

CHAPTER 1

Deauville, Normandy, France

Suddenly almost everyone was on their feet; parents anxiously gathering their things together and ushering their offspring away, others preferring to stay and watch from a distance. A small crowd was already gathering at the water's edge as the inflatable rescue craft edged into the shallows, crew members jumped into the water, grabbed the side ropes and ran it aground.

Only one person had noticed the man, in the private area cordoned off for the Casino's clients, sit up and lift himself off his sun-bed. She had watched closely as he leaned down to say a few words to his wife, patted his two little girls on the head and walked the forty metres or so down the sand, his eyes fixed on some far distant point as he brushed past baking bodies, towels and parasols, to the water's edge.

The woman fiddled with something in her hand and smiled as the man strode purposefully into the water.

If anyone else had been watching him, they might have found it odd that, once the water was up to his waist, he didn't do the usual thing and dive in or start to swim: he just carried on walking, allowing the warm water to rise up to his shoulders, then to his neck, walking onwards, onwards until his face started to disappear, his expressionless eyes staring straight forward at the hazy horizon.

By now, his route had taken him some distance away from the other bathers, most of whom were engaged in noisy ball games or just floating on their back enjoying the hot sun on their skin.

When he disappeared quietly beneath the water, there was hardly a ripple.

It must have been at least ten minutes before a young man, a strong swimmer showing off just how good he was, came upon the body floating face down and shouted frantically for help.

It took four lifeguards to lift the stretcher from the life raft and carry it out of the shallows and up the beach. He was clearly a big man, well over six feet. The watching woman knew more than that: he was in his mid-forties, British and had kept himself in good condition.

She knew him as a charming man with an exceptional intellect, one of life's winners: a high-flyer in his student days at Cambridge, snapped up by one of the more fashionable Chambers at Lincoln's Inn, now he was a QC in the top fee bracket with a good, solid marriage; a man who, so the whispers went, had been identified by the powers-that-be for greater things.

And that, of course, was why he had to go.

As the stretcher-bearers reached a clear patch of sand and laid him down, the crowd, now three-deep in places, tried to edge forward to get a better look until two of the lifeguards barked at them to stay clear and give them space to work. Their colleagues had already started the life-saving routine, one pressing firmly on the man's chest while the other pumped oxygen into his mouth.

The shriek took everyone by surprise.

'Please, let me through. Please. Get out of...my...way, you idiots!' A woman was shouting in English, fighting to clear a path through the onlookers.

As she reached the front, she stopped, her hand on her mouth, her eyes wide.

'Oh my God, oh my God.' Instinctively, her elbow connected with the restraining lifeguard's solar plexus. The next second, she was on her knees beside the stretcher.

'Robert,' she sobbed. 'Robert, darling, what have you done?'

The watcher turned away. It was time to go. A busy few days lay in front of her.

For now, it was a case of 'job done'.

As she walked towards a quiet side street behind the promenade, nobody gave her a passing glance. She didn't mind; she had taken a lot of trouble disguising her distinctive mane of black hair and her perfectly-proportioned figure that morning. The cheap sunglasses did an effective job of hiding the look in her eyes – professional, determined, quietly satisfied. Sensual.

Sensual? Every time a job went according to plan, the thrill came in many forms.

No one could possibly have guessed that she had just earned herself a quarter of a million dollars by disposing of the next chairman of the UK's Independent Press Standards Organisation, the media watchdog that, over recent years, had acquired enough teeth to put the fear of God into journalists and newspaper owners.

London Euston station

He was early enough to catch the 4.15 train, and it was on time, for a change. That would get him to Stratford-on-Avon just after 5. Even allowing for the Friday evening traffic, he should arrive at his Warwickshire village home well before 6, with time for a refreshing shower before his wife appeared at the bedroom door and thrust an apron and the potato peeler into his hands.

It had been a pig of a week. Yet again, the economic forecasters – a bunch of complete wankers in his personal opinion - had got it wrong and it had been he, yet again, who was forced in as anonymous spokesman, facing hordes of cynical journalists and explaining, in the most optimistic terms, of course, why they had cocked up the numbers for the third quarter running.

Having to do all this in London had not helped. For one thing, it was uncomfortably hot and humid; and for another, any Brit whose salary came in Euros from the tottering European Union's coffers had to expect to be a target for the media's scorn. Although tomorrow's financial press would not mention him by name, all the financial analysts would know it was him. He would be the one they would blame in the wine bars of London, Frankfurt and Paris.

After phoning his wife to confirm his expected arrival time, the man found his seat in the air-conditioned first-class carriage. He stood aside to allow a tall, conservatively dressed woman to pass. She smiled, thanked him and settled into a seat three rows further back. Something about her made him turn as she took a small phone-like gadget from her pocket. He thought he heard a tiny beep.

The man removed his jacket, sat down and opened the Evening Standard.

Extraordinary eyes, he thought, then turned his attention to the business news.

Euro-prats get it wrong again, he read. He smiled. Sometimes a cliché really did fit the bill . . . the bill . . . the bill . . .

Four hours later, a passenger approached the train manager as they pulled out of Oxenholme station, in the picturesque Lake District, on their way to Edinburgh. After checking the restaurant car and toilets, the train manager phoned ahead to Carlisle to report some unidentified, possibly abandoned luggage.

The train had been too busy for her to notice other passengers, she'd told the train manager. And no, she couldn't recall much about any of them. She was tired and had dozed most of the way.

Someone was calling the man's mobile phone but she had already silenced the ring tone. She reached across and checked the screen – his wife again. Turning it off, she stood and walked through to the space between her carriage and the next. Opening the window he'd used earlier, she threw it down a steep embankment.

When she got back to her seat, the catering trolley had arrived. She bought herself another large vodka with ice, smiled her job done smile and settled down with her iPad to write her report.

Her employers should be pleased at the week's progress.

The man regarded by many as the dark horse to become the next head of the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, the world's most powerful financial regulator, would never be seen again.

West Norwood, South London

Property in this street had been in high demand in the early 2000's as young couples and speculators, fuelled by easy cheap mortgages, decided this was to be the next boom suburb of commuter London. The houses had as much character as buyers could expect in a metropolis of ten million people: reasonable gardens, mature trees lining the pavements, and it was usually possible to park a car within a hundred metres of your own house.

A few residents had come unstuck when the banks crashed but not the owners of the house where the police car was pulling up outside.

Inside, a mother was doing her best to negotiate a deal with her twelve year-old, who was perfectly sure he could finish his homework, meet his mates for an impromptu game of cricket in the park, eat supper and practise on his trumpet before 8 p.m. At the moment when the bell rang, she felt she was getting the upper hand.

'Mrs Daniel?' enquired the uniformed officer, showing her his ID card.

'Yes,' she replied, wiping her hands on her apron.

'Sorry to disturb you, Madam. Do you think we could come in for a moment?'

A rash of burglaries in neighbouring streets had triggered a big effort by the police to get local residents to tighten up on their security. House to house enquiries were not uncommon these last few weeks.

'Of course.' She smiled. 'Come in, please.'

It was then that she noticed a female officer standing behind the man. Something about the woman's expression triggered a flicker of worry.

As the police car drove away, the mother was still sitting on the edge of the sofa, her head in her hands, in an advanced state of shock. The policewoman had done her best to console her but she had rejected her help and asked them to leave.

The sitting room door opened a fraction and a very frightened twelve year-old face peeped into the room. She looked up, her brain a mass of confused thoughts and emotions, her face showing every symptom of a secure, intelligent woman whose world had just imploded.

How could she tell him? He's only twelve, for God's sake. It just wasn't *fair*.

The silver Mercedes two-seater burst into life and pulled out as soon as the police car rounded the next turn. It was a beautiful evening. Jenna Dobrosova felt the need to celebrate: she pressed the button and lowered the sunroof, letting the warm breeze pour the perfume of a hundred gardens into the car's cockpit.

Three out of three.

Tonight she would enjoy herself. Oh, yes.

It would be several hours before the world learned that Jamie Daniel, the man some called a saint, others a genius, the mastermind behind the most powerful and well-informed corruption-busting website in Europe, had been caught red-handed soliciting young boys for sex in a copse in South London.

CHAPTER 2

Twenty years earlier Beijing, China

Hong Jintao had been waiting more than an hour beyond the appointed time, which was not unexpected. A few magazines and some tea-making facilities would have made the wait more bearable but, on his arrival at the old imperial palace that housed the private offices of the most powerful men in China, he had been escorted to a huge barely furnished room and told to sit on one specific upright chair, even though he was the only person there.

In an attempt to overcome his nerves, he had already counted the dragons on the ornate murals four times. 173 or 174? He decided not to check them again; it would only make him worry more.

Hong had only a vague idea of why he had been summoned. At university, his speciality had been the history and culture of Great Britain and he currently held the relatively minor post of Cultural Adviser at the UK desk of the National Intelligence Agency. Recently, there had been the occasional rumour that the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China was becoming rather irritated with Britain. But it was almost unheard of for someone of his lowly rank to receive a summons to this heavily guarded building.

At least, he reassured himself, they're not going to fire me; they'd have kept that within the Department.

Finally, a door on the far side of the room opened and a solemn faced, well-groomed young man waved silently, inviting Hong to follow him down a long corridor. He knocked on an unmarked door and ushered Hong into a surprisingly small office. A short, elderly man stood looking out onto the courtyard.

The man turned to welcome him and Hong had to suppress a gasp. The 'invitation' had come from a middle-ranking functionary but

here, walking round the desk to shake his hand, was one of China's most recognisable faces: the man widely credited with the success of the People's Republic's policy of investment in the developing world - Africa, Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East.

Country by country, year after year, China had bought new friends; as well as securing the supply chains for the vast natural resources they required, these countries' local politicians, both those in power and the local opposition, were now turning first to China for support, in preference to America or Russia.

'Good morning, Hong Jintao,' said Guo Dalong, shaking the young man's hand. 'Please, take a seat.'

'Thank you, sir,' muttered Hong, struggling to maintain at least some degree of calm in front of this great man.

Tea had quietly arrived and Guo served them both.

'I have heard much about your work,' said Guo, after sipping his tea. 'You are highly regarded at the National Intelligence Agency. Which is why I need your advice.'

Guo Dalong needs my advice? One of the six most powerful men in China needs my advice? Hong dug his nails into the palm of his hands to check that he hadn't died in the night and passed over into Paradise.

'I know you are a busy man,' Guo continued. 'So I'll explain quickly what I need from you. You are an expert on the United Kingdom of Great Britain, correct?'

'And Northern Ireland,' Hong intervened and immediately wished he had not bothered.

But the old man laughed out loud. 'Thank you for correcting my mistake.'

Now he was feeling more at ease in front of this evidently likeable man, Hong listened intently as Guo Dalong began to spell out why he was here.

'Hong, I have a problem with the United Kingdom,' he began. Hong could hear himself breathing.

'As I'm sure you are aware, it has been our long-term policy to develop cordial, and mutually beneficial, relationships with many countries in the Third World. Not for ideological reasons - we gave up on converting the world to Communism long ago and frankly, between you and me, while it works for us, it would be a disaster for most of these countries.'

‘No, our original motives were far more pragmatic. We needed land, food, minerals: it’s the only way we can balance the books in this impossibly vast and diverse country we call China.’

Hong sat quietly, waiting for Guo to get to the point. He still had no idea why he was sitting in this office.

‘We knew this would all take a very long time, but as you know, patience is a central character trait of the Chinese. So far,’ the old man continued, ‘it’s been going pretty well. Clearly I can’t share details with a man of your status but let’s just say that we now control more than twenty global commodity markets as well as the political strategy of more than half the nations of Africa, large parts of South Asia, a dozen countries in South America, and several of the Gulf States.

‘However, and here I come to the point of our conversation, we are still having a little difficulty with your British friends.’

Hong wanted to say something – although he had come to like them in many ways, the British were not his friends; he merely studied them - but this was not the time. Guo was in full flow.

‘Let’s be frank: the British are yesterday’s imperial power, a tiny country that has already sold off its entire manufacturing base to foreign owners, riddled with social unrest, America’s puppy dog. And yet, years after the demise of its mighty empire, it still clings to its front row seat in the global theatre, on the basis of nothing more than what they arrogantly regard as past glories. While we in China, despite quietly bankrolling the debt-ridden economies of the US and most of Europe with our investment funds and tourism cash, have apparently still not earned our invitation to join the really important world leadership forums.

‘But . . . what about the United Nations?’ Hong intervened.

‘The UN? The Americans have an excellent phrase: all piss and wind, my boy. An expensive, long-running televised saga with next to no real influence over anyone. High-sounding resolutions that half the world chooses to veto or ignore and no power to intervene when someone steps out of line. No, the real debates, where the real leaders, the men who truly run world affairs meet, they take place elsewhere, behind closed doors, doors to which the British still have a key but we do not.’

Guo Dalong paused and watched the young man’s face. Hong

Jintao was confused. *Why am I, a lowly apparatchik, receiving a detailed briefing on the behind-the-scenes world of global politics? When is he going to get to the point?*

'Now, Hong Jintao, I would like you to tell me how you think this frustrating state of affairs with Great Britain may be hampering our programme of Third World, shall we say, management?'

Now the pressure was on the young man: so this was the test he had been summoned here to undergo. This was the kind of opportunity that would never come again.

He looked the aging politician in the eyes, searching for clues as to the answer he was expected to give. Guo was smiling again, returning his stare, his eyes revealing nothing as he waited for Hong to respond.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. His mind cleared. Hong could see exactly what he should say. It was almost as if the older man was, in some strange way, transmitting his own thoughts to Hong's mind. But at the same time, he felt sure these were his own ideas; that somehow his thinking had moved onto a higher level. The answers seemed so obvious now, so evident.

He cleared his throat.

'Sir,' he began. 'It has to relate to the British Commonwealth. More than fifty countries, almost one-third of the world's population and a quarter of its land area.

'Even though almost every Commonwealth country has now gained its independence, they have each chosen, or perhaps been persuaded, to retain their membership. Why? Because they all still depend on Britain for trade and for aid funding. And, under Britain's wing, they can feel part of that voice at the top table too, something they could never dream of alone.'

Now he could see the logic of the argument stretching out before him, like a brightly lit flight path.

'As long as Britain retains its hold over the Asian and African Commonwealth countries, many of whom are rich in minerals and other resources, China will be never be able to bring them, or their leaders, into line.'

Guo sat back in his chair, spread his hands and smiled broadly. 'Well done, Hong Jintao. Your superiors were correct in their assessment of your talents. Have some more tea.'

Once he had refilled the exquisite bone china cups, Guo took up the story once more.

‘So,’ he continued calmly, ‘the Politburo has formulated a long-term strategy, designed to resolve this little difficulty. It will take some time for us to see the benefits, but we are patient people. And, with your help . . .’

His voice was now barely a whisper.

‘Your task, over the coming years, Hong Jintao, will be to unlock these doors for us, to break the chains that are holding us back from our ultimate goal – which is . . .’ He paused, clearly for effect, his eyebrows raised.

When he spoke again, his tone was deadly serious. ‘Our ultimate goal, my young friend, can be expressed in just a few words: control of the entire global economy.’

He paused again to allow this to sink in. Now Hong’s head was a mass of tangled emotions – excitement, incredulity, mild panic, fascination – and he knew it showed.

Guo pressed on. ‘The twenty-year plan we have formulated is, in our view, the only way to remove the British from our path.’

‘Twenty years?’ Hong couldn’t help himself interrupting.

‘Yes. As I said earlier, patience – the Chinese way. Death by a thousand cuts – they will hardly realise it’s happening to them so they will not fight back.

‘Guo Dalong, I am very honoured that you should be asking me to assume this great responsibility. May I ask you . . .?’

‘Ah, such youthful enthusiasm. I have told you what our goals are. And now you are eager to know *how*. I will tell you. I would like to give you a short lesson in what is known as *realpolitik*.’

‘*Realpolitik*?’ the young man asked.

‘A German word. It means politics based on power and the practicalities of life, rather than ideology. The reality of power, Hong Jintao. The practical application of influence; where the real power lies. Great Britain is like most Western countries, indeed like almost every country that employs the democratic system. The people go out to vote every few years, blithely believing that they are free to elect a government who will run their country for them. Poor souls, they are so deluded.

‘In Britain, just as in the United States and in most of Europe, the

people who really run the country, who control the law, business, the economy, the markets, the Commonwealth, and the elected government, they operate behind the scenes, well away from the public eye. They are sometimes referred to as the Establishment, sometimes as the ruling classes. In earlier times, it was the land-owning aristocracy, the power-brokers, and the academic elite. Now they have been joined by the bankers, the heads of the giant corporations and the media. Plus, of course, the heads of the nation's oldest families. In Britain, believe me, these are the people who choose, and remove, the party leaders and, once they are in government, their chosen leaders, naturally, do their bidding.'

'You talked earlier about the top table nations, sir,' said Hong. 'The really important world forums.'

'Yes, I did. These elite groups meet regularly, in private, with their opposite numbers from the other top table member countries. The elected heads of government are invited to attend a few selected sessions but only as guests. These meetings, Hong Jintao, are where the decisions that affect the lives of billions of people, and the movement of trillions of dollars, are made. And little Great Britain – their Establishment, not their government – still appears to win far too many of the arguments. Why? Some think it's to do with their immensely wealthy banking families, the power of the City; for me, it's also about the strange power the European royal families still hold over international affairs, even after all this time.'

Once again, Hong Jintao was puzzled. His studies had shown clearly that the royal families of Britain and Europe, most of whom were inter-related, were little more than symbolic, ceremonial figures these days, wealthy landowners of course, but with no real power in the late twentieth century. Now Guo was painting an entirely different picture.

Guo continued: 'Which brings us to the British Commonwealth. These power brokers still exercise considerable influence over what happens in their former colonies. They effectively control their cash-flow. Control the flow of cash and you've got them by the balls. And, as Theodore Roosevelt famously said: "If you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow."

Hong laughed. Guo did not.

'This, young man, is the true power base of the British and so, in

our judgement, there lies the key to the arena where China must be present.'

He paused, not entirely for effect, stood up and leaned forward, his hands on the desk.

In the last few minutes, his eyes had completely lost the kindly twinkle.

'Hong Jintao, we have decided to infiltrate and then destroy the power of the British Establishment. And you have been chosen to lead the entire operation.'

Guo had stopped speaking and was now sitting back in his chair, catching his breath. He looked old, very tired.

Looking back in the days and years to come, Hong Jintao would never quite understand why he felt so calm. This was the moment that would change his entire destiny and yet already, the massive responsibility Guo was placing upon his shoulders felt both comfortable and exhilarating. He knew he was up to the challenge.

'Where do you suggest I start, Guo Dalong?' asked Hong after a minute or so.

The old man opened a drawer in his desk and extracted a plain covered file. He laid it on the desk in front of him.

'In here you will find details of three young British men. They have been selected after considerable research. Your mission is to recruit them, train them, with and without their knowledge, to become our instruments as they rise to positions of great power in their country.'

Hong reached across and took the file without opening it.

'Our instruments?' he asked.

'Yes, our spies. During the Second World War, the Soviet Union successfully penetrated British security and drained them of information for many years afterwards; others have done the same since, you can be sure, but, when the spies were caught, the British have managed to avoid any publicity. The men in this file are young now but, in twenty years' time, under your guidance, they will be our own Burgess, Philby and McLean.'

Hong had read about the unmasking of the so-called 'Cambridge group' of spies in the early 1950s but not until they had betrayed huge quantities of government secrets to their Russian masters.

'Great Britain,' Guo laughed at the word 'great', 'will be fatally damaged and consigned to history.'

Paris, France
A few months later

Dropping his heavy suitcase beside the elegant restored oak wardrobe, Gregory Bellingham fell backwards onto the bed and grinned. The hotel the department had selected was a classic example of Parisian *ancien régime*: a nondescript street door, tall and wide enough to allow a carriage to pass, opening onto a cobbled courtyard surrounded by three storeys of tall windows, a mass of colour cascading from the window boxes.

He entered a marble tiled reception area, hung with vast ornate drapes, scattered with aging furniture and an even older head porter, the smell of fresh bread and flowers almost masking the mothballs.

'Bonjour, Monsieur,' the old man croaked.

'Hello, my dear chap,' replied Gregory, waving his passport.

In common with almost every hotel porter and restaurant waiter in Paris, the porter, who almost certainly had a fair command of English, ignored him and, muttering something about '*petit déjeuner à huit heures*', handed Gregory his key and pointed to the lift.

Just large enough to accommodate one man and a case, it had taken almost a minute to reach the next floor. His brass bed, complete with a couple of loose knobs, felt wonderfully comfortable but creaked loudly as he sat up to remove his shoes.

On the face of it, almost a year away from the daily grind, here in Paris, studying for an MBA at HEC, Europe's top international business school, all at the Government's expense, with the 'cast-iron guarantee of a two-grade salary hike when you get back', sounded like a pretty damned good offer.

But Gregory Bellingham's brief career in Whitehall, after graduating with flying colours from Cambridge, had taught him to take very great care whenever anyone dropped phrases like 'cast-iron guarantee' into the conversation.

'You do realise, Bellingham, that an MBA from HEC is like winning the pools in these parts,' the Director of People Enhancement had said. 'People have been known to sacrifice their grand-

mother to get on that list. Fantastic opportunity. Wish I'd had the chance myself. Can't think why they chose you, though. Loads of brighter sparks around, in my humble view.'

The newly-crowned DoPE, who appeared to possess only one rather shabby tweed jacket, had discreetly unscrewed his new title from his office door within days of its triumphant announcement by the latest Minister for Loose Ends, as their department was unaffectionately known.

'New roles, new culture, new start,' had been the theme of the minister's address to the staff on his first day.

The suffix 'Same devious, demotivating, self-serving senior management' was offered by one wag on behalf of the signally unimpressed room, only just loud enough for the minister to hear.

'At least *People Enhancement* makes a change from the dreaded *Human Resources*,' commented Gregory's pal David Marksworth, over lunch the next day. 'Don't you think that said everything you needed to know about employers' attitudes to their staff in the 90's?'

He switched to his Whitehall grandee voice. "'Hello. Is that the warehouse? We need a couple more truckloads of human resources. Tomorrow, if not earlier. Medium grade, in brown or black, doesn't matter, as long as they're still on special offer.'" Yuck!'

Marksworth, whom Bellingham had known since Cambridge, had also been selected to go to Paris and Gregory was looking forward to renewing their old partnership. David had an unerring knack of attracting the company of well-heeled, attractive ladies, from a variety of age groups. Nothing to do with good looks; David's nose was a strange shape and his ears didn't match. It was the mischievous twinkle in his one good eye that was apparently irresistible.

This course was going to be hard work but it had every prospect of being a lot of fun too.

Lying on the pristine white linen, he allowed himself a brief smile before his mind switched back to the real reason why he reckoned that he and his friend David had been sent to Paris.

By common consent, HEC provided just about the best management education the world can offer. Every September, thirty of the world's brightest young executives were sent by their employers - multinational corporations, billionaires and governments - to

complete their education. Thirty men and women, from twelve different countries, who had been singled out, some for their extraordinary potential, others for their impeccable breeding. These were thirty of the people, Gregory reflected, who, barring accidents, would one day be running the world.

Including me.

He decided to see whether David had checked in. When he arrived downstairs, there was no sign of the geriatric porter, so he wandered over to the desk and swivelled the guest registration file. The front page was headed *HEC MBA*. Around twenty names were listed, all male as far as he could tell. The women students had clearly been billeted elsewhere.

Each guest's room number and nationality was typed alongside his name. Germany, Russia, Ghana, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India, China . . .

Running his finger down the list, and realising his friend had not yet arrived, he decided to explore the local *faubourg*.

He was only a stone's throw to the north of the Arc de Triomphe but, in that curiously Parisian way, the streets exuded a kind of genteel residential peace, the city's traffic noise but a distant hum. Elderly aristocratic ladies in elegant hats and gloves, each trailing an expensive small dog, seemed to be the dominant socio-economic grouping. The entire retail scene consisted of one florist, one shop selling nothing but a multi-coloured mountain of small macaroons and a historic clock specialist who wasn't sure when he'd return.

A slim figure emerged from the shadow of the hotel's staircase, crossed the foyer and took a quick look at the list on the porter's desk before slipping out of the door.

Reaching the street, the man spotted Gregory Bellingham taking a left in the direction of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and set off along the same route. Bellingham glanced round instinctively but saw nothing.

CHAPTER 3

Sometime in the reasonably near future Oxford, England

Patrick Cameron hadn't slept well but the usual cycling three miles to work would help to clear his head. He needed to be on time and in good form: Government inspectors had a habit of asking trick questions when they carried out a snap check.

He wasn't supposed to have prior warning of their arrival at the medical research lab he'd been running in Oxford for the last three years. Quite how Rowena, his PA, had discovered news of the impending 'enemy invasion' was not for him to know. When she waved her hands in the air, rolled her eyes and muttered something about receiving 'a message from my angels', he had thought it best not to enquire further.

He swallowed the last of his coffee, checked the kettle was boiling and poured water into the teapot. Half a dozen squat-thrusts later, the tea was ready and the last of the muzziness in his head had gone. Approaching forty, he needed to loosen up more these days before climbing onto his bike. But at least he still had all his hair and his waist measurement meant he could still get into his favourite trousers, at a squeeze.

Placing the hot mug beside the bed, Patrick leaned forward to kiss Angela on the forehead. He knew she'd been awake a lot too in the small hours of the night but she would need to get up in the next few minutes if she was to be on duty at school on time, pregnant or not.

Only weeks to go. This was not just his wife; this was the woman who had shown such incredible courage when he had asked her to help him infiltrate and bust open a plot by religious extremists to start a holy war – the most recent, and hopefully the final occasion the Security Service would ask him to go undercover and risk his life.

Now all that mattered was the baby, their first, a small person

whose arrival, Patrick was sure, would lead them into a wonderful new phase of their life together.

By now, she had managed to manoeuvre herself into a sitting position, cup in one hand, the other pushing her naturally wavy fair hair back from her face.

‘Let me take a look at you before you go. Those socks you wore with your green trousers yesterday looked awful. Couldn’t you see?’ She laughed.

‘You know me, love. Grab the first ones I find from the drawer. Anyway, fifty percent of men are supposed to be colour blind.’

She gave her husband the once-over. ‘You’re a good-looking devil. Sexy without flaunting it. The mauve sweater would be better but you’ll do. Such a shame about those socks. Nag, nag, I know what you’re thinking. Off you go.’

‘Bye, love. Have a good day. Give the bastards hell,’ she mumbled as he left the room.

‘You too,’ he said, laughing.

Oxford was still coming to life as he pedalled past the historic colleges, cradles where countless brilliant men and women had nurtured their talents before moving on to change the world, each in their own different way.

The sun was already drying the overnight showers, the street cleaners had done their job, and he could smell the coffee and croissants from a hundred café doors. He stopped to pick up a morning paper from a street vendor and stuffed it into his saddle-bag.

Swinging round the corner into the lab’s parking area, he was happy to see no strange cars: he had beaten the bogey men by arriving early.

A couple of his staff were already at their work, dressed in white coats, poring over the results of the tests they had run overnight.

‘Hi, guys’, he called as they looked up and smiled. ‘Anything new?’

‘Oh, hi Patrick’, said Julian. Patrick had had one hell of a fight to stop this man being poached by the Security Service nine months earlier. ‘When you’ve got a moment, you might want to take a look at this.’

Julian was his star man. A tousle-haired lad who always looked as though he had just climbed out of bed, not often his own. A strong contender for an award of scruffiest man in Oxford, Julian’s uncon-

scious ability to send attractive women, of all ages, into squirming paroxysms of lust for his body was the stuff of legend.

On a more professional level, his uncanny knack of spotting inconsistencies in a mountain of seemingly normal data had been the trigger that led to a breakthrough in the early diagnosis of breast cancer the previous year. But his real speciality was the brain.

In recent months, his work had focussed on trying to identify imbalances in younger brains that could later develop into the onset of dementia.

Patrick dumped his things in his office and strolled over to Julian's lab desk. 'What have you got, mate?' he asked.

'You remember I was analysing the brain scans of a sample of people with dementia? Well, just out of interest, I thought I'd run a comparison check against the scans of a few characters who everyone thought were quite "normal" . . .' he waggled his fingers. ' . . . but who suddenly, out of the blue, did something totally out of character. Like murder their kids or go on the rampage.'

'I'm with you so far,' said Patrick. 'Go on.'

'Well, the best way to explain what I'm rambling on about is to show you a few pictures.'

He clicked his mouse on a couple of icons and the screen started to scroll through a series of brain scans, side by side. On each scan, an area had been highlighted in red and a blow-up of the highlighted area superimposed in a box in the corner.

'The dementia sufferers are on the left, the others on the right. Watch carefully. Notice anything?'

'Run them through again, please, Julian. A bit more slowly.'

As the shot sequence ran once more, Patrick suddenly grabbed the young man's arm and said, 'Stop it there.'

'You've won this morning's star prize.' Julian smiled.

'Unless I'm missing something here,' said Patrick, 'the dementia victims fall into a number of distinct categories. But we already knew that. Now, when I look at the people with sudden behaviour change, I can see where your research is heading, except for this one.' He pointed to the scan on the right-hand side of the screen and asked, 'Who's that?'

'That, my friend, is today's odd man out. His name was Alistair Thomas.'

‘The Alistair Thomas?’ Patrick said, shock in his voice.

‘The same. All set to be elected leader of his party, the man tipped to be our greatest statesman of the last fifty years, the “new British Kennedy”. And what happens?’

‘At ten in the evening, he announces to his family he has to attend an urgent meeting, gets into his car and, stone cold sober, drives the wrong way up the motorway and dies under the wheels of a sixty ton truck.’

‘Thank God his brain survived the crash. Now, tell me: am I wrong or is his scan showing exactly the same pattern as the dementia patient on the left?’

He leaned closer to the screen.

‘Yes,’ said Julian. ‘But why do none of the other “sudden change” examples show anything remotely similar?’

‘Your sample size is pretty small, Julian. You’ll need to run the same test with at least thirty of each. But, I agree with you, it does seem weird.’

While they had been talking, the lab had filled up with staff arriving for work.

Rowena, a woman never noted for subtlety, was looking down at the car park from a window. Today she had chosen to wear thigh length white leather boots beneath an astonishingly short skirt and a tee-shirt emblazoned with the words:

I LOVE giving my boss a hand.

Patrick wasn’t sure but he suspected that her multi-coloured hair had acquired yet another streak.

‘Achtung!’ she exclaimed and started to goose-step around the room. The inspectors had arrived.

Patrick finished showing the ‘men from the Ministry’ (motto: We’re here to help you) round the building and had seen them safely installed in a side office, surrounded by voluminous files and a plate piled high with cream buns.

Returning to his own office, he checked his emails, answered the urgent stuff and relaxed. He noticed the morning newspaper lying untidily where he had dropped it.

Picking it up, he scanned the front page. A by-line caught his eye: *Top whistle-blower in court. Alleged sex with minors. See page 6.*

Something made him turn to the full article. What he saw hit him like a rock.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. There was Jamie Daniel, one of his great old university friends, a man with whom he had spent any number of raunchy evenings, possibly the most heterosexual guy he had ever met, being led from a police van to answer charges of importuning young boys! It didn't make any sense.

How come he had missed the news of his arrest a month earlier? He checked the date. Then he remembered: he and Angela had been on a long weekend break in Barcelona.

He hadn't been in touch with Jamie Daniel for years. But there had to be a mistake here. Either that or his old pal, who had the guts to launch his now notorious corruption-busting website while he was still a student, had been set up.

'Julian!' he called out. To nobody's surprise, one of the inspectors, a woman in her forties, married with considerable assets, was at that moment perched on Julian's desk conducting an in-depth interview.

'I'd like you to do something for me,' Patrick said when the mass of hair finally peeked round the door.

Assistant Commissioner Andy Fields of the Security Service had the same newspaper spread across his desk. But his was accompanied by a file of cuttings of other articles, each one announcing the death, disappearance or disgrace of someone in public life.

Taking each example at face value, there was probably a perfectly good explanation. Human failings were a fact of life; most people had at least one guilty secret, their dark side. And, since time began, fear of exposure or plain and simple pressure of work, had always tipped a few people over the edge,

What had caught Fields' eye in these cases, however, was in the detail. He had started to list the common factors:

In (almost) every case:

- *The individual concerned was about to be promoted*
- *The individual was expected, once appointed, to make radical changes, to clean the place up and/or to clear out dead wood*
- *The men or women who took their place were all on our MoleWatch list (low category level)*

The Exceptions:

- *All involved in campaigning – civil liberties, anti-corruption, etc.*
- *Question: had they over-stepped the mark?*

So far:

They all had, or were expected to, upset the status quo

Which means they all had, or were expected to, spoil somebody's plans

Plans for what?

To achieve power? Or to hold on to power?

For themselves? Or on behalf of someone else?

Fields sat back and pondered, steeping his fingers and tapping his chin. There was not much to go on, but . . .

He pulled a slim phone from an inside pocket and dialled a number; a number that changed every month.

The man who picked up the call had just come in from working on his vegetable patch. His back was hurting; he would need to ask his wife to rub something into his lower spine again. *Bugger this old age!*

He had not yet had time to wash his hands but the distinctive ring-tone told him he had to answer this call.

'Hello.' He listened for all of two minutes.

'I'll call the others,' he said. 'We'll let you know, when and where.'

He put the phone down and picked up the kettle.

Tea - that was the answer. He would have loved a cigarette too but his wife would cut him off at the balls.

No respect for senior rank these days. I was a bloody Air Vice-Marshal once, for crying out loud.

Oh, bugger old age!