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On the second floor of a characterless hotel in the British Crown Colony of Gibraltar, a lithe, agile man in his late fifties restlessly paced his bedroom. His very British features, though pleasant and plainly honourable, indicated a choleric nature brought to the limit of its endurance. A distraught lecturer, you might have thought, observing the bookish forward lean and loping stride and the errant forelock of salt-and-pepper hair that repeatedly had to be disciplined with jerky back-handed shoves of the bony wrist. Certainly it would not have occurred to many people, even in their most fanciful dreams, that he was a middle-ranking British civil servant, hauled from his desk in one of the more prosaic departments of Her Majesty's Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be dispatched on a top-secret mission of acute sensitivity.

His assumed first name, as he insisted on repeating to himself, sometimes half aloud, was Paul and his second – not exactly hard to remember – was Anderson. If he turned on the television set it said *Welcome, Mr Paul Anderson. Why not enjoy a complimentary pre-dinner aperitif in our Lord Nelson's Snug!* The exclamation mark in place of the more appropriate question mark was a source of constant annoyance to the pedant in him. He was wearing the hotel's bathrobe of white towelling and he had been wearing it ever since his incarceration, except

when vainly trying to sleep or, once only, slinking upstairs at an unsociable hour to eat alone in a rooftop brasserie washed with the fumes of chlorine from a third-floor swimming pool across the road. Like much else in the room, the bathrobe, too short for his long legs, reeked of stale cigarette smoke and lavender air freshener.

As he paced, he determinedly acted out his feelings to himself without the restraints customary in his official life, his features one moment cramped in honest perplexity, the next glowering in the full-length mirror that was screwed to the tartan wallpaper. Here and there he spoke to himself by way of relief or exhortation. Also half aloud? What was the difference when you were banged up in an empty room with nobody to listen to you but a colour-tinted photograph of our dear young Queen on a brown horse?

On a plastic-topped table lay the remnants of a club sandwich that he had pronounced dead on arrival, and an abandoned bottle of warm Coca-Cola. Though it came hard to him, he had permitted himself no alcohol since he had taken possession of the room. The bed, which he had learned to detest as no other, was large enough for six, but he had only to stretch out on it for his back to give him hell. A radiant crimson counterpane of imitation silk lay over it, and on the counterpane an innocent-looking cellphone which he had been assured was modified to the highest state of encryption and, though he was of little faith in such matters, he could only suppose it was. Each time he passed it, his gaze fixed on it with a mixture of reproach, longing and frustration.

I regret to inform you, Paul, that you will be totally incommunicado, save for operational purposes, throughout your mission, the laborious South African voice of Elliot, his self-designated field commander, is warning him. Should an unfortunate crisis afflict

your fine family during your absence they will pass their concerns to your office's welfare department, whereupon contact with you will be made. Do I make myself clear, Paul?

You do, Elliot, little by little you do.

Reaching the overlarge picture window at the further end of the room, he scowled upward through the grimy net curtains at Gibraltar's legendary Rock which, sallow, wrinkled and remote, scowled back at him like an angry dowager. Yet again, out of habit and impatience, he examined his alien wristwatch and compared it with the green numerals on the radio clock beside the bed. The watch was of battered steel with a black dial, a replacement for the gold Cartier presented to him on their twenty-fifth by his beloved wife on the strength of an inheritance from one of her many deceased aunts.

But hang on a minute! *Paul hasn't got a bloody wife!* Paul Anderson has no wife, no daughter. Paul Anderson's a bloody hermit!

'Can't have you wearing *that*, Paul darling, can we now?' a motherly woman his own age is saying to him a lifetime ago in the red-brick suburban villa near Heathrow airport where she and her sisterly colleague are dressing him for the part. 'Not with those nice initials engraved on it, can we? You'd have to say you'd nicked it off of somebody married, wouldn't you, Paul?'

Sharing the joke, determined as ever to be a good chap by his own lights, he looks on while she writes *Paul* on an adhesive label and locks his gold watch away in a cash box with his wedding ring for what she calls *the duration*.

How in God's name did I ever get to end up in this hellhole in the first place?

Did I jump or was I pushed? Or was it a bit of both?

Describe, please, in a few well-chosen circuits of the room,

the precise circumstances of your unlikely journey from blessed monotony to solitary confinement on a British colonial rock.

‘So how’s your poor dear wife?’ asks the not-quite-superannuated ice queen of Personnel Department, now grandly rechristened Human Resources for no reason known to man, having summoned him without a word of explanation to her lofty bower on a Friday evening when all good citizens are hurrying home. The two are old adversaries. If they have anything at all in common, it is the feeling that there are so few of them left.

‘Thank you, Audrey, not poor at all, I am pleased to say,’ he replies, with the determined levity he affects for such life-threatening encounters. ‘Dear but not poor. She remains in full remission. And you? In the pink of health, I trust?’

‘So she’s leavable,’ Audrey suggests, ignoring this kindly enquiry.

‘My hat no! In what sense?’ – determinedly keeping up the jolly banter.

‘In this sense: would four super-secret days abroad in a salubrious climate, just *possibly* running to five, be of any interest to you?’

‘They could be of considerable possible interest, thank you, Audrey, as it happens. Our grown-up daughter is living with us at the moment, so the timing could scarcely be better, given that she happens to be a *medical doctor*,’ he can’t resist adding in his pride, but Audrey remains unimpressed by his daughter’s accomplishment.

‘I don’t know what it’s about and I don’t have to,’ she says, answering a question that he hasn’t put to her. ‘There’s a dynamic young junior minister called Quinn upstairs whom you may have heard of. He’d like to see you immediately.

He's a new broom, in case word hasn't reached you in the far wastes of Logistical Contingencies, recently acquired from Defence – hardly a recommendation but there you are.'

What on earth's she on about? Of *course* such news has reached him. He reads his newspapers, doesn't he? He watches *Newsnight*. Fergus Quinn, MP, Fergie to the world, is a Scottish brawler, a self-styled *bête intellectuelle* of the New Labour stable. On television he is vocal, belligerent and alarming. Moreover, he prides himself on being the people's scourge of Whitehall's bureaucracy – a commendable virtue viewed from afar, but scarcely reassuring if you happen to be a Whitehall bureaucrat.

'You mean *now*, this minute, Audrey?'

'That is what I understand him to mean by *immediately*.'

The ministerial anteroom is empty, its staff long departed. The ministerial mahogany door, solid as iron, stands ajar. Knock and wait? Or knock and push? He does a little of both, hears: 'Don't just stand there. Come on in, and close the door behind you.' He enters.

The dynamic young minister's bulk is squeezed into a midnight-blue dinner jacket. He is poised with a cellphone to his ear before a marble fireplace stuffed with red paper foil for flames. As on television, so in the flesh, he is stocky and thick-necked with close-cropped ginger hair and quick, greedy eyes set in a pugilist's face.

Behind him rises a twelve-foot portrait of an eighteenth-century Empire-builder in tights. For a mischievous moment brought on by tension, the comparison between the two such different men is irresistible. Though Quinn strenuously purports to be a man of the people, both have the pout of privileged discontent. Both have their body weight on one leg and the other knee cocked. Is the dynamic young minister about

to launch a punitive raid on the hated French? Will he, in the name of New Labour, berate the folly of the howling mob? He does neither, but with a gritty 'Call you later, Brad' for his cellphone, stomps to the door, locks it and swings round.

'They tell me you're a *seasoned member of the Service*, that right?' he says accusingly, in his carefully nurtured Glaswegian accent, after a head-to-toe inspection that seems to confirm his worst fears. '*Cool head*, whatever that means. Twenty years of *kicking around in foreign parts*, according to Human Resources. *Soul of discretion, not easily rattled*. That's quite a write-up. Not that I necessarily believe what I'm told around here.'

'They're very kind,' he replies.

'And you're grounded. Confined to barracks. Out to grass. Your wife's health has kept you back, is that correct, please?'

'But only as of the last few years, Minister' – less than grateful for *out to grass* – 'and for the moment I'm quite at liberty to travel, I'm happy to say.'

'And your present job is – ? Remind me, please.'

He is about to do so, emphasizing his many indispensable responsibilities, but the minister impatiently cuts him short:

'All right. Here's my question. Have you had any direct experience of secret intelligence work? You *personally*,' he warns, as if there is another you who is less personal.

'*Direct* in what sense would that be, Minister?'

'Cloak-and-dagger stuff, what d'you think?'

'Only as a consumer, alas. An occasional one. Of the product. Not of the means of obtaining it, if that's your question, Minister.'

'Not even when you were kicking around in those foreign parts that nobody has had the grace to itemize for me?'

'Alas, one's overseas postings tended to be largely economic, commercial or consular,' he explains, resorting to the

linguistic archaisms he affects whenever he feels threatened. 'Obviously, from time to time, one had access to the odd secret report – none of it high level, I hasten to say. That, I'm afraid, is the long and short of it.'

But the minister appears momentarily encouraged by this lack of conspiratorial experience, for a smile of something like complacency flits across his broad features.

'But you're a safe pair of hands, right? Untried maybe, but safe, for all that.'

'Well, one likes to think so' – diffidently.

'CT ever come your way?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Counter-terrorism, man! Has it come your way or not?' – spoken as to an idiot.

'I fear not, Minister.'

'But you *care*? Yes?'

'About what exactly, Minister?' – as helpfully as he may.

'The well-being of our nation, for Christ's sake! The safety of our people, wheresoever they may be. Our core values in times of adversity. All right, our *heritage*, if you like' – using the word like an anti-Tory swipe. 'You're not some limp-wristed closet liberal harbouring secret thoughts about terrorists' right to blow the fucking world to pieces, for example.'

'No, Minister, I think I may safely say I am not,' he mumbles.

But the minister, far from sharing his embarrassment, compounds it:

'So then. If I were to tell you that the extremely delicate assignment I have in mind for you involves depriving the terrorist enemy of the means to launch a premeditated assault on our homeland, you would *not* immediately walk away, I take it?'

'To the contrary. I should be – well –'

'You should be *what*?'

'Gratified. Privileged. Proud, in fact. But somewhat surprised, obviously.'

'Surprised by *what*, pray?' – like a man insulted.

'Well, not mine to enquire, Minister, but why me? I'm sure the Office has its fair share of people with the type of experience you're looking for.'

Fergus Quinn, man of the people, swings away to the bay window and, with his chin thrust aggressively forward over his evening tie, and the tie's fixing awkwardly protruding from the cushions of flesh at the back of his neck, contemplates the golden gravel of Horse Guards Parade in the evening sunlight.

'If I were *further* to tell you that for the remainder of your natural life you will not by word or deed or any other means reveal the fact that a certain counter-terror operation was so much as *considered*, let alone executed' – casting round indignantly for a way out of the verbal labyrinth he has talked himself into – 'does that turn you *on* or *off*?'

'Minister, if you consider me the right man, I shall be happy to accept the assignment, whatever it may be. And you have my solemn assurance of permanent and absolute discretion,' he insists, colouring up a bit in his irritation at having his loyalty hauled out and examined before his own eyes.

Shoulders hunched in the best Churchillian mode, Quinn remains framed at the bay window, as if waiting impatiently for the photographers to finish their work.

'There are certain *bridges* that have to be negotiated,' he announces severely to his own reflection. 'There's a certain *green light* that has to be given by some fairly crucial people up and down the road there' – butting his bullish head in the direction of Downing Street. 'When we get it – if we do and not until – you'll be informed. Thereafter, and for such time as I

deem appropriate, you will be my eyes and ears on the ground. No sweetening the pill, you understand? None of your Foreign Office obfuscation or persiflage. Not on *my* watch, thank you. You'll give it me *straight*, exactly the way you see it. The cool view, through the eyes of the old pro which I am to believe you to be. Are you hearing me?'

'Perfectly, Minister. I hear you and I understand exactly what you are saying' – his own voice, speaking to him from a distant cloud.

'Have you got any *Pauls* in your family?'

'I'm sorry, Minister?'

'Jesus Christ! It's a simple enough question, isn't it? Is any man in your family named *Paul*? Yes or no. Brother, father, what do I know?'

'None. Not a Paul in sight, I'm afraid.'

'And no *Paulines*? The female version. *Paulette*, or whatever?'

'Definitely none.'

'How about *Anderson*? No Andersons around at all? Maiden name, Anderson?'

'Again, not to my knowledge, Minister.'

'And you're in reasonable nick. Physically. A stiff walk over rugged terrain isn't going to cause you to go faint at the knees in the manner that certain others around here might be afflicted?'

'I walk energetically. And I'm a keen gardener' – from the same distant cloud.

'Wait for a call from a man named Elliot. Elliot will be your first indication.'

'And would Elliot be his surname or given name, I wonder?' he hears himself enquire soothingly, as if of a maniac.

'How the fuck should I know? He's operating in total secrecy under the aegis of an organization best known as Ethical

Outcomes. New boys on the block, and up there with the best in the field, I'm assured on expert advice.'

'Forgive me, Minister. What field would that be, exactly?'

'Private defence contractors. Where've you been? Name of the game these days. War's gone corporate, in case you haven't noticed. Standing professional armies are a bust. Top-heavy, under-equipped, one brigadier for every dozen boots on the ground, and cost a mint. Try a couple of years at Defence if you don't believe me.'

'Oh I do, Minister' – startled by this wholesale dismissal of British arms, but anxious to humour the man nonetheless.

'You're trying to flog your house. Right? Harrow or somewhere.'

'Harrow is correct' – now past surprise – 'North Harrow.'

'Cash problems?'

'Oh no, far from it, I'm thankful to say!' he exclaims, grateful to be returned if only momentarily to earth. 'I have a little bit of my own, and my wife has come into a modest inheritance which includes a country property. We plan to sell our present house while the market holds, and live small until we make the move.'

'Elliot will say he wants to buy your house in Harrow. He won't say he's from Ethical or anywhere else. He's seen the ads in the estate agent's window or wherever, looked it over from the outside, likes it, but there are issues he needs to discuss. He'll suggest a place and time to meet. You're to go along with whatever he proposes. That's the way these people work. Any further questions?'

Has he asked any?

'Meantime, you play totally normal man. Not a word to anyone. Not here in the Office, not at home. Is that clearly understood?'

Not understood. Not from Adam. But a wholehearted, mystified 'yes' to all of it, and no very clear memory of how he got home that night, after a restorative Friday-evening visit to his Pall Mall club.

Bowed over his computer while wife and daughter chatter merrily in the next room, Paul Anderson elect searches for Ethical Outcomes. *Do you mean Ethical Outcomes Incorporated of Houston, Texas?* For want of other information, yes, he does.

With our brand-new international team of uniquely qualified geopolitical thinkers, we at Ethical offer innovative, insightful, cutting-edge analyses of risk assessment to major corporate and national entities. At Ethical we pride ourselves on our integrity, due diligence, and up-to-the-minute cyber skills. Close protection and hostage negotiators available at immediate notice. Marlon will respond to your personal and confidential inquiries.

Email address and box number also in Houston, Texas. Free-phone number for your personal and confidential enquiries of Marlon. No names of directors, officers, advisors or uniquely qualified geopolitical thinkers. No Elliot, first name or surname. The parent company of Ethical Outcomes is Spencer Hardy Holdings, a multinational corporation whose interests include oil, wheat, timber, beef, property development and not-for-profit initiatives. The same parent company also endows evangelical foundations, faith schools and Bible missions.

For further information about Ethical Outcomes, enter your key-code. Possessing no such key-code, and assailed by a sense of trespass, he abandons his researches.

A week passes. Each morning over breakfast, all day long in the office, each evening when he comes home from work, he plays Totally Normal Man as instructed, and waits for the

great call that may or may not come, or come when it's least expected: which is what it does early one morning while his wife is sleeping off her medication and he's pottering in the kitchen in his check shirt and corduroys washing up last night's supper things and telling himself he really must get a hold of that back lawn. The phone rings, he picks it up, gives a cheery 'Good morning' and it's Elliot, who, sure enough, has seen the ads in the estate agent's window and is seriously interested in buying the house.

Except that his name isn't Elliot but *Illiot*, thanks to the South African accent.

Is Elliot one of Ethical Outcomes' *brand-new international team of uniquely qualified geopolitical thinkers*? It's possible, though not apparent. In the bare office in a poky side street off Paddington Street Gardens where the two men sit a mere ninety minutes later, Elliot wears a sober Sunday suit and a striped tie with baby parachutes on it. Cabalistic rings adorn the three fattest fingers of his manicured left hand. He has a shiny cranium, is olive-skinned, pockmarked and disturbingly muscular. His gaze, now quizzing his guest in flirtatious flicks, now slipping sideways at the grimy walls, is colourless. His spoken English is so elaborate you'd think it was being marked for accuracy and pronunciation.

Extracting a nearly new British passport from a drawer, Elliot licks his thumb and flips officiously through its pages.

'Manila, Singapore, Dubai: these are but a few of the fine cities where you have attended statisticians' conferences. Do you understand that, Paul?'

Paul understands that.

'Should a nosy individual sitting next to you on the plane enquire what takes you to Gibraltar, you tell them it's yet

another statisticians' conference. After that you tell them to mind their fucking business. Gibraltar does a strong line in Internet gambling, not all of it kosher. The gambling bosses don't like their little people talking out of turn. I must now ask you, Paul, very frankly, please, do you have any concerns whatever regarding your personal cover?

'Well, maybe just the one concern actually, Elliot, yes, I do,' he admits, after due consideration.

'Name it, Paul. Feel free.'

'It's just that being a Brit – *and* a foreign servant who's been around the halls a bit – entering a prime British territory as a *different* Brit – well, it's a bit' – hunting for a word – 'a bit bloody *iffy*, frankly.'

Elliot's small, circular eyes return to him, staring but not blinking.

'I mean, couldn't I just go as myself and take my chances? We both know I'm going to have to lie low. But *should* it happen that, *contrary* to our best calculations, I *do* bump into someone I know, or someone who knows me, more to the point, then at least I can be who I am. Me, I mean. Instead of –'

'Instead of what exactly, Paul?'

'Well, instead of pretending to be some phoney statistician called Paul Anderson. I mean, who's ever going to believe a cock-and-bull story like that, if they know perfectly well who I am? I mean, honestly, Elliot' – feeling the heat coming into his face and not able to stop it – 'Her Majesty's Government has got a bloody great tri-Services headquarters in Gibraltar. Not to mention a substantial Foreign Office presence and a king-sized listening station. *And* a Special Forces training camp. It only takes one chap we haven't thought of to jump out of the woodwork and embrace me as a long-lost chum and I'm – well, scuppered. And what do I know about statistics,

come to that? Bugger all. Don't mean to question your expertise, Elliot. And of course I'll do whatever it takes. Just asking.'

'Is that the complete sum of your anxieties, Paul?' Elliot enquires solicitously.

'Of course. Absolutely. Just making the point.' And wishing he hadn't, but how the hell d'you throw logic out of the window?

Elliot moistens his lips, frowns, and in carefully fractured English replies as follows:

'It is a *fact*, Paul, that nobody in Gibraltar will give a five-dollar fuck who you are for as long as you flash your British passport at them and keep your head below the horizon at all times. However: it's your balls that will be in the direct line of fire, should we strike worst-case scenario, which it is my bounden duty to consider. Let us take the hypothetical case of the operation aborting in a manner not foreseen by its expert planners of whom I pride myself as being one. Was there an inside man? they may ask. And who is this scholarly wanker Anderson who skulked in his hotel room reading books all day and all night? – they will start to wonder. Where is this Anderson to be found, in a colony no bigger than a fucking golf course? If that situation were to arise, I suspect you'd be grateful indeed not to have been the person you are in reality. Happy now, Paul?'

Happy as a sandboy, Elliot. Couldn't be happier. Totally out of my element, whole thing like a dream, but with you all the way. But then, noticing that Elliot looks a bit put out, and fearing that the detailed briefing he is about to receive will kick off on a bad note, he goes for a bit of bonding:

'So where does a highly qualified chap like *you* fit into the scheme of things, if I may ask without being intrusive, Elliot?'

Elliot's voice acquires the sanctimoniousness of the pulpit:

‘I sincerely thank you for that question, Paul. I am a man of arms; it is my life. I have fought wars large and small, mostly on the continent of Africa. During these exploits I was fortunate enough to encounter a man whose sources of intelligence are legendary, not to say uncanny. His worldwide contacts speak to him as to no other in the safe knowledge that he will use their information in the furtherance of democratic principles and liberty. *Operation Wildlife*, the details of which I shall now unveil to you, is his personal brainchild.’

And it is Elliot’s proud statement that elicits the obvious, if sycophantic, question:

‘And may one ask, Elliot, whether this great man has a name?’

‘Paul, you are now and for evermore family. I will therefore tell you without restraint that the founder and driving force of Ethical Outcomes is a gentleman whose name, in strictest confidence, is Mr Jay Crispin.’

Return to Harrow by black cab.

Elliot says, *From now on, keep all receipts*. Pay off cabbie, keep receipt.

Google Jay Crispin.

Jay is nineteen and lives in Paignton, Devon. She is a waitress.

J. Crispin, Veneer Makers, began life in Shoreditch in 1900.

Jay Crispin auditions for models, actors, musicians and dancers.

But of Jay Crispin, the driving force of Ethical Outcomes and mastermind of *Operation Wildlife*, not a glimpse.

Stuck once more at the overlarge window of his hotel prison, the man who must call himself Paul emitted a weary string of mindless obscenities, more in the modern way than his own. *Fuck* – then *double fuck*. Then more *fucks*, loosed off in a bored

patter of gunfire aimed at the cellphone on the bed and ending with an appeal – *Ring, you little bugger, ring* – only to discover that somewhere inside or outside his head the same cellphone, no longer mute, was chirruping back at him with its infuriating *diddly-ah, diddly-ah, diddly-ah dee-dah-doh*.

He remained at the window, frozen in disbelief. It's next-door's fat Greek with a beard, singing in the shower. It's those horny lovers upstairs: he's grunting, she's howling, I'm hallucinating.

Then all he wanted in the world was to go to sleep and wake up when it was over. But by then he was at the bed, clutching the encrypted cellphone to his ear but, out of some aberrant sense of security, not speaking.

'Paul? Are you there, Paul? It's me. *Kirsty*, remember?'

Kirsty the part-time minder he'd never set eyes on. Her voice the only thing he knew about her: pert, imperious, and the rest of her imagined. Sometimes he wondered whether he detected a smothered Australian accent – a pair to Elliot's South African. And sometimes he wondered what kind of body the voice might have, and at others whether it had a body at all.

Already he could catch its sharpened tone, its air of portent: 'You still okay up there, Paul?'

'Very much so, *Kirsty*. You, too, I trust?'

'Ready for some night-birding, owls a speciality?'

It was part of Paul Anderson's fatuous cover that his hobby was ornithology.

'Then here's the update. It's all systems go. Tonight. The *Rosemaria* left harbour bound for Gib five hours ago. *Aladdin* has booked his on-board guests into the Chinese on the Queensway Marina for a big lash-up tonight. He's going to settle his guests in, then slide off on his own. His trust with *Punter*

confirmed for 2330. How's about I pick you up from your hotel at 2100 hours cold? That's 9 p.m. on the dot. Yes?'

'When do I join up with Jeb?'

'As soon as maybe, Paul,' she retorted, with the extra edge in her voice for whenever the name Jeb was mentioned between them. 'It's all arranged. Your friend Jeb will be waiting. You dress for the birds. You do *not* check out. Agreed?'

It had been agreed all of two days ago.

'You bring your passport and your wallet. You pack up your possessions nicely, but you leave them in your room. You hand your room key in at the desk like you're going to be back late. Want to stand on the hotel steps so's you don't have to hang around the lobby and get stared at by the tour groups?'

'Fine. I'll do that. Good idea.'

They'd agreed that, too.

'Look out for a blue Toyota four-by-four, shiny, new. Red sign on the passenger-side windscreen saying CONFERENCE.'

For the third time since he had arrived, she insisted they compare watches, which he considered a needless excursion in these days of quartz, until he realized he'd been doing the same thing with the bedside clock. One hour and fifty-two minutes to go.

She had rung off. He was back in solitary. Is it really me? Yes, it is. It's me the safe pair of hands, and they're sweating.

He peered round him with a prisoner's perplexity, taking stock of the cell that had become his home: the books he had brought with him and hadn't been able to read a line of. Simon Schama on the French Revolution. Montefiore's biography of Jerusalem: by now, in better circumstances, he'd have devoured them both. The handbook of Mediterranean birds they'd forced on him. His eye drifted to his arch-enemy: *The Chair That Smelt Of Piss*. He'd sat half of last

night in it after the bed had ejected him. Sit in it one more time? Treat himself to another watch of *The Dam Busters*? Or might Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* do a better job of persuading the God of Battles to steel his soldier's heart? Or how about another spot of Vatican-censored soft porn to get the old juices flowing?

Yanking open the rickety wardrobe, he fished out Paul Anderson's green wheelie-bag plastered with travel labels and set to work packing into it the junk that made up an itinerant bird-watching statistician's fictional identity. Then he sat on the bed watching the encrypted phone recharge, because he had an unappeasable fear it would run out on him at the crucial moment.

In the lift a middle-aged couple in green blazers asked him if he came from Liverpool. Alas, he didn't. Then was he one of the group? Afraid not: what group would that be? But by then his posh voice and eccentric outdoor gear were enough for them and they left him to himself.

Arriving at the ground floor, he stepped into a seething, howling hubbub of humanity. Amid festoons of green ribbon and balloons, a flashing sign proclaimed St Patrick's Day. An accordion was screeching out Irish folk music. Burly men and women in green Guinness bonnets were dancing. A drunken woman with her bonnet askew seized his head, kissed him on the lips and told him he was her lovely boy.

Jostling and apologizing, he fought his way to the hotel steps, where a cluster of guests stood waiting for their cars. He took a deep breath and caught the scents of bay and honey mingled with the oil fumes. Above him, the shrouded stars of a Mediterranean night. He was dressed as he'd been told to dress: stout boots, and don't forget your anorak, Paul, the Med at night gets nippy. And zipped over his heart in the anorak's

inside pocket, his super-encrypted cellphone. He could feel its weight on his left nipple – which didn't prevent his fingers from making their own furtive exploration.

A shiny Toyota four-by-four had joined the queue of arriving cars, and yes it was blue and yes there was a red sign saying CONFERENCE on the passenger side of the windscreen. Two white faces up front, the driver male, bespectacled and young. The girl compact and efficient, leaping out like a yachtswoman, hauling back the side door.

'You're Arthur, right?' she yelled in best Australian.

'No, I'm Paul, actually.'

'Oh right, you're Paul! Sorry about that. Arthur's next stop. I'm Kirsty. Great to meet you, Paul. Hop right in!'

Agreed safety formula. Typical over-production, but never mind. He hopped, and was alone on the rear seat. The side door slammed shut and the four-by-four nosed its way between the white gateposts, on to the cobbled road.

'And this here's Hansi,' Kirsty said over the back of her seat. 'Hansi's part of the team. "Ever watchful" – right, Hansi? That's his motto. Want to say hullo to the gentleman, Hansi?'

'Welcome aboard, Paul,' said Ever-Watchful Hansi, without turning his head. Could be an American voice, could be German. War's gone corporate.

They were driving between high stone walls and he was drinking in every sight and sound at once: the blare of jazz from a passing bar, the obese English couples quaffing tax-free booze at their outdoor tables, the tattoo parlour with its embroidered torso in low-slung jeans, the barber's shop with sixties hairstyles, the bowed old man in a yarmulke wheeling a baby's pram, and the curio shop selling statuettes of greyhounds, flamenco dancers, and Jesus and his disciples.

Kirsty had turned to examine him by the passing lights.

Her bony face, freckled from the outback. Short, dark hair tucked into the bush hat. No make-up, and nothing behind the eyes: or nothing for him. The jaw crammed into the crook of her forearm while she gave him the once-over. The body indecipherable under the bulk of a quilted bush jacket.

‘Left everything in your room, Paul? Like we told you?’

‘All packed up, as you said.’

‘Including the bird book?’

‘Including it.’

Into a dark side street, washing slung across it. Decrepit shutters, crumbling plaster, graffiti demanding BRITS GO HOME! Back into the blaze of city lights.

‘And you didn’t check out of your room? By mistake or something?’

‘The lobby was chock-a-block. I couldn’t have checked out if I’d tried.’

‘How about the room key?’

In my bloody pocket. Feeling an idiot, he dropped it into her waiting hand and watched her pass it to Hansi.

‘We’re doing the tour, right? Elliot says to show you the facts on the ground, so’s you have the visual image.’

‘Fine.’

‘We’re heading for Upper Rock, so we’re taking in the Queensway Marina on the way. That’s the *Rosemaria* out there now. She arrived an hour ago. See it?’

‘See it.’

‘That’s where *Aladdin* always anchors, and those are his personal steps to the dockside. Nobody’s allowed to use them except him: he has property interests in the colony. He’s still aboard, and his guests are running late, still powdering their noses before they go ashore for their slap-up dinner at the Chinese. Everybody eyeballs the *Rosemaria*, so you can, too.’

Just keep it relaxed. There's no law says you can't take a relaxed look at a thirty-million-dollar super-yacht.'

Was it the excitement of the chase? Or just the relief of being got out of prison? Or was it the simple prospect of serving his country in a way he'd never dreamed of? Whatever it was, a wave of patriotic fervour swept over him as centuries of British imperial conquest received him. The statues to great admirals and generals, the cannons, redoubts, bastions, the bruised air-raid precaution signs directing our stoical defenders to their nearest shelter, the Gurkha-style warriors standing guard with fixed bayonets outside the Governor's residence, the bobbies in their baggy British uniforms: he was heir to all of it. Even the dismal rows of fish-and-chip shops built into elegant Spanish façades were like a homecoming.

A flash-glimpse of cannons, then of war memorials, one British, one American. Welcome to Ocean Village, hellish canyon of apartment blocks with balconies of blue glass for ocean waves. Enter a private road with gates and a guard-box, no sign of a guard. Below, a forest of white masts, a ceremonial, carpeted landing bay, a row of boutiques and the Chinese restaurant where *Aladdin* has booked his slap-up dinner.

And out to sea in all her splendour, the *Rosemaria*, lit overall with fairy lights. The windows on her middle deck blacked out. The salon windows translucent. Burly men hovering among the empty tables. Alongside her, at the foot of a gold-plated ship's ladder, a sleek motorboat with two crew in white uniforms waiting to ferry *Aladdin* and his guests ashore.

'*Aladdin* is basically a mixed-race Pole who has taken out Lebanese citizenship,' Elliot is explaining, in the little room in Paddington. '*Aladdin* is the Pole I personally would not touch with a barge, to coin a witticism. *Aladdin* is the most unprincipled fucking merchant of death on the face of this earth bar

none, plus also the chosen intimate of the worst dregs of international society. The principal item on his list will be Manpads, I am given to understand.'

Manpads, Elliot?

'Twenty of them at last count. State of the art, very durable, very deadly.'

Allow time for Elliot's bald, superior smile and slippy glance.

'A Manpad is, technically, your man-portable air-defence system, Paul, *Manpad* being what I call an *acronym*. As a weapon known by the same acronym, your Manpad is so lightweight that a kid can handle one. It also happens to be just the item if you are contemplating bringing down an unarmed airliner. Such is the mentality of these murderous shits.'

'But will *Aladdin* have them with him, Elliot, the Manpads? Now? On the night? On board the *Rosemaria*?' he asks, playing the innocent because that's what Elliot seems to like best.

'According to our leader's reliable and exclusive intelligence sources, the Manpads in question are part of a somewhat larger inventory of sale comprising top-of-the-range anti-tanks, rocket-propelled, and best-brand assault rifles from state arsenals around the known bad world. As in the famous Arabian fairy tale, *Aladdin* has stashed his treasure in the desert, hence the choice of name. He will notify the successful bidder of its whereabouts *when* – and *only* when – he has cut the deal, in this case with none other than *Punter* himself. Ask me what is the purpose of the meeting between *Aladdin* and *Punter* and I will reply that it is in order to set the parameters of the deal, the terms of payment in gold, and the eventual inspection of goods prior to handover.'

★

The Toyota had left the marina and was negotiating a grass roundabout of palm trees and pansies.

'Boys and girls neat and tidy, everyone in place,' Kirsty was reporting in a monotone over her cellphone.

Boys, girls? Where? What have I missed? He must have asked her:

'Two parties of four watchers sitting in the Chinese, waiting for the *Aladdin* party to show up. Two walk-by couples. One tame taxi and two motorcyclists for when he sneaks away from the party,' she recited, as to a child who hasn't been paying attention.

They shared a strained silence. She thinks I'm surplus to requirements. She thinks I'm the Limey know-nothing striped-pants parachuted in to make difficulties.

'So when do I get to meet up with Jeb?' he insisted, not for the first time.

'Your friend Jeb will be ready and waiting for you at the rendezvous as per schedule, like I told you.'

'He's why I'm here,' he said too loud, feeling his gall rising. 'Jeb and his men can't go in without my say-so. That was the understanding from the start.'

'We're aware of that, thank you, Paul, and Elliot's aware of it. The sooner you and your friend Jeb hook up and the two teams are talking, the sooner we can get this thing squared away and go home. Okay?'

He needed Jeb. He needed his own.

The traffic had gone. The trees were shorter here, the sky bigger. He counted off the landmarks. St Bernard's Church. The Mosque of Ibrahim-al-Ibrahim, its minaret lit white. The shrine to Our Lady of Europe. Each of them branded on his memory thanks to mindless leafings through the greasy hotel guidebook. Out to sea, an armada of lighted freighters

at anchor. *The seaborne boys will operate out of Ethical's mother ship*, Elliot is saying.

The sky had vanished. This tunnel is not a tunnel. It's a dis-used mineshaft. It's an air-raid shelter. Crooked girders, sloppy walls of breeze block and rough-cut cliff. Neon strips flying overhead, white road markings keeping pace with them. Festoons of black wiring. A sign saying LOOK OUT FOR FALLING STONES! Potholes, rivulets of brown flood water, an iron doorway leading to God knew where. Has *Punter* passed this way today? Is he hovering behind a doorway with one of his twenty Manpads? *Punter's not just high value, Paul. In the words of Mr Jay Crispin, Punter is stratospheric.* Elliot again.

Pillars like the gateway to another world coming at them as they emerge from the belly of the Rock and land on a road cut into the cliff. A hefty wind is rattling the coachwork, a half-moon has appeared at the top of the windscreen and the Toyota is bumping along the nearside verge. Beneath them, lights of coastal settlements. Beyond them, the pitch-black mountains of Spain. And out to sea, the same motionless armada of freight ships.

'Sides only,' Kirsty ordered.

Hansi dowsed the headlights.

'Cut the engine.'

To the furtive mutter of wheels on crumbling tarmac, they rolled forward. Ahead of them, a red pin-light flashed twice, then a third time, closer at hand.

'Stop now.'

They stopped. Kirsty slammed back the side door, letting in a blast of cold wind, and the steady din of engines from the sea. Across the valley, moonlit cloud was curling up the ravines and rolling like gun smoke along the Rock's ridge. A car sped