-aggressive.’

‘And what’s our counteraction?’

The officer smiled tightly. ‘Two F18s are buzzing the helos to warn them off, and we’ve signalled *Luhu* this is a private party, invitation only.’

Harding nodded. 'Keep me posted. We don't want an international incident by accident.'

'Sir.'

As the officer withdrew, Hudd looked across the table at Vice Admiral Harding. 'What does all that mean?'

Harding offered one of his rare bleak smiles. 'It means the Chinese Navy is monitoring the exercise and it's playing a long way from home.'

'That's what we in the CIA have been warning,' Frank Aspen added darkly. 'We've had evidence for a long time that China has serious territorial ambitions. It's the only major power in the world that doesn't accept the geographical status quo and it's got major territorial disputes with all its neighbours. That's why Beijing is determined to project its influence with a modern blue-water navy.'

Hal Katz swallowed the remains of his first bagel. 'I've seen those reports, Frank. The assessment is it'll be at least fifteen years before the Chinese have an operational navy good enough to allow them to cause real trouble. And anyway, that assumes causing trouble would be in their interest. To my mind they're too far down the capitalist road for that.'

'Sorry, sir,' Admiral Harding interrupted, 'but that's not what I'm seeing. Despite the friendly face they've been offering the world media, there's been a subtle but distinct shift towards aggressive nationalism and they've been flexing their muscles. Two years ago you'd never have seen *Luhu* out here, nearly two thousand miles offshore and aggressively poking its nose into an American exercise.'

Katz shrugged dismissively, but Piers Lansdowne from the British Foreign Office, added: 'Things have changed since the Hong Kong handover. Restored national pride went to the heads of the leadership. Since President Deng Xiaoping's death, there's been an ongoing power struggle and at the moment the hard men are holding sway. Two hundred years ago China was the most powerful nation on earth, and now they see the economic miracle as the key to restoring them to their former position in the world.'

‘Nothing wrong in that,’ Katz said defensively. ‘Every nation has its aspirations.’

‘Nothing wrong,’ the vice admiral agreed, ‘as long as we in the West don’t help them there by selling them all our latest weapons technology.’

‘That’s not how State or the White House sees it,’ Katz snapped back. ‘They see it as the greatest investment opportunity for America that the world will ever see. A fifth of mankind and the second largest economy on earth.’

Admiral Harding did not respond. No point in reminding the Defense Department official that far from being a great market opportunity, China had actually become the largest source of trade deficit to both the USA and Europe. He just wouldn’t listen, because the President wouldn’t listen and Hal Katz was the President’s man. If the President said jump, he’d ask how high. So Harding would save his breath to cool his porridge. Besides, as the old saying went, it wasn’t his job to ask how or why.

The boy Lansdowne accepted a coffee cup from the steward. ‘Have you noticed how the slogans have changed?’ he asked absently, his cultured English accent sounding oddly out of place.

‘What?’ Katz asked, bewildered.

A politely patronising English smile. ‘If you read the Chinese newspapers, you’ll notice the old ‘To Get Rich is Glorious’ slogans have gone. No more stories of businessmen successfully risking all to turn round ailing factories. The new slogans are full of reference to hostile forces abroad. Accusing them of using economics to democratise China in order to divide and control it.’

Hal Katz looked blank. ‘I don’t read Chinese.’

Piers Lansdowne sipped delicately at his coffee. ‘Perhaps you should learn, sir.’

Jim Hudd nearly choked on his tea. Beautiful! A stiletto straight between the shoulder blades. Young Piers was everything the ex-Nottingham miner thought he hated

about the old Establishment right wing, but he'd warmed to the young man quickly during the long flight out from Heathrow. He wasn't in the least bit patronising as the newly appointed minister struggled to absorb the complexities of the briefing. Piers was friendly and witty, explaining that the main obstacle to their secret mission was the President of the United States himself.

Hudd noticed that across the table Admiral Harding and Frank Aspen of the CIA were looking at Piers Lansdowne with undisguised admiration. Then Hudd's eyes met theirs and the Americans' expressions said it all. The boy from the British Secret Intelligence Service – sorry, Foreign Office – had put into words exactly what they thought.

For the first time since being flown aboard the carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, Jim Hudd felt that he was among allies, if not yet friends.

An hour later, they returned to the bridge. Hudd was feeling much better, fortified by the tea he had surreptitiously laced with whisky from Piers's flask.

The carrier's captain informed them that nothing had happened during their absence. It was good from one point of view, thought Hudd. The stealth submarine was *still* undetected. But, as he could see from the CCTV monitor, there wasn't much point in that if the mission itself was unaccomplished. And no sign of life had been seen at the island aerial site so far.

Meanwhile the Chinese destroyer *Luhu* remained watching and listening on station, its helicopters now returned to the aft flight deck to refuel.

When thirty minutes had passed, Admiral Harding cleared his throat. 'Well, gentlemen, I have to tell you that it looks as though we are faced with mission failure. The US Marine detachment report no sign of activity on Tim-Wan and *Manta* has only thirty minutes left to return undetected to the outside of the cordon.'

'But the sub hasn't been found. . .' Hudd began.

Harding couldn't conceal his disappointment. 'That is true, Minister, and I'm sorry my boys haven't located it yet. That may be because of some mechanical failure. If the sub is lying doggo on the bottom, it would explain why the AS sonars haven't picked her up.'

'And why they haven't reached their target,' Frank Aspen added.

Concern clouded Hudd's face. 'They're not in any danger, are they?'

'Highly unlikely,' Harding replied. 'In about thirty minutes they'll make themselves known to us, wherever they are.'

Hal Katz said: 'I expect it's the new computer software. They've been having trouble with that.'

'You're probably right.'

Hudd felt suddenly depressed. It just underlined what the military sceptics back at the Ministry of Defence in London had told him. The concept was fatally flawed. And if it was, so was the entire mission that Piers Lansdowne and Frank Aspen had set themselves. To set free the largest nation on earth. A thousand million people.

Piers sensed his disappointment and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

'Sir!' It was the communications officer. 'Signal from *Knox* again. Contact bearing zero-eight-one.'

'Inside the cordon,' Piers said instantly.

Shit, Hudd mouthed.

'Picked up on active this time,' the officer added. 'Strong signal and they have a fix.' He rattled off the reference. It was barely a mile off *Theodore Roosevelt's* bow.

'Odd,' Harding thought aloud as the CTFC scrambled the anti-submarine Sea Kings again. 'Active sonar's usually hopeless against *Manta*.'

Frank Aspen from Langley said: 'Maybe she's lost some of her tiles. That happened in earlier trials.'

'The anechoic tiles absorb sonar signals,' Piers explained to Hudd. 'If some tiles are lost, then an active sonar signal

will hit the bare surface and bounce back to give a contact and approximate position.'

'So what happens next?'

Harding answered. 'We're dropping dummy depth charges. If they go off close enough, *Manta* will surface. That will represent a kill or SD. Severe damage.' He turned towards the bridge windscreen and vast flight deck beyond, crammed with rows of naval fighters. 'If you look off our starboard bow, you should be able to watch the floor show.'

The group craned forward to watch the helicopters speed across the sluggish swell of the Pacific, the surface glistening like hammered silver under the full moon.

Suddenly the bridge was filled with the squawk and static hiss and rapid radiospeak of the pilots as they assessed and confirmed their positions above the submarine.

'*Fired one, fired two,*' intoned the first helicopter.

He was joined by the second, forming a pattern. '*Fired one, fired two.*'

Hudd saw the dark shape of the charges falling like birdshit from the helicopter pods. He held his breath, expecting an almighty roar and the great geyser of displaced water he'd seen on war movies.

Stupid, of course, because these were only dummies. So the small fountains of spray were a bit of a disappointment and they couldn't even hear the detonations at that distance.

A tense silence followed, Hudd aware of his heart's slow and steady thud from somewhere deep within his crumpled shirt.

'*We got somethin'*,' broke in one of the helicopter pilots, followed by a hiss and crackle. '*Stand by, stand by. Contact about to surface.*'

Hudd's spirits sank and he turned to Piers in search of consolation, but the eyes behind the glasses were fixed and concentrated, showing no emotion. A cold fish and no mistake.

Off the starboard bow, where the Sea Kings circled like vultures in the night sky, the sea began to ferment and bubble. Suddenly the frothing surface was illuminated by two fierce blades of light from the Nitesun lamps.

On the carrier's bridge, each VIP leaned forward, hoping for a clearer view and their first sight of the mysterious craft. Hudd tried to focus the binoculars he'd been issued with.

'Good God,' Aspen murmured. The slippery grey-blue hull was breaking through the cauldron of disturbed water.

'Holy Cow!' gasped Katz.

'What the hell?' Hudd began.

'*Negative, negative,*' crackled the nearest pilot. '*False contact. Repeat false contact. Anyone fancy a fish supper?*'

'A fucking sperm whale,' Vice Admiral Harding growled.

Hudd breathed again, looking at Piers and this time seeing the big wide grin that made him look more like a schoolboy than ever.

'Sir, sir!' It was one of the duty watch officers who constantly scanned from the carrier with night-vision aids. 'Unidentified contact bearing one-eight-one. Repeat one-eight-one.'

'What?' Hudd was totally bewildered.

'Aft,' Piers translated. 'Behind us.'

Outside the cordon, Hudd told himself, as Harding led the group across the bridge for a better view over the stern end.

Scarcely a half-mile off, a white froth was forming on the blue-black surface of the ocean swells. Piers helped his minister focus the binoculars.

It was bizarre, like something out of science fiction. The strangely globular monster rose from the deep, seawater spilling from her sides.

'USS *Manta*,' Aspen murmured in awe.

Then, barely without hesitation, it began gliding into the night. A fine wall of spray burst from the water jets around

the hull's winged edge. They created an envelope of wet mist that broke up the craft's shape and merged it into the surrounding sea. Even as Hudd watched, it melted away before his eyes like an illusionist's trick.

'Cocky bastards,' the admiral growled, but there was no mistaking the admiration in his voice.

Hal Katz grunted. 'They've no grounds for being cocky. They failed to reach the . . .'

The end of his sentence was drowned out in the noise of the explosion relayed from the island over the loudspeaker. Everyone turned as the TV monitor pulsed momentarily with white light. As the picture settled and the smoke cleared, they could all see the collapsed wreckage of the dummy mast and bewildered US Marines running in all directions.

'They can't have done,' murmured the officer charged with watching the monitor. 'I didn't see a thing.'

'We'll rerun the tapes later,' Harding said dismissively. 'See if we can spot when they planted the delayed charge.'

But Jim Hudd was no longer listening. They'd done it and that was all that mattered. A British concept backed with Yank know-how had managed to defeat the technology of the world's finest anti-submarine force. Then put a joint assault group of American SEALs and British Special Boat Service troops ashore, succeeding in planting the explosives even while being watched by CCTV cameras.

And they said it would never work. Well, it had. And now Jim Hudd, ex-Nottingham miner and one-time CND protester, was going to claim his place in history – ironically, by freeing a fifth of humanity still yoked and shackled by the political philosophy he himself had once espoused.

Out there, silent beyond the horizon, the Chinese frigate *Luhu* rose and fell gently between the long Pacific swells.

One

John Dancer was not aware of her watching him from the park pathway. Or the nine-year old boy by her side, who was pointing at the *t'ai chi* group exercising with strangely elegant and restrained movements beneath the willows in the cool, early morning air.

They were too far away for the American to hear the boy remark to his mother, in giggling Mandarin. 'See, I tell you. A big nose in the park, doing *t'ai chi* with Chinese people! How funny he looks!'

'Don't point,' his mother chided. 'And so what? It is good that he takes exercise. You could do with taking more yourself. Come on, young man, you'll be late for school.'

She did not tell her son that she recognised the American. Nor that she thought he looked far from funny. He was tall and athletic in the silk jogging pants and sweat-stained T-shirt. She had seen him several times when he had visited the office where she worked and she had thought then how distinguished he looked. The way he walked with such a lazy grace – and now she realised why. He had the natural poise and movement of the seasoned *t'ai chi* practitioners. And of course she had noticed his fair hair, a pale coppery gold which was muted by the grey of early middle age. What Chinese woman living in a world where everyone had crow-black hair would not be fascinated by such a feature? Just like the eyes, not brown but a piercing cobalt blue.

Oh, yes, she had noticed him. And remembered the time she had shyly turned away when their eyes had met and he had given her a warm and ready smile.

But he would not remember her, she realised, as they walked away across the park towards the frenetic bustle of

the Beijing streets. She was only one amongst so many.

As she and her son disappeared from view, the martial arts instructor ended the session and the class dispersed. Dancer waved farewell to the fellow pupils who had become his friends over the years. Mr Xuan the grocer, Mr Ren the butcher, 'Shanghai Joe' the market trader and Mr Liu the new-wave entrepreneur whose pager would always bleep during the *t'ai chi* class and drive the instructor mad.

As Dancer sauntered towards the park entrance, Mr Ren scurried after him and proffered a plastic carrier bag. Dancer peered inside. Four chicken breasts. Just a few *yuan*, said the butcher with a sly smile. The Chinese had a peculiar disregard for white poultry meat, much preferring to gnaw and suck on such delicacies as the feet. Now Mr Ren had discovered a way of making a little extra money out of leftovers that would otherwise have been consigned to a humble family stir-fry. The capitalist enterprise economy had even reached Mr Ren's family butchery in an Xidan backstreet.

Dancer wasn't complaining; in a city where even Kentucky Fried Chicken served only battered feet, locating plump breasts was like discovering the Holy Grail.

'I have plenty more,' Mr Ren said, pocketing the money. 'Corn-fed like Mother makes. Tell your friends, Mr Dancing, please.' As he smiled, Dancer could almost see the *yuan* signs clocking up behind the man's eyes.

'I'll do that. Thank you.'

He continued on his way, tugging a pack of Camel from his pants pocket and lighting one as he walked. It was eight o'clock now and already the heat and humidity were rising. Summer in Beijing was hell on earth. A layer of light cloud lay over the city like the lid on a pressure cooker, slowly broiling its citizens until they became limp and listless before the day had barely begun.

His Seagull bicycle was in the rack by the park entrance. After stuffing the packet of prized chicken breasts into the saddlebag, Dancer mounted and wobbled his way into the

never-ending stream of fellow cyclists. He had long ago discovered that this was the only sane way to move around the capital, avoiding the heaving mass of pedestrians on the pavements, the sardine-tin buses, or even the claustrophobic carriages of the Underground Dragon subway. Freedom, exercise and fresh air. Well, air anyway, considering the choking fumes from the battered and neglected vehicles in the grid-locked streets. That was another reason to avoid taxis. Why pay good money to sit in a decrepit, stifling cab just for the dubious pleasure of going nowhere fast? And certainly nowhere you wanted to go. Because, as Dancer had learned the hard way, Beijing taxi drivers knew as much about the streets of London or Washington as they did about their own city. In short, nothing.

He picked up a welcome cooling breeze as he weaved his way through the lines of jammed traffic, progressing speedily towards the Hua Thai Apartment Hotel in the south-east. The place was unusual in that it actually provided proper apartments with a kitchen and bathroom, unlike most of the others. For a long stay it at least allowed you to have a place that almost felt like home. The private market for accommodation was hopeless for non-nationals. Even if you could find a decent flat not snapped up by the Chinese Communist Government cadres, getting telephones installed, a plumber to call, or even the garbage collected, was a bureaucratic nightmare. Even the overseas Chinese gave up, threw money at the problem and made their long-term homes at the Beijing, the Chinese World or the Friendship hotels and apartments. At least at the Hua Thai 'foreign devil' journalists, businessmen, diplomats and Third World graduate students could form an impromptu club and commiserate with each other about life in China.

But for Dancer that morning the reliable flow of hot water was good enough reason for his choice, as he showered, shaved and changed into a denim cotton shirt,

chino suit and loafers. He took a moment at the mirror to straighten his tie with its tiny winged motifs of Stonedancer Couriers.

It had been his partner's idea. Abe Stone believed in marketing from the bottom up. If Dancer recalled correctly, it had been the man's very first decision. Silk ties in every conceivable colour, made up in Shanghai and given as gifts only to their very top Chinese Communist – or Chicom, as Stone always liked to abbreviate things – customers and government ministers. He said he'd got the idea from Onassis who'd marketed his hand-made cigarettes in the beginning by *not* selling, but only giving them as gifts to the opera-house elite in Buenos Aires back in the 1930s, until everyone in chic society was begging for them.

Well, no one was actually begging for the ties, but they proved popular because their distribution was carefully restricted. That might not have been the case if Dancer hadn't insisted on a *discreet* motif and dropping the 'You Call, We Haul' slogan Stone had wanted to include.

He smiled to himself in the mantelshelf mirror as he donned his broad-brimmed fedora and glanced at the silver-framed portrait on the shelf.

Debs smiled back at him like she always did, like she always had. That zany Californian smile and laughing eyes. The freckles and wild ginger hair. A face that would never grow old. That would be frozen like that for all time. Just like the ache that still lurked somewhere deep inside his being.

'I think I've been here too long, Debs,' he murmured. 'What do you think?'

'I think if you don't stop talking to photographs you're going to be late,' he could hear her say. 'And Abe's going to be climbing up the wall.'

She could always make him smile, even now. 'It doesn't take much.'

And as he remounted the Seagull and began pedalling

towards the Wangfujing district, he mused that at least today Abe Stone would have every reason to rant and rave. With the huge Pacific Rim Trade Development Conference down in Macao in just two days' time, it would be the courier service's busiest time since the Hong Kong handover. It was billed as the biggest international show on earth, destined to launch the future of the Far East into the new millennium. Everyone would be in town. Senior sales teams from all the main Western and overseas Chinese conglomerates in telecommunications, computers, transport, arms and international retail. Entire diplomatic communities and political leaders from around the world. If you weren't there, then you weren't anywhere.

But all those from Beijing who intended to be there seemed to be sending their documents and sales material through Stonedancer Couriers rather than risk the post. Or else flying them with Dancer's relatively new ExecFlight service to avoid the unspeakable horrors of Chinese airlines.

Even as he dismounted in the teeming clamour of the hot and dusty street, he could hear Stone's gravelly foghorn voice from the open window of their offices on the first floor. Leaving his trusty Seagull in the corridor, Dancer took the stairs two at a time.

'In the name of dear Confucius, Mr Pu,' the operations manager was saying as Dancer opened the glass-fronted door, 'there are tens of thousands of troops in Xinjiang province. There is no *earthly* reason why your cousin should be amongst the casualties!'

The packed office of Chinese and American clerks and executives had momentarily become a frozen tableau in the dusty yellow bars of light that poured through the window shutters. Each was motionless at his or her desk, bemused by the vision of Abe Stone showing sympathy and compassion. It was something of a novelty, as was the compelling silence. It was a rare moment in the hectic office when no one happened to be speaking or tapping a

keyboard, the telex had stopped chattering and even a telephone didn't ring. People say it's the moment when the angel of death is flying overhead.

It was that strange second's silence that made Dancer aware of the tinny background babble of the newscaster issuing from the little transistor radio on the top of Mr Pu's in-tray.

Abe Stone's ample backside, with billowing trousers suspended from bright red braces, had a precarious half-perch on the edge of the man's desk. His huge, hair-matted arms were folded across his chest. The body language was clearly supposed to signal understanding to his clerk, but Dancer suspected it was Stone's attempt to restrain himself from the temptation to strangulate.

The posture certainly did nothing to mollify Mr Pu any more than the rictal smile on the American's fleshy face, as he perspired in his effort at self-control. Nothing was going to pacify the underfed-looking clerk who was lost in a starched but frayed white shirt that was two sizes too large for him. His lank hair flapped as he shook his head, rolled his eyes and wailed.

'It is no good, Mr Abe. I know it is my cousin. I know! *Joss* is no good for my family this year. It is a bad time.'

Stone's patience was cracking. 'Never mind about your *yin* and *yang*, Mr Pu. If you don't get back to work pronto, your personal luck is going to run out along with your job!' He snapped off the thin sound of the radio and looked at the rows of faces gazing in his direction. 'And what are you lot gawping at! We've got a business to run. No business and we're *all* out of a job!'

A telephone trilled suddenly and the spell was broken. A voice answered the call and the shirt-sleeved clerks and executives reluctantly began to resume their duties.

'What's the problem, Abe?' Dancer asked.

Stone turned, noticing his partner for the first time. 'Oh, mornin', John. Oh, it's nothing, just a news bulletin. Been more trouble with the Muslims in Xinjiang province. An

attack by separatists. Some Chinese troops were killed.'

Mr Pu still hadn't put pen to paper; he looked miserable. 'My cousin is a soldier there.'

Dancer knew all about the desolate north-eastern province of Xinjiang. It was China's trash bin. An empty dustbowl of a place over three times the size of France, where the indigenous Uighur inhabitants have shared a mutual hatred of their Chinese 'guardians' on and off for over two thousand years. It was the province where the Chinese tested their nuclear weapons, where they built their *laogai* gulags and to which the intellectual classes were banished during the upheaval of the catastrophic Cultural Revolution. The Beijing Government might well have abandoned it centuries before had it not been for its strategic position as a 'buffer zone' and its vast reserves of oil.

It was quite clear to Dancer that the disconsolate clerk would not have his mind on the job until he'd established that his cousin was still alive and well. 'Take the rest of the day off, Mr Pu. Speak with the People's Liberation Army and see if you can't telephone your cousin's barracks. Put your mind at rest. I would like you back here tomorrow. You really are an important little screw.'

Mr Pu liked that. Liked being allowed home, and appreciated the jokey compliment that likened him to Lei Fang, the legendary worker of Maoist propaganda. Fang's reputed saying, 'A man's usefulness to the Revolution is like a small screw in a machine. Though small its use is beyond measure – I want to be a screw', was as widely quoted as it was privately despised and ridiculed.

'Oh, thank you, Mr John,' the clerk gabbled, a wide grin plastered to his face as he gathered up his jacket from the chairback and stuffed the offending radio into his ancient battered briefcase along with his lunchbox filled with cold steamed pork dumplings.

As he scurried for the door, Stone led the way back to his office. 'Not sure that was setting a good example, John. You're going soft in your old age.'

‘Mr Pu would have been a liability, Abe. His mind wasn’t on the job. And I don’t want any of our precious little screws fouling up on work for the conference.’

Stone flopped into the swivel chair behind a massive desk choked with dispatch notes, delivery and consignment documents. All around, boxes with the distinctive blue-wings insignia of Stonedancer Couriers were stacked to form a second wall to the office.

‘You’re ruining my reputation as a tyrant, John, but – yeah – I guess you’re right. Pu’s elevator wasn’t stopping at every floor.’

‘What sort of attack was it in Xinjiang?’

Stone shrugged. ‘The bulletin said something about an ambush. A PLA convoy.’

‘It must have been serious,’ Dancer said thoughtfully. ‘If Beijing thought they could have kept it quiet, it wouldn’t have been mentioned.’

The manager fished a half-smoked stogie from his desk drawer and poured a can of Coke as he lit it with his free hand. ‘Things must be heating up there, what with those two bombings last month.’ But despite his words it was clear that Stone regarded Xinjiang as did most Chinese, as somewhere on the far side of the moon, and just about as relevant.

John Dancer knew differently, but forced his mind back to more mundane matters.

‘Any problems with the conference I should know about? Anything I can help with?’

One of Stone’s rare thin smiles glinted through the gathering clouds of smoke, momentarily twitching his heavy cheeks and scowling eyebrows. His bleak humour was to be detected more subtly in the amusement behind his pale grey eyes.

‘It’s the usual Chinese fire drill.’ He pulled on one of the lobes of the jug ears that protruded from the mass of curls that surrounded his thinning crown. ‘But we’re keeping on top.’

They'd started as partners and become firm friends. Dancer would have been surprised had Stone given any other answer. There had never been any doubt about the man's ability since Dancer had picked him up from skid row in the Laotian capital of Vientiane six years before. With a broken marriage and shattered career behind him, Stone, the former high-flying air freight management expert from Kansas, had sought oblivion in a country that time had forgotten.

But if time had forgotten, Abe had not. Had not forgotten the magical time spent there in his youth on a posting with the CIA's covert Air America operations. And he had never forgiven his fellow countrymen for later bombing the shit out of the country, dumping more ordnance on its eastern provinces than was dropped in the entire Second World War in a futile and pointless attempt to sever the Ho Chi Minh trail where it ran across the border.

Stone remembered other things. The calming tranquillity of the air, the floating scents of frangipani and opium pipes, the beguiling and friendly people, the teak houses and crumbling French villas that overlooked the lazy Mekong river. And, of course, Suzy, star of the famous White Rose, who stole young Americans' hearts with her cabaret skill of smoking a cigarette between her legs.

That was where he'd met his first love, in one of the little cubicle rooms above the bar. Little Lindy-lou, a happy, almond-eyed teenage sprite who would laugh and giggle and teasingly strip for a dollar and make unforgettable love for just a couple more. She had stolen his heart. Within a week they were no longer whore and punter, but tentative lovers. One night she took him home to a clean but dingy backstreet flat. When he awoke he was lying naked and alone on the sheets. His clothes had gone and with them his wallet.

In an instant, Abe's light heart was filled with darkness and his rage boiled over. The cheap trickster, how could

she? After all they'd done and said, after all the murmured words of how the rest of their lives would be spent together. He smashed what little furniture there was in the room, ripped the sheet from the bed and tore the tatty curtains from the rails.

Only then did he hear the light-toed movement behind him and turn to see the expression of bewilderment on her face. In her hands she held out his clothes, all freshly laundered, ironed and neatly folded. And, balanced on the top, his wallet.

It was a miracle the relationship had survived that, but it had. For nearly a year, until he was posted elsewhere. He wrote once or twice, but she never wrote back. Or, if she did, her letters never reached him.

His career with Air America was followed by a career in commercial air freight management, working in developing countries where his experience counted most. Africa, South America and the Far East. He married a Kansas girl whom he'd known since childhood. She was beautiful and adored him, but she was a home-bird, like a fine wine that didn't travel well. Eventually the long separations took their toll and Abe's wife found someone else. He sought comfort in the bottle and lost interest and concentration in his work. Having taken his eye off the ball, he allowed a bad deal to go through that almost bankrupted his company. When he was fired, it made trade press headlines. No one would touch him.

No one, that is, except John Dancer. He had been in China since 1984, when the Chinese Communist Government had begun quietly to drop its Maoist excesses and encourage an enterprise economy. Seven years on, Dancer Courier Services was well established, but now there were new opportunities and objectives. Dancer needed someone reliable to take over existing operations while he built up a new venture, ExecFlight, VIP passenger services for top businessmen and Chinese government officials.

He was given Abe Stone's name.

He found him back in Laos, living in the mist in a riverside pontoon house at Luang Prabang. Stone never had been able to find the whereabouts of his teenage passion; he guessed Lindy-lou had made the journey to Bangkok to seek her fortune in the fleshpots there. If anyone knew for certain, they weren't saying.

Instead, he'd settled with a delightful creature with Bambi eyes who was young enough to be Lindy-lou's daughter. She was a 'second-hand girlfriend', considered sullied because her first spotty adolescent admirer had not been persuaded to marry her. Abe had no such qualms about the 'second-hand' market. He had drowned out his self-pity in an orgy of self-indulgence.

She and the timeless Mekong had done their healing. Stone was off the booze, well, virtually, and content. But getting bored with fishing. The timing of Dancer's offer of a junior partnership could not have been more perfect. The downside was that history was to repeat itself. His girlfriend would not even consider moving with him to China, a country whose name she barely recognised; she moved back in with her family. Abe still sent regular small cheque payments which were cashed. But like Lindy-lou before her, Bambi was not one for writing letters.

Once in Beijing, Stone had gone to work with the energy and fervour of a television evangelist, kicking Dancer's somewhat chaotic operation into shape. There were hirings and firings, a move of office, new computer systems and a marketing campaign to drum up new business. Time and again he had proved his worth, just as Dancer's confidential adviser had said he would.

So Dancer was not in the least surprised that the great Pacific Rim Trade Development Conference workload had not even caused a blip on his partner's erratic stress chart. Bluff and bluster were his stock-in-trade, never panic.

'What about you, John?' Stone asked. 'You still going?'

Dancer smiled lightly. 'You bet. Got to fly our flag. I thought I'd join our midday ExecFlight tomorrow.'

‘Who’s on it?’ He winked. ‘Knowing you, some big bananas.’

‘A couple of Chicom officials I’ve wanted to get the chance to talk to for some time.’

Stone understood. Relaxing in the flying hospitality suite, sinking into luxurious leather chairs and being served such delicacies as snake and crispy stir-fried scorpion with rare Napoleon Augier cognac by pretty and gregarious hostesses, put the sternest Communist cadres in the mood to talk and do business.

‘And Wang,’ Dancer added.

His partner grunted. Wang was a cross they had to bear. As assistant deputy director of the Civil Aviation Administration of China, Wang Fu’s influence had to be bought in order to get ExecFlight off the ground and accepted as an official wing of the state-owned China Southern Star Lines, which was quoted on the New York Stock Exchange.

In order to meet the requirements of Chinese law, Wang arranged with Dancer for his brother to join the board of the official joint venture. This was also necessary as non-Chinese were not allowed to run aircraft or helicopters.

There was, however, another motive for this. While Wang made it his business to keep Chinese bureaucracy at arm’s length from the Stonedancer operations, he could rely on his brother to keep an eye on things and ensure that he received a fair cut of the profits. *Hou-men* or ‘backdoor business’ was what oiled the wheels of the new entrepreneurial China and when it came to oil, Wang was never happier than when up to his neck in the stuff.

Mercifully, Xin-Bin was the complete antithesis of his older brother. He was quiet, almost bashful, and thoughtful. A former business management graduate from Nanjing University, he had even studied at Harvard for a year where he’d perfected his English with a decidedly American accent.

Even this didn't endear him to Abe Stone, who was deeply suspicious, probably because in his own mind he couldn't separate Xin-Bin from his brother. Moreover, he would blink, unmoved by Stone's ravings, so that the American manager could never quite fathom him. Because Xin-Bin was a very unusual character in real life – a genuinely inscrutable Chinaman. In his frustration, Stone's suspicions deepened. And it made no difference that the young man dedicated long hours to ExecFlight business which left little time for the wife and child to whom he was clearly devoted. It even meant doing something almost unknown in Beijing – forgoing lunch. It confirmed to Stone that there was something deeply wrong; it was just that he wasn't quite sure what.

'Why's Wang going to Macao?' he asked.

'Same reason he goes anywhere,' Dancer replied with a smile. 'It's a free perk and he wants to party.'

'And what about ExecFlight? You want me to go over and keep an eye on things while you're off partying with Wang?'

Dancer had been expecting that. It was a regular routine whenever he went away. 'No need, Abe. Xin-Bin is quite capable of running things.'

Stone's lips formed a disgruntled straight line. 'Sure he is, John. It's just that two heads and all that.' There was an accusing glint in his eyes. 'We should never have set up the ExecFlight office on the other side of town.'

That old chestnut. 'It made sense. It was suitable and the rent was a giveaway,' Dancer reminded.

'Wang family property.'

'So what?'

'It makes it difficult for me to drop over, keep them on their toes, that's what!'

Dancer didn't tell him that had been one of the main attractions. The less Abe Stone knew about ExecFlight the better. For his own good. Keep everything separate, that was the philosophy.

'We'll discuss it at our next board meeting. I've got to get over there now.'

Stone gave him a meaningful stare. 'See what I mean?'

But Dancer just laughed as he turned to leave the office for another cycle ride. 'The exercise does me good, Abe. Keeps me young. You should try it some time.'

His partner's expletive reply was cut off as the door swung shut.

'The Stonedancer courier is here,' announced the embassy clerk, a cool too-tall blonde called Suzy whose upright posture and accent marked her out as the daughter of a British Army officer.

'Shit!' Iona Moncrieff hissed, glaring up from the computer screen, cigarette clamped between her teeth, lank hair falling over her face. 'He's early.'

Suzy was unfazed. 'He's efficient.'

'Balls,' snapped Iona. 'On time is efficient. Early is a pain in the arse. No point being an army brat if your dad didn't teach you anything.'

'Late is a capital offence,' the girl replied with a lofty smile. 'He taught me that.'

'Okay, smarty pants, the printer's packed up. I'm on the last document and it's printing blind.' She smiled sweetly, ribbons of smoke drifting out between her teeth. 'Help me.'

'You're a Luddite, boss.'

'Okay, so you know big words. Help me.'

'You're out of ink. You need a new cartridge.' Suzy sighed at the sight of the second secretary trying to look angry and appealing at the same time. It didn't fit well with the lived-in features and amused, seen-it-all-before eyes.

'Okay, boss, I'll do it.'

'You're an angel.'

'I thought I was an army brat.'

Now that Suzy was deftly fitting the new cartridge, Iona felt safe to add: 'Yeah, that too.'

The scurrying of officials between departments, the hectic comings and goings and frantic preparation of

documents was the nearest the British Embassy ever got to bedlam. And coping with computers was the only thing that brought Iona Moncrieff remotely close to breaking sweat. She'd been in the game a long time. Too long, she sometimes thought.

Diplomats were used to living at a measured pace, allowing only modest variations between embassies according to national culture and tradition. Certainly similar scenes of last-minute panics and glitches would be repeated, she knew, at all the other embassies in the two compounds of Jianguomenwai and Sanlitun. It was a legacy of Chinese xenophobia that all 'foreign devil' diplomats were kept together in the same place where they could be kept an eye on.

The last pages stuttered out of the printer. 'By the way,' Suzy said, 'your boyfriend's waiting in reception.'

Iona scowled. 'By that, I suppose you mean Bill. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I'm improving your chances.'

'What do you mean?'

'He fancies you rotten.'

Iona blinked for a second, pursing her lips. 'Balderdash.'

'Oh, yes, he does.' Suzy cocked her head to one side. 'That's why you've got to play hard to get. Keep him waiting.'

Her boss stubbed out her cigarette butt in the ashtray and straightened her jacket. 'That's your expert advice, is it? And you barely out of nappies.'

'Nearly thirty years out of them, boss,' came the typically cool reply. 'And you must be fifty. Time you landed yourself a bloke.'

'Not interested,' Iona said, quickly dabbing lipstick at her reflection in the mirror. 'I've got my cats and my origami. What do I want with men?' She didn't wait for a response. 'Now, Suzy, be an angel and get that document down to the courier while I see Bill.'

Suzy arched one finely plucked eyebrow. 'Only if you promise to vamp it up. Get his pulses racing.'

The diplomat paused by the door and peered back alluringly over her shoulder while fluttering her eyelids. 'Like this?'

'On second thoughts. . .'

Bill Dawson had not come far. The United States Embassy was sited conveniently on the next block of the compound. Therefore he was a frequent visitor. He was waiting in the lobby amid the piles of diplomats' luggage awaiting transportation to the airport on route to the Macao conference.

'Your Majesty,' the American greeted as Iona Moncrieff negotiated the bullet-proof glass of the security door. As always dressed immaculately – today in a pale grey mohair suit artfully cut to trim his thickening waist – Dawson took her hand and pressed it to his lips. '*Enchanté*, my dear Iona.'

She was aware of the mischievous glint in his flinty eyes as they smiled up at her from over her knuckles. 'My assistant says you are madly in love with me,' she challenged, straight-faced.

Dawson gently released her hand. 'Out of the mouths of babes. . .'

'I'll have none of it, do you hear.' She wore her best aloof expression, averting her head. 'I'm saving myself.'

The American couldn't suppress his grin. 'Alas, so I've noticed, Your Majesty.'

Several years older than Iona, he had known her for more than twenty years since his first posting to Beijing after the Viet Nam War where he'd served on detachment to the CIA. They'd met at an embassy party and it had not been a promising start. She had made some choice remark about the Americans' defeat in Viet Nam – in retrospect witty and perceptive – and he had mocked her accent and likened her to Queen Victoria. The 'Your Majesty' tag had stuck. But there was something about their antagonistic quick-fire repartee that signalled something else beneath the surface. They shared the same sense of dry, cynical

humour, sparking off each other like flintstones and had flirted outrageously ever since.

Dawson never had quite figured her strange allure. He was fond of saying she was the most beautiful ugly woman he'd ever met. Convent and public school educated, Iona was tall and gangling with a lazy posture which did little for her slim figure and rather shapeless legs. There was a constant look of weariness about her, as there was with her frequent smiles and her clothes. Her straight fair hair always looked as though it had been cut by a trainee in a poodle parlour and that she had forgotten to shampoo it the day before. Her face had had the slightly crumpled, lived-in look ever since he'd first met her.

So, what was it about her that always lifted his spirits if never quite stirring his loins? The smoky voice – hardly surprising given her consumption of tobacco and brandy – could have something to do with it, together with those expressive eyes that always hinted she was seeing the joke when you didn't, and that the joke was probably quite obscene.

Despite two decades of verbal flirtation, there had never been a hint of serious romance between them. How, Dawson asked himself, could there ever be with a woman like Iona Moncrieff? Was it possible to bed a personality rather than a person?

So he had taken the path to penury with three unsatisfactory marriages followed by three financially crippling divorces. Meanwhile, Her Majesty had settled contentedly into spinsterhood with her cat, her origami and her crochetwork. Or so she claimed.

'Come in,' she invited. 'Have some Earl Grey.'

Dawson shook his head. 'Thanks, but I'm flying down to Macao this evening. Just checking if you're still going?'

'Most definitely. I'm travelling down tomorrow.'

'Good. I want to have a chat.' He jerked his thumb back towards the main door. Iona looked out into the street and saw the young Chinese man in the polyester suit and

shades leaning against the lamppost, pretending to read a newspaper. 'It'll be good to get away from the Bureau kids for a few days. That jerk just followed me from the embassy. I wouldn't mind, but they really *believe* we can't spot them.'

Iona smiled in sympathy. The omnipresence of the Public Security Bureau could be a little claustrophobic at times. Like their counterparts in the former Soviet Union's KGB, its members weren't too clever at concealment. They were too used to making their presence obvious to intimidate their own people. But she and Dawson both knew that some more secretive elements within the Chinese security apparatus and the Ministry of State Security could be a lot more invisible and efficient than the man outside in his polyester suit.

'Which hotel are you staying at?' she asked.

He told her. 'Perhaps we could meet up tomorrow evening, around eight. Our President should be arriving then – an ideal time to slip away.'

'Remember the Silver Dragon? I'll meet you there. I understand Piers Lansdowne will be in town.'

Dawson's bushy eyebrows rose in unison. Piers Lansdowne. British Secret Intelligence Service. From 'Riverside', London. Iona's young chief officer. 'I hope he's got something on developments.'

'So do I, Bill. The suspense is killing me.'

He nodded. 'You heard the news?'

'Xinjiang? Yes.'

'We're doing our bit.'

'And we're doing ours.'

'Time I met Piers again.'

She gave her best coquettish look. '*A ménage à trois?*' she asked provocatively. 'I'll see what I can do.'

A smile hovered on his lips. 'Macao's a hotbed of hormones. So you be careful.'

Iona feigned mock horror. 'I'm too old for that sort of thing. And so are you.'

He regarded her for a moment, wondering. Then his laugh cut in. 'Nonsense. Macao's just the place for a tired old divorcee.'

The evening rush hour was going full tilt as John Dancer cycled alongside Xin-Bin. Traffic was log-jammed to a cacophony of motor horns and an accompaniment of bicycle bells, the baked air laden with toxic fumes.

Despite the thousands of cyclists crisscrossing the city, he had little difficulty in picking out the Bureau tail. The man was wearing an unsuitably heavy quilted jacket as he pedalled his yellow Flying Pigeon, at the same time gabbling into a mobile phone.

What would Hollywood make of the Chinese spying game, Dancer wondered? A snail-pace bicycle chase through Hongqiao Market and a swordfight with chopsticks hardly had the visual impact of high-speed cars, shoot-outs and explosions.

He wondered if Xin-Bin had spotted their shadow; probably, but he didn't ask. There was no point. Just lately there always seemed to be an obvious plain-clothes Bureau man about, and no doubt there were others who weren't as obvious. The only question was why? He just hoped the answer wasn't as obvious too. What he really suspected was a gradual, inch-by-inch shift in power behind the scenes in the Politburo. That was the way of things in China. It was the smallest of changes that indicated the really big ones. And since the British had handed back Hong Kong, there had been a lot of small changes.

They reached the Holiday Inn Lido, padlocked their bikes and made their way to the Pig and Whistle bar on the ground floor. It was the nearest thing in Beijing to an English pub and was popular with many European expatriates. Despite the exorbitant prices and the long ride to get there, it remained one of Dancer's favourite watering holes. At least they appeared to have lost their shadow on the journey.

Abe Stone was already in the mock-Tudor bar, hunched on a stool and watching CNN news on the television, mounted high on the far corner wall. He glanced round as they approached. 'Hi, John, usual?' Then to Xin-Bin: 'And you?'

The Chinaman gave a smile that said Stone always made him feel nervous. '*Jianlibao*, thank you.'

No emotion showed on Stone's face. 'You can manage something a little stronger, can't you? Day's over. Put hairs on your chest.'

Another smile said that he really wanted a soft drink, but he was prepared to relent to please the senior partner. 'I suppose sun is over the yardarm, Mr Abe. A ginny T, thank you.'

Stone waved a fifty *yuan* note at the sour-faced barmaid. 'A glass of *tsingtao* and a gin and tonic.'

'How was the day?' Dancer asked casually, lighting a Camel and taking his beer from the counter.

'We coped.' Stone added pointedly, 'despite being short-handed. Everything got off to Macao, although the British Embassy caused a panic when their pack wasn't ready for the courier.'

'Iona Moncrieff?' Dancer guessed.

Stone nodded his head. 'My grief, more like. She does that to me damn near every time.'

'Enjoys sailing close to the wind, that one,' Dancer agreed. 'Quite a character.'

'Customers, I like. Characters, I can do without.'

A group of new-wave Chinese businessmen had entered wearing flash suits and weighed down with expensive attaché cases and mobile phones. They were noisily ordering drinks at the other end of the bar. A couple of Mongolian hookers in red plastic skirts observed them with deep interest from their seats in the partitioned 'snug'.

Suddenly the businessmen broke into excited chatter, arguing with each other as they watched the CNN newscaster on the corner television.

‘ . . . from Xingjiang province of China. Unconfirmed reports suggest upward of one hundred-twenty troops of the People’s Liberation Army may have been killed or injured in the convoy ambush. Uighur secessionists calling themselves the Flames of Aktu are being blamed for the attack.’

‘Holy Cow,’ Stone murmured. ‘Maybe Mr Pu had good reason to be worried about his cousin after all.’

Another man had joined the group of Chinese businessmen watching the television. He was short with a pock-marked face which was half-hidden by dark glasses. Angrily he began berating them and yelled at the barmaid to switch off the set.

‘It is a disgrace to show that Imperialist American propaganda!’ he shouted. ‘You are unpatriotic and a snake spirit! You should be ashamed of yourself!’

The barmaid was unmoved; no one was going to tell her what television station she showed; she knew what her ‘foreign devil’ customers wanted to watch. Then the newcomer started waving a plastic wallet containing some sort of ID card. This time the barmaid’s face paled visibly, a distinctly worried look in her eyes. She reached for the remote control, the picture flickered for an instant and CNN was replaced by a Chinese opera.

Xin-Bin leaned towards Dancer. ‘He is PSB. Security Bureau. It is he who followed us here.’

It was only then that Dancer recognised the dark blue quilted jacket that the man on the yellow Flying Pigeon had been wearing.

‘You were followed?’ Stone asked. ‘Why on earth should the Bureau want to follow you?’

His friend shrugged. ‘No idea, Abe, but it’s been happening quite a bit lately.’

‘You never mentioned it.’

‘Not relevant. Has anyone been tailing *you*?’

‘I haven’t looked.’ Stone’s eyes narrowed. ‘What’s going on at ExecFlight, John? Is that why the Bureau’s taking an interest?’

Dancer's laugh was light. 'Nothing's *going* on, Abe. But you're right, that's probably the reason they're watching. We're flying a lot of Chicom cadre people nowadays and a few PLA generals are regulars. Someone at the Bureau's decided to do some positive vetting.'

That seemed a fair assumption to Stone. 'Then there's good reason for me to base myself at the ExecFlight office while you're away.'

Xin-Bin looked offended. 'There's no need, Mr Abe. I can handle things. There's no problem.'

'He's right,' Dancer agreed. 'I've already told you that.'

It was Stone's turn to look affronted. 'For God's sake, John, we don't have secrets from each other. We're supposed to be a partnership.' He spared Xin-Bin a withering sideways glance. 'All three of us. But if the Bureau pays a visit, they'll ride rough-shod over any Chinese. They just won't listen. But they *will* if a foreigner's there.'

'The Bureau will not come,' Xin-Bin insisted. 'My brother always makes sure of that.'

Mentioning Wang to Abe Stone was like a red flag to a bull. 'Since when can your brother control the Bureau? He's Civil Aviation Administration. All he can do is protect us from his own bureau-crats – when it suits him.'

Dancer tried to defuse the argument. 'Let's not blow this out of proportion. So the Bureau's given us a couple of tails. Fine, it's their job and we've nothing to hide.' He turned to Xin-Bin. 'If you have any trouble while I'm away, you get straight on the phone to Abe. Agreed?'

But before the man could reply, another voice interrupted. 'Hi, you guys, is this a private row or can anyone join in?'

It was Bill Dawson from the US Embassy.

Dancer raised his hand in greeting. 'Hi, Bill, take a pew. We were just talking business.'

'Thought it was serious,' Dawson said jokingly. 'You sounded like a couple of Greeks discussing the weather.'

'Have a beer.'

The newcomer sat on the edge of a spare barstool and gave an acknowledging nod to Abe Stone, who returned the gesture with obvious reluctance. 'No thanks, John, I've gotta scoot to get down to Macao.'

'You flying with us?'

'I can't afford your fancy prices. I'll leave the Chicom cadres to do that.' An earnest note crept into his voice. 'Just wanted to check you're still going?'

Dancer nodded. 'Tomorrow.'

'Then let's make sure we meet up. Might have some business to steer your way. I'll be at the Lisboa Hotel.' He was already on his feet.

'Okay, Bill, I'll make sure I see you.'

Dawson gave a cheery 'Ciao' and was on his way.

Stone scowled after him. 'I don't trust that guy, John. Watch yourself with him.'

'He's our commercial attaché, Abe.'

His partner grunted. 'He's our resident spook, John, and you know it. *Everyone* knows it.'

Dancer drained his beer. 'Then I'll wear rubber gloves next time we shake hands.' He rose to his feet. 'Now, I've got packing to do. I'll grab a burger on the way home. Either of you want to join me?'

Of course, he knew Xin-Bin wouldn't; as always he'd be anxious to get back to his wife and young child.

'You hate burgers,' Stone said accusingly.

'I'm learning to be a real American. Now, you coming?'

Stone shook his head. 'Ding's doing an anniversary steak supper. Celebrating three years together.'

Ding was the successor to Lindy-lou and Bambi-eyes; whilst she shared the diminutive stature of the Laotian girls, she was, in fact, an overseas Chinese from Singapore and was a petulant dragon. Dancer would joke with Xin-Bin that he could light a Camel off her breath when she was in one of her regular moods.

Abe Stone was right about one thing, Dancer mused as he cycled on towards the Hard Rock Café on

Dongsanhuan Beilu. He hadn't been a lover of Western food since he'd been behind the lines with the Green Berets during the Viet Nam War. Eating the simple peasant fare with friendly villagers had caught his imagination and re-educated his adolescent taste buds. At least the Hard Rock didn't have queues of Chinese waiting to have their photographs taken with a giant plastic Ronald McDonald.

But, of course, that wasn't the reason. It was commonplace for both Westerners and Chinese to visit the Hard Rock; it was expected and would not raise suspicions.

Instead of the grinning burger clown, he had to endure the kinetic thud of heavy metal as a tribute to all the Western evils of which Chairman Mao had warned. But everyone was clearly too deafened to hear, he mused, as he watched the brisk trade in Hard Rock T-shirts at the merchandising counter. It occurred to him that the Chinese should be running courses in Basic Capitalism at the Harvard Business School; they really were the louisiest socialists he'd ever come across.

Watched over by a poster of Elvis, he mainlined on cholesterol with a Philly Steak sandwich, heavy on the cheese and piled high with onion rings. After washing it down with an iced bottle of Bud, he made his way to the toilets. He wasn't expecting to see a sign, let alone the small cross in yellow chalk on the wall above one of the urinals.

Yellow meant it was "Hunan". A cross meant there was something at the drop. Usually it would be a scrap of paper containing a line of numbers which, read in a certain order, suggested a date and time to meet. The venue had been decided at their last face-to-face encounter.

Life was a little simpler with "Hunan"; there was no great need for secrecy. It was one of the fallacies that secrecy was the prime requisite of the spying game; openness worked far better. The best spies were hearty, gregarious types with a wide circle of friends and

acquaintances. Cover and alibis worked best when they were as close as possible to the truth. And where possible, meetings were best held in public places with obvious good reason.

The obvious good reason with “Hunan” was that he was a fanatical golfer. Dancer had quickly overcome his loathing of the game. He was even getting to like it – something he never admitted to Debs’s photograph – and had driven his handicap down to twelve. There had even been another benefit of his new-found recreation; he discovered that it was especially popular with the highest echelons of Beijing’s ruling cadres.

The only precaution with “Hunan” was not to play too frequently. He was by nature a subdued, even sullen character on first acquaintance and would not have been the type to strike up a close sporting friendship with a ‘foreign devil’. So their games were played at lengthy intervals, often following seemingly chance encounters in mid-week mornings when the links were relatively empty.

In truth, the last thing Dancer needed was a visit to the drop. There was still packing to do and preparations to make for his trip to Macao. He was in half a mind to postpone it until his return. But then the Philly Steak sandwich seemed to have formed a doughy lump in his gut and he decided the exercise would do him good.

It was an ideal location, a park bench in a secluded area of shrubbery. By sitting at one end, Dancer could reach back over a low ornamental fence to the base of the metal lamppost sited just behind it. At its rear, out of view of casual passers-by, was a small junction box.

Dancer had made it himself from a plastic traveller’s soap case. He’d carefully drilled and fitted a magnetic plate to the base before spraying it with metallic grey paint to match the lamppost. Then he’d stencilled a small lightning flash – the international warning for live electricity – in red on the lid.

When he reached the bench, he propped his bicycle

against the fence, took a newspaper from his saddlebag and sat down to read for ten minutes. Even a trained observer would have been hard pushed to recognise the moment when he reached back one arm, removed the soap-box lid and extracted the piece of paper. A few minutes later he began his return journey.

It wasn't until he reached his apartment that he examined the note from "Hunan". To his surprise, it wasn't the encoded numerals for a suggested rendezvous. It was a folded A4 sheet containing lines and lines of carefully hand-written numbers in groups of five digits.

Dancer frowned. "Hunan" had used his one-off cipher pad for only the second time in their relationship. This was going to take some time. The first line of "Hunan's" message told him which pad had been used, which pages and which lines. He poured three fingers of bourbon into a tumbler and sat at his desk, retrieving a two hundred carton of Camel from an unlocked drawer. In the pool of light cast by a brass lamp, he opened one of the packs and pulled out the cigarette from the right side of the back row. Close examination would have shown that it was not regular cigarette paper but matt laminated for extra strength. Using a pair of tweezers he extracted the tightly rolled plug of scrolled paper that formed the first inch of the cigarette.

The scroll was printed by a form of photographic reduction on inflammable cellulose nitrate material that was as thin as rice paper. Half-way through the scroll the colour of the thousands of numerical groups changed from black to blue, indicating the enciphering and deciphering sections. It was going to be a long and tedious job with a magnifying glass.

He wasn't at all sure what he was expecting. Fairly routine operational stuff. Problems with the network organisation and requests for assistance or equipment. To his surprise there was none of that. By the end of the fourth paragraph he found that his hand was trembling.

Three times he read the contents of his deciphered note, not even aware that his bourbon was untouched and that his cigarette had burned out in the ashtray.

His mind was reeling, his thoughts suddenly a confused jumble. Feeling slightly off balance, he hauled himself to his feet and paced the room a couple of times to help him concentrate. Then he noticed the glass of bourbon and, as he went to reach for it, caught sight of the photo frame on the mantelpiece. Debs was staring directly at him, seeming to be asking: 'What is it, John? What's shaken you like this?'

'You don't want to know,' he mouthed.

'I'm your lover and your friend. For eternity. We have no secrets.'

The corner of his mouth curled up in that lop-sided half-smile she had always loved so much. Thank God, sometimes when he was alone and it was quiet, he could still hear her voice.

'Taiwan,' he said silently. 'The Chinese are going to invade within the next four months.'